

*James R. Dilke*

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THE DUKE ENDOWMENT

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# The Student Resilience And Well-Being Project

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A five-year initiative to assess  
and promote the conditions that  
help college students flourish



This project aims to understand and reinforce the conditions that strengthen college student resilience and well-being.

PHOTO CREDITS:  
Davidson College, Duke University, Furman University, Johnson C. Smith University

<b>Introduction</b> .....	4
Intended Outcomes .....	9
<b>The Methodology Unfolds</b> .....	11
The Foundations of Resilience .....	13
<b>Four Schools, Four Experiences</b> .....	14
■ Davidson College .....	16
■ Furman University .....	20
■ Johnson C. Smith University .....	24
■ Duke University .....	28
Symposium on Student Well-Being .....	26
Summer Research Program .....	31
<b>Next Steps</b> .....	32
<b>Sharing Across National Higher Education Landscape</b> .....	34
<b>Project Contributors</b> .....	35



# Introduction

Concern about student anxiety and depression sparks a five-year research project

Over the past decade, the emotional health of college students has become a growing issue of national concern. In 2017, the U.C.L.A. Higher Education Research Institute's annual freshman survey found that a record high of 12 percent of responding students in the 2016 incoming class reported they "frequently" felt depressed in the past year. Fourteen percent indicated "there was a very good chance they would seek personal counseling in college." *The New York Times* noted that "for the first time in the survey's history, less than half (47 percent) consider their mental health to be above average, relative to their peers."

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**Nationally, the demand for services at counseling centers is continuing to rise. It's time to recognize that building student well-being is a campus-wide effort.”**

—TRISH MURRAY,  
FORMER DIRECTOR,  
STUDENT HEALTH,  
DAVIDSON

This national issue aligned with concerns The Duke Endowment had heard about student mental health and well-being at the four Endowment-supported schools: Davidson College, Duke University, Furman University and Johnson C. Smith University. Visits to mental health providers on the four campuses were steadily increasing, with a large and growing number of students saying they felt stressed, anxious, overwhelmed and depressed.

While understanding that exposure to stress is normal and necessary to prepare students for life after college, the Endowment suspected that certain factors can either exacerbate or mitigate the impact of stressors on students' mental health, and even foster resilience. There is significant research about the factors contributing to students' long-term well-being and resilience, including the Gallup-Purdue Index, which found that key elements of the college experience predict thriving and well-being in early adulthood—including feeling emotionally supported, having access to experiential learning and developing strong engagement with faculty and staff.

While the physical and psychological health consequences of insufficient resilience were well documented, the Endowment wanted to engage its four schools in an exploration of approaches to fostering resilience and well-being across the college student experience. Given its ties to some

of the most talented researchers in U.S. higher education, the Endowment saw an opportunity to contribute to the general understanding of student well-being. Enlisting the expertise of all four Endowment-supported institutions, a collaborative research project launched with two specific objectives: first, to understand the factors that contribute to students' mental health issues; and second, to uncover practical steps these schools could take to help students develop a strong foundation of resilience.

### COMING TOGETHER FOR A FIRST CROSS-CAMPUS RESEARCH COLLABORATION

The project, to be fully funded by the Endowment, would take a long, deep look at student resilience at each school. In March 2012, student affairs leaders from all four schools gathered at the Endowment's offices to discuss how a joint project on student resilience would take shape as a cross-campus research collaboration, and to prepare for a first summit.

Before the initial kickoff meeting, student life staff from each institution met with Emory Professor Corey Keyes, a sociologist and nationally known leader in positive psychology (the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive, as defined by the University of Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Center). Afterward, on October 1, 2013, psychology research faculty and practitioner staff from the schools' student affairs, student life, health services, counseling centers, health education and wellness areas came together for the first time.

Keyes' perspective helped participants decide to focus their research on how to bolster the positive elements of resilience and well-being rather than solely on how to alleviate mental distress. The Endowment's recent work with clergy in its Rural Church program area supported this direction. The \$3.4 million, five-year project would be called "The Student Resilience and Well-Being Project," with a mission "to better understand the challenges students face in college and to identify individual, interpersonal and institutional factors that promote and detract from student well-being in the face of challenge and stress." The research would seek to identify the key behaviors and characteristics of both risk and resilience and the impact on students' ability to thrive and flourish.



**DESIRED OUTCOMES:  
COMBINE SCIENTIFIC  
LEARNING WITH  
PRACTICAL APPLICATION**

The idea was not to eliminate stress from students' lives, but rather to identify ways that institutions of higher education can provide the appropriate balance of challenge and support to help students develop the skills they need to flourish in college and beyond. To that end, the project team established a dual goal:

1. **Contribute to the academic understanding** of student risk, resilience and well-being.
2. **Identify and apply interventions** to help students nurture their resilience and well-being in college and enhance their ability to flourish after college and throughout their lives.

The key questions driving the research were: What is it about the campus culture that harms resilience and well-being? How can we help students build resilience, develop a sense of belonging and ensure that they flourish?

A successful outcome would be to identify the individual, interpersonal and institutional factors that enable students to better cope with challenge and stress. Ideally, the project would identify where new practices might be needed, and lead to expansion of existing practices that were working well, refinement of practices that could be improved and elimination of practices that may be counterproductive.

The researcher-practitioner team would use a highly collaborative process involving communication and feedback among all stakeholders, including faculty researchers, university policymakers, students and Endowment staff and trustees.



# Intended Outcomes

Project organizers sought a range of outcomes, including greater collaboration, improved student resilience, enhanced interventions, and significant contributions to academic understanding.

## SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES



### Increased Collaboration

Increased collaboration across and within the four schools



### Collected Data

Increased understanding of the state of student wellness and resiliency at the four schools, along with insights on promising intervention ideas derived from analysis of these data

## MID-TERM OUTCOMES



### Piloted Interventions

Increased knowledge about the effectiveness of interventions designed to improve resiliency

## LONG-TERM OUTCOMES



### Effective Interventions

More effective array of interventions and supports available to students on each campus



### New Scholarship

Scholarly findings that contribute to the higher education and mental health communities



### Enhanced Wellness

Enhanced population-level resiliency and student health/wellness on four campuses

Compared with other people your age, how

Far below average

Below average

Slightly below average

Average

Slightly above average

# The Methodology Unfolds

Faculty and practitioners come together to create a unified research strategy

The Endowment-supported schools are diverse in size, academic focus, student backgrounds, culture and more. The group includes a major research institution in Duke, a national liberal arts college in Davidson, a national liberal arts university in Furman and a historically black university in Johnson C. Smith. This diversity presented a great opportunity to understand what risk and resilience look like across a wide range of students in a wide range of campus environments, experiencing a wide range of academic and personal challenges. The project team hoped this would result in insights that colleges and universities across the United States would find applicable to their own student bodies.

**To be successful, the study needed a common purpose and a common methodology that would meet the needs of all four campus communities.**

The first challenge faced by this cross-campus group of researchers was to agree on a consistent approach. Participating researchers would be challenged to apply their expertise in diverse areas of psychology to create a cohesive research strategy that would lead to a better understanding of student resilience and well-being. To be successful, the study needed a common purpose and a common methodology that would meet the needs of all four campus communities.

### **FOLLOW THE CLASS OF 2018 FROM ORIENTATION THROUGH GRADUATION**

After multiple discussions and negotiations that sometimes tested the ability of four such different institutions to collaborate effectively, researchers from each school agreed on a common set of research goals as well as a framework and methodology that could work across the diverse campuses. The project steering committee—composed of a researcher and a practitioner from each school—provided final approval.

It was agreed that the project would be a researcher–practitioner partnership, centered around a four-year longitudinal study of the class of 2018 at all four schools, plus the class of 2019 at Johnson C. Smith, with a final fifth year added for data analysis. The project would examine student mental health and emotional well-being at points in time from college entry through graduation. It would track the sources of challenge

and stress; the underpinnings of risk and resilience; and psychological, social, achievement and health outcomes across time. The multi-faceted tracking process includes the following elements:

- All incoming members of the class of 2018 at each school would be invited to complete their first online survey during the summer before enrollment as first-year students.
- Parents would also complete a one-time survey during the summer before their students enrolled.
- Students who chose to participate throughout their four years would complete one-hour online surveys 2–4 times during their first year and their sophomore, junior and senior years.
- All schools would use a consistent research instrument asking the same set of core questions at each sitting, to track any changes in response over time.
- Each school would have the ability to include some custom questions for its students, along with some unique questions each year as the students progressed.
- Schools would have discretion over how to incentivize the cohort to maintain participation over the four years.

### **THE ORGANIZING FRAMEWORK**

To achieve their key goals and desired outcomes, the project team developed an organizing framework for the student survey with three primary categories:

1. **Sources of challenge and stress:** the events and other influences in students' lives that pose challenges and potentially cause stress.
2. **Underpinnings of risk and resilience:** factors that would be key targets for intervention in the future. These could be a diverse set of processes that can either promote or undermine student well-being in the face of stress. Some of these underpinnings are amenable to change/intervention and some are not.
3. **Psychological, social, achievement and health outcomes:** indicators of student well-being that can help practitioners understand how students are doing in the face of everyday life challenges and more significant stressors and setbacks.

# The Foundations of Resilience

The four key factors found to buttress student resilience and well-being



### **Self-Control**

Behaving in ways that are consistent with achieving an active goal when circumstances do not favor such behavior. Resisting temptation to behave in ways that compromise goals. Taking initiative even when doing so is hard. Seeing initiatives through to their end.



### **Academic Engagement**

Developing gusto for academic life, finding topics that are exciting and immersive, talking about academic subject matter with others outside of class.



### **Self-Compassion**

Treating oneself with kindness, understanding and compassion in the face of disappointment, negative experiences or difficulty.



### **Relationships**

Developing supportive and meaningful relationships with others.

### **DATA GATHERING BEGINS**

With the research goals and objectives agreed upon, the survey instrument designed and the class of 2018 ready to arrive, the project began with its first survey of parents and students in the summer of 2014. Duke's Molly Weeks accepted the role of lead researcher and project manager. Student responses and data would feed into a central data hub managed by Weeks and housed at Duke. The project steering committee would gather monthly to review progress, and the full project team would assemble at least three times a year to share

experiences and continue their collaboration.

Over the next four years, Weeks would share each school's student data with that school's research and practitioner team. The individual schools would start to glean early insights about their own populations, and some would even start to brainstorm and implement interventions in response to their early learnings.

The following sections present the approaches that each school took to examining, interpreting and responding to early insights, even as the schools continued to collect data.



Davidson College



Furman University



Johnson C. Smith University



Duke University

# Four Schools, Four Experiences

A range of responses to early project insights, influenced by the context and culture of each school

As each wave of student responses flowed into the central database at Duke, the project research staff sent each institution interim reports and high-level insights into that school's early results. Some of the research and practitioner teams found surprises in their data. Others saw what they expected. Given the institutions' different cultures and characteristics, it was not surprising, though, that the schools had a unique way of responding to what they were learning along the way. The following section looks at how Davidson, Furman, Johnson C. Smith and Duke interpreted their early data and how they started responding—even with the final year just completed and additional results still to come.



# Davidson College

Davidson, a private liberal arts college in Davidson, North Carolina, attracts an intellectually curious and engaged student body from around the world. About 1,850 students from 48 states and 47 countries attend. The 2019 annual ranking by *U.S. News & World Report* rates Davidson as the 10th best among “National Liberal Arts Colleges” in America and 3rd in “Best Undergraduate Teaching.”

One-third of the Davidson class of 2018 (168 students) participated in the project research during their first year on campus. They took the survey just before entering college, at first-year orientation and in October and April each year. The project had a retention rate of 70% over the four years, with 120 Davidson students completing surveys in their senior year. A February survey was added in the fourth year and sent to every student who had completed the survey before entering Davidson, whether they had continued with the research or not.

## INSIGHTS: KEY TAKEAWAYS QUICKLY EMERGE

The research teams at each school had access to early results. As the Davidson team reviewed its data, a few takeaways stood out:

### Belongingness

Belongingness is one of the most consistent and strongest variables associated with academic engagement and psychological health. Early on data from the project was used to support a proposal to the Howard Hughes Medical Institute to increase Davidson’s capacity to cultivate and sustain inclusive environments in which all students interested in STEM fields belong and can thrive.

### Academic engagement

One of the most stunning first findings at Davidson turns out to have been a positive one, centered on academic engagement. “One of the first things we talked about was that being academically engaged or having a strong connection to a professor can really pull you through the worst of times. It can be the whole key to resilience,” said Georgia Ringle, a health educator at Davidson. “It’s actually guided a lot of conversations where I could be talking to a student about a painful topic, and by the end they’re animatedly telling me about the classes they love. We’re actively feeding the idea of finding an adult mentor as a way to build resilience.”

### Self-control—Inadequate sleep findings inspire focused study

Having low self-control is strongly associated with high depression and stress. The aspect of self-control that appears to be most important is the ability to initiate tasks and confront stressors. One area of focus at Davidson was on sleep. Students reported sleeping an average of six hours per night, which is short of the eight hours considered a minimum need for this age group. They found mild depression in those with the poorest sleep habits, setting up a potential vicious cycle of depression exacerbating sleep problems and vice versa—leading to sickness, missed classes, counseling center visits, etc. This finding inspired researchers at Davidson to launch a study alongside the core project to look specifically at sleep issues.

### Self-compassion

Having low self-compassion is strongly associated with higher depression, stress, body dissatisfaction,

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...a strong connection to a professor can really pull you through the worst of times. It can be the whole key to resilience.”

—GEORGIA RINGLE

disordered eating and difficulty in experiencing positive feelings. The Davidson results related to body image and disordered eating were more concerning than the overall percentages across all four schools. Slightly over a quarter of the cohort had high weight/shape concerns along with high disordered eating levels, and 41.0% had high weight and shape concerns with low disordered eating at the end of the first year. These concerns affected both men and women, with 10% of men and 35.1% of women reporting high weight/shape concerns with high disordered eating, and 52.5% of men and 35.1% of women indicating high weight and shape concerns with low disordered eating. These findings led to specific practices addressing body image, described more fully below.

### Self-criticism, negative self-talk and high levels of academic stress

It seems that while Davidson students consider themselves and their peers to be relatively kind, cooperative and non-competitive with each other, they can be hard on themselves individually. Davidson’s somewhat intense environment may also reinforce students’ own inability to relax, take breaks and take care of themselves.

## INTERVENTIONS: A PROACTIVE APPROACH

As early results started coming in, the Davidson project team took a proactive approach to intervention. Helping students reduce stress, learn to practice better self-compassion and develop a more positive self-image was a priority, and the team went deep. Acknowledging the diverse student body on campus, they also took



120

Davidson students completed surveys in their senior year

steps to create multiple types of intervention—some inspired by other schools and others’ original ideas. The team also collaborated with students to create and implement their own projects. This served as an intervention by encouraging student, faculty and staff collaboration to improve student well-being. This also enabled other initiatives that were more creative and diverse than the project team could develop on its own.

The following are just a few examples of Davidson’s early responses that address the four foundations of resilience:

**Project Token**

To address issues of belongingness, a student group created an art installation depicting marginalized students’ resilience. The exhibit combined photography, spoken word and narrative techniques to represent multiple perspectives from Davidson students of color, with the goal of creating a more inclusive environment.

**Body Image Project**

To enhance self-compassion, the Davidson project team prioritized addressing the findings around body image and eating disorders. They worked with students who had already been studying body image and brought in a program called “The Body

Project,” a body acceptance program designed to help college-age students resist cultural pressures to conform to any single ideal standard of attractiveness. Lauren Stutts, Davidson’s lead project researcher, noted that students in this program, many of whom did not know each other previously, bonded through their experience. “By the end of that retreat, you could just watch the belongingness occur. You could watch the friendships being formed,” said Stutts. This effort is having a ripple effect through campus, as Davidson recruits participants to lead sessions for additional groups.

**The Davidson Art Cart and Mindfulness Stones**

Also to foster self-compassion, Davidson placed two carts on campus with craft supplies and themed project ideas to encourage students to take a spontaneous break. The Art Carts have their own Instagram account that students follow to know where the carts are and what the project of the day is. Diverse groups of students find themselves engaging with each other through an easily accessible creative outlet.

In addition, a selection of positive, meaningful phrases inspired by the research data (seek balance, chill, breathe, etc.) are etched onto stones

(called Mindfulness Stones), which are made available in public places for students to pick up and keep. Students indicate that the stones symbolize Davidson’s caring approach.

**Addition of wellness programs to the Physical Education and Recreation department**

To enhance self-control, Sandy Helfgott, Davidson’s Director of Physical Education, Recreation and Wellness, has been changing his area’s programming to meet student needs highlighted by the early research results and requested by students. In fact, the Wellness label was added to Helfgott’s title largely as a response to this research. The department now offers many more programs with a cognitive and mental health component, including yoga and mindfulness classes that are fully enrolled with long waiting lists. Campus participation overall is growing, with many students taking classes beyond the minimum requirements for graduation.

**Holistic advising and mentorship**

In the area of academic engagement, Byron McCrae, Davidson’s Vice President of Student Affairs, said some student responses talked about helpful positive feedback from a faculty member or having a faculty member express interest in them. Davidson

launched a new holistic advising pilot, in which faculty volunteered to advise pre-major students. They were trained to talk about physical, social and emotional topics in addition to academics. The pilot was so successful that the college has adopted this new holistic advising model permanently.

**And many more...**

A grant from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute will fund a study of belongingness and success in students of color; the school is part of the Healthier America/Healthy Campus initiative; there are meditation spaces around campus and a mindfulness room in the library; when the days are short, Davidson lends lightboxes to students with Seasonal Affective Disorder.

**LEARNING TO EMBRACE FAILURE**

Showing students the important role that risk-taking and failure play in nurturing resilience, well-being and satisfaction is also a priority for Davidson. The team is planning to start a “Failure Project” that will bring successful leaders to campus to tell the stories of their early failures, what they learned and what makes failure such a powerful driver of success.



# Furman University

Furman, the oldest private institution of higher education in South Carolina, is a liberal arts university in Greenville. Roughly 2,700 undergraduates attend from 46 states and 53 countries. The highest-ranked liberal arts college in South Carolina by *U.S. News & World Report*, Furman was named a “Top Producer of Fulbright students for 2016–17” by the U.S. State Department Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

Two hundred and forty-two Furman students participated in the project for the full four years. Furman surveyed the students the summer before their arrival, four times their first year, twice during sophomore and junior years and three times senior year.

Furman’s resilience team included members from across the student experience, with representation from both Academic Affairs and Student Life. The resilience team brought together colleagues from institutional research, counseling, faculty research, health services, academic assistance, residential life and student activities to understand more intentionally all aspects of a student’s experience.

They wanted to answer the questions of how to help build resilience, including how to adjust the campus experience and climate so the environment did not unintentionally weaken student resilience. The close collaboration between faculty and staff eventually served as the foundation and model for the university’s strategic vision that was announced in October 2016. The resiliency project provided not only a model for inter-divisional campus engagement and collaboration, but also a road map for putting student development theory as the center of campus-wide practice.

When Connie Carson, Furman’s Vice President for Student Life, and Beth Pontari, Associate Provost for Engaged Learning, joined the project, they looked forward to collecting data that might affirm their theory about the root of students’ mental distress. Furman students are known to be hard-driven, hardworking and high-achieving. Carson and Pontari noted the downside of their students’ early experience is that so many of them grow up with highly structured academic and extra-curricular schedules that leave little room for personal decision-making and little experience of failure. Their operating theory was that the highly unstructured and unscripted nature of college life and social relationships would be revealed as the primary source of stress and difficulty for Furman students.

## INSIGHTS: EARLY RESULTS REVEALED SURPRISES

Some of Furman’s early results were surprising. Overall, students were positive about their experience at the university. They reported strong engagement with both faculty and staff on a personal level. They felt they had great access to counseling services and that those services were strong.

The biggest sources of stress, according to early results, were:

## Academic pressures

The Furman research team did not expect academic issues to be *the* top source of stress throughout the four-year student experience. Academic stress came up expectedly in the first year, as students acclimated to campus intellectual life and navigated a new social environment. The surprise was that issues of academic stress continued to arise during every year of the student experience. Students needed stronger time management and study skills for a better academic launch, so Furman has integrated such skills into its first-year *Pathways* curriculum, further discussed below.

## Grief

Many respondents, certainly more than would be expected in a cohort of 18- and 19-year-olds, had recently experienced the death of a significant person in their lives. That grief created stress and compromised their resilience. In response, Furman started a grief group facilitated by university counselors and chaplains and by outside trained grief counselors. The group was so well-received by students that it has continued, and campus practitioners have expanded their use of group support for other mental health issues. Given Furman’s small size, student life professionals originally worried that these interventions may lead to privacy concerns and stigma for students. Instead, one of the most positive outcomes of these activities has been students’ realization that they are not alone in their grief, and they are connecting around it. Building on this success, students started a well-received grief-focused speaker series.

## INTERVENTIONS: PROMOTING “CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT”

High-caliber students do not often experience failure. As a result, they do not have much practice in overcoming and learning from negative experiences. Furman promotes an approach to student development based on a commonly known theory of “challenge and support.” “Resilience means experiencing some sort of discomfort or stress, overcoming it and then being better for it,” Pontari explains. “So there actually has to be challenge. But there also has to be some level of support so students don’t go into full-on distress.” Furman staff and faculty were concerned that the wrong kinds of interventions might make students feel



242

Furman students participated in the project for the full four years

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**Resilience means experiencing some sort of discomfort or stress, overcoming it and then being better for it.”**

—BETH PONTARI

better over the short term, but would fail to help them build resilience.

A review of their early data led the Furman team to launch several interventions that promote challenge and support, particularly to assist with issues of class absenteeism, conflict resolution and goal setting that were either reflected in student survey responses or observed by faculty and staff.

**Ending health provider notes for class absences**

High academic stress was taking a toll on class attendance, and students were increasingly seeking notes from health professionals to excuse them from missed classes. Furman wanted to encourage students to develop stronger coping skills and take more ownership of their own behavior and circumstances, so they could push through uncomfortable feelings to fulfill their responsi-



bilities. They implemented a new policy in which health providers would no longer give notes for anything other than major issues like surgeries or prolonged illness. Otherwise, students had to own, discuss and resolve absences and other issues with their professors.

**Case manager and counselor training in the challenge and support theory**

Carson says one key audience for additional training are their counselors and case managers, who tend to be student advocates and highly nurturing. Furman started training these professionals in the challenge and support theory as another tool to help them encourage students to take ownership of and handle their challenges, albeit with appropriate guidance. The goal is to equip students for self-advocacy.

**Coping skills training for students**

Pontari noted that some students arrive at college without highly developed conflict resolution skills. “Instead of addressing small issues as they occur, they let things build and get worse until a full-blown issue is at hand.” She cited roommate conflict as a classic example, where many of today’s students lack the skills for constructively handling conflict with strangers. Furman’s *Pathways* program will introduce coping skills training to help students prepare for and know how to handle stresses proactively, before they become problems. See more about *Pathways* below.

**WELL-BEING AND RESILIENCE PROJECT INFORMING LARGER STRATEGIC INITIATIVES**

At Furman, the project is also contributing insights for *The Furman Advantage*, the university’s strategic vision that promises students an unparalleled education that combines classroom learning with real-world experiences and self-discovery, and *Pathways*, the signature enhanced advising course aimed at the first two years of the college student experience.

**The Furman Advantage**

Carson described *The Furman Advantage* as “our promise of a four-year individualized experience that’s developmentally and thematically tuned for each year of a student’s undergraduate education.” The program rests on faculty and staff advisors who are specifically trained and personally invested



in being strong mentors, especially in the years before students declare majors. In addition to faculty, Furman also involves alumni mentors at developmentally appropriate times. Along the way, Furman encourages students to reflect on their experiences, interests and strengths. *The Furman Advantage* also integrates high-impact immersive learning experiences (study away, internships, undergraduate research and community-engaged learning projects) to prepare students for professional and personal life after graduation.

**Pathways**

*Pathways*, a student’s first experience of *The Furman Advantage*, is a two-year class of 15 students starting in their first year, taught by a professor or trained staff member who becomes the pre-major advisor for everyone in the class. The *Pathways* curriculum, led and created by staff and faculty experts, specifically addresses the needs and

experiences of first year students and sophomores at developmentally appropriate times. It includes topics like coping skills, study skills, time management, academic integrity, financial management, conflict resolution, belonging and identity issues. “*Pathways* addresses the reality of life in the first two years of college and is strongly informed by what we’re learning from the resilience study,” Pontari said.

The Furman project team of researchers and practitioners continues to meet regularly to share insights and discuss issues associated with the project. The relationships built among faculty and staff through the project have had a positive impact and will likely lead to future campus integrative collaborations such as *The Furman Advantage* peer mentoring institute and the first-generation student experience program currently being designed.

# Johnson C. Smith University



Johnson C. Smith is a private historically black university with a total enrollment of more than 1,500 students. The urban campus located in Charlotte, North Carolina, focuses on integrating the liberal arts with business, the sciences and technology in innovative and socially conscious ways, with a goal of preparing graduates to become entrepreneurial citizens and leaders.

Given the smaller incoming class sizes at Johnson C. Smith, the project team decided to include two cohorts of students in the study, the classes of 2018 and 2019. Eighty-one members of the class of 2018 and 91 members of the Class of 2019 participated in the project. Therefore, Johnson C. Smith's research phase concluded in spring of 2019.

## INSIGHTS: SENSE OF BELONGING MAY DRIVE RETENTION

The project team at Johnson C. Smith knows from their own experience and from a growing body of research that having a sense of belonging is critical to academic success, particularly for students of color, first-generation college students and transfer students. Many Johnson C. Smith students work full-time to pay for their education and to provide financial support to their families. Johnson C. Smith students tend to face considerable financial, family and emotional stress, with responsibilities and concerns that most college students do not encounter until much later in adulthood. The pressures of real life and the challenges that make paying for college difficult often lead students to struggle with the question of whether they really belong on campus. A considerable number of students do not find a sense of belonging strong enough to keep them enrolled. "Our students are life resilient," said Debra Terrell, Associate Professor of Psychology, "We've got to show them how to translate that into academic resilience." Early project findings indicate that this is happening at Johnson C. Smith.

More specifically, Terrell notes an early finding that participating in the project seems to have improved retention for students, perhaps because

“  
Our students are life resilient. We've got to show them how to translate that into academic resilience.”

—DEBRA TERRELL

of the extra attention they received by being in the study. "The preliminary data suggests that we might have had some unintended positive consequences for the students who participated in the project," Terrell said. Johnson C. Smith saw more first-year project participants return for their sophomore year as compared to students who did not participate. Terrell surmises that the caring shown to these students, the early career advising they received and the one-on-one attention they experienced as part of a physical health study Johnson C. Smith initiated as a component of the project, may have increased their sense of belonging sufficiently to keep them enrolled. Johnson C. Smith would like to conduct more in-depth research on this hypothesis.

## INTERVENTIONS: STILL UNDER DEVELOPMENT

Given that Johnson C. Smith's data gathering process continued with the class of 2019, the university's researchers and practitioners look forward to developing and implementing new interventions once they assess their data. Programming is already in place to help students increase their sense of belonging in college, build cohesiveness within class years and improve retention and student success.

### First year student programming

Johnson C. Smith offers productive programming and activities throughout a student's first year. "All of our activities are strategically planned and linked to motivation, leadership, building a growth mindset," said Cathy Jones, Associate Dean of the First-Year Experience. A legacy project during new student week helps students connect to the university and develop a sense of belonging by



81

Members of the Class of 2018 participated in the project

91

Members of the Class of 2019 participated in the project

immersing them in the school's history.

#### Stress reduction pilot events

Jones and her team spent two semesters introducing activities and events aimed at reducing student stress, including massage chairs, jump rope, midnight breakfasts and visits from therapy dogs. "Student stress builds during midterms and finals, and that was impacting the demand on our counseling office," explained Antonio Henley, Dean of University College, a program designed to connect first-year students to the university. "This was an attempt to

mitigate that onslaught. Those were excellent ways to reduce student stress during that period." Johnson C. Smith encourages counselors to facilitate wellness-related conversations with students.

Johnson C. Smith hopes to obtain sufficient funding to bring this kind of connection to upper-class students as well, providing developmentally appropriate programming for each class year.

#### FOCUSED STUDY ON PHYSICAL HEALTH

Terrell believes that studies of student resilience and

well-being should consider physical health as part of the overall story. In an example of a cross-institutional collaboration, Terrell and Kerstin Blomquist, a Furman researcher, conducted physical health focused studies which added height, weight and blood pressure measurement to the project. Rather than relying on self-reported height and weight obtained from students as part of the online project surveys, Terrell met with students during the fall and spring semesters of each year to measure height, weight and blood pressure. "The college years represent a high-risk time for weight gain, which

can increase the potential for high blood pressure and diabetes," explained Terrell. During the Johnson C. Smith study, Terrell observed an average weight gain of 4.3 pounds for women and 3.5 pounds for men by the end of the first year; and 14.8 pounds and 9.8 pounds respectively for women and men by the end of senior year. Terrell notes that this aspect of the project at Johnson C. Smith was unique because there are few existing studies assessing student weight gain over four years in college and none of the studies report data for African American college students. As a result, Terrell continues to explore the larger implications of this study.

# Symposium on Student Well-Being

The Endowment hosts a forum to exchange insights among a wider set of colleges and universities

During the summer of 2016, The Duke Endowment hosted a project symposium, welcoming representatives from other universities with active resilience and well-being projects. These included Azusa Pacific University (Azusa, CA), Paul Quinn College (Dallas, TX), Stanford University (Stanford, CA), UCLA (Los Angeles, CA) and Wake Forest University (Winston-Salem, NC). Here is a brief overview of resilience and well-being projects at these institutions:



#### Azusa Pacific University Putting the focus on "thriving"

Azusa Pacific uses the concept of thriving as a framework for its research into and support of student well-being. Thriving students, Azusa believes, are fully engaged intellectually, socially and emotionally. To explore how to define and measure well-being, optimal functioning and thriving, Azusa built a model with psychosocial and motivational inputs (attitudes), engagement activities (behaviors) and learning/graduation outcomes (student success).



#### Stanford University Emphasizing the importance of failure

The Resilience Project at Stanford motivates and supports students as they experience the normal academic setbacks that are part of a rigorous education. It emphasizes the importance of failure in the learning process and seeks to instill a sense of belonging and bravery to ultimately change the campus perception of failure from something to be avoided at all costs, to something essential to a meaningful education.



#### Wake Forest University Helping students find a sense of meaning

Wake Forest's work centers around helping students find a sense of meaning during their college experience. The university's "Thrive" well-being initiative aims to encourage students do things they value. This means helping students understand their own value systems and helping them acquire knowledge, skills and expectations to drive their behaviors.



#### Paul Quinn College Building resilience through building community

Paul Quinn, a historically black college, is home to 450 students, 85% of whom are eligible for Pell Grants and come from historically segregated and under-resourced communities. Faculty identify students who could benefit from joining an intensive residential academic support and advising program where participating students live together in a dorm. Students also help run the campus organic farm, achieving a community-wide sense of purpose and belonging. To provide financial assistance, Paul Quinn has reduced tuition and fees, opened access to online textbooks and implemented other measures seeking to relieve the financial burden of college.



#### UCLA Guiding students to manage stress

With roughly 25% of its 42,000 students accessing the counseling center, UCLA saw a clear need to help students manage stresses in their lives. It has launched a healthy campus initiative aimed at making a healthy choice the easy choice; a chancellor's initiative responding to parent concerns about suicide by improving non-clinical support on campus; and a student mental health oversight committee, which supports the counseling center and provides funding to support resilience efforts.



# Duke University

By far the largest of the Endowment-supported higher education institutions, Duke is a private research university in Durham, North, Carolina, with approximately 7,000 undergraduate students. It is ranked 8th in the *U.S. News & World Report Best Colleges Ranking* and 22nd in the *U.S. News & World Report Best Global Universities Ranking*.

About five years before the project began, Duke researchers Molly Weeks and Steve Asher had been engaged in a more focused study of students' social and academic experiences in college. That research had uncovered strong correlations between relationships and a sense of belonging and well-being as well as identifying academic engagement as a pervasive positive correlate of student well-being. As that work was concluding, the Duke researchers were excited to transition into the Endowment project as a natural evolution to build on their findings.

In addition to having had their own student cohort participating, Duke researchers and project staff coordinate the project as a whole. Weeks and her team manage the research, store all the data and lead the analysis across the institutions.

Before arriving on campus, 1,200 of 1,700 total Duke incoming first year students responded to the first iteration of the survey, with 370 participating in the full four-year cohort. In the class of 2018's senior year, each school, including Duke, decided to go back to all students with a final survey. Duke received approximately 1,000 responses from seniors.

In addition to the gatherings that took place with the four schools, the internal cross-campus Duke project team met each month to explore topics associated with the project. "That relationship has now given all of us in the Student Affairs office exposure to faculty and has nurtured other partnerships," said Larry Moneta, who retired as Duke Vice President of Student Affairs in 2019.

## INSIGHTS: UNDERSTAND THE SCIENCE AND LET THE PRACTICE FOLLOW

From their findings in the previous social relationship study, the Duke team had an idea of what factors contributed to loneliness, belonging and well-being in college. They knew the project would present a significant opportunity to gain greater understanding of these factors, which the practitioners could apply to their work with students. "Going in, we didn't have plans for specific things we wanted to fix," Moneta reflected. "We felt that if we understood the science better, we could let the practice follow."

This philosophy is driving a number of efforts to share the insights already gained from the project with faculty, staff and students:

- Researchers who focus on each of the four foundations (self-control, self-compassion, academic engagement and friendship) are holding campus-wide presentations for faculty and staff.
- Duke's project team is in the process of building a website that provides in-depth information about the four foundations; shares informational resources including both Duke-authored and third-party articles and presentations; highlights Duke's academic courses specifically related to student well-being; and encourages faculty and

“Going in, we didn't have plans for specific things we wanted to fix. We felt that if we understood the science better, we could let the practice follow.”

—LARRY MONETA

staff to share how they are integrating the four foundations of resilience into their interactions and work with students.

- In 2019, the Duke project team plans to produce a series of videos in which researchers share the highlights of what they're learning about self-control, self-compassion, academic engagement and friendship—with a video dedicated to each of these foundations. These videos will live on the new website.
- Duke "DuWell"—a multi-faceted initiative focused on holistic wellness through risk mitigation, student wellness development and wellness of the Duke community—is taking a leading role in bringing programming connected to the four foundations directly to students.

## INTERVENTIONS: FACULTY TRAINING, ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT AND FRIENDSHIP

Even with Duke's focus on sharing what they have learned and letting faculty and staff determine how they can best use the insights, the Duke project team has initiated a number of interventions based on early findings.

### Training faculty to better support students

Duke's Academic Affairs and Faculty Advancement leaders believe that when students feel supported they become more academically engaged. To help faculty become better student mentors, they are designing a faculty orientation module that encourages faculty to get to know their students and provides resources to support them.



370

Duke students participated in the full four-year cohort



Duke also understands that faculty are among the best-positioned adults on a college campus to help identify struggling students. Professors, in fact, are the dominant source for referring students for case management. The university is reaching out to help faculty understand the case management resources that exist, so no one feels they have to handle difficult student situations alone.

**Moments of Mindfulness**

Created by DuWell, “Moments of Mindfulness” is an innovative collection of programs led by students, designed to engage community members in daily behavioral practices that facilitate stress management and the development of resilience. Relationships are formed through participation in activities, self-compassion is nurtured through the learning process, and self-control increases through prioritizing wellness as students are exposed to various ways to identify meaning and purpose in their lives. Preliminary data show increased resilience among participants.

**Study of random roommate assignments and friendship**

Developing friendship, one of the key foundations of resilience and well-being, often begins with first-year roommates. In the 2017–18 academic year, 46% of first-year students had selected a roommate and they predominantly chose people just like themselves, according to Moneta. Building on her previous research, Duke researcher Sarah Gaither is partnering with the Office of Student Affairs in a four-year study to see if assigning roommates increases student interaction with peers from diverse backgrounds, leading to unexpected friendships.

**Programming to support second-year students’ academic engagement and friendship**

Because of the transition from living on the first-year campus, the shift to sophomore year can be difficult. Suddenly, students no longer live in the friendship-nurturing community of their same-age peers. They are distributed around campus, facing much more academic challenge and pressure to choose a major—all resulting in considerable stress. In response, Duke has focused on creating programming to help fortify sophomores’ academic engagement by creating more informal channels for students to get to know faculty and explore and develop their passions as they prepare to declare majors. Resident Advisors in upper-class housing are also being trained to know all the students on their hall and facilitate new connections based on shared interests, which in some cases can lead to lasting friendships.

**FOCUSED STUDY ON REJECTION**

Like Davidson’s focused study on sleep and Johnson C. Smith’s and Furman’s look at physical health, Duke also ran focused studies alongside the core project research. One Duke study led by researchers Julie Martin and Mark Leary looked at the long-term consequences of fraternity and sorority rejection. Do the short-term effects of rejection actually create harm over the long-term? Duke’s study found that real harm does result from participating in the Greek Life recruitment process, “so we introduced better preparation for students about the real possibilities of rejection, and we were able to help them manage expectations,” Moneta said.



# Summer Research Program

For three summers during the project, students gathered for in-depth research, collaboration and presentation

Through a summer research program, faculty focused on helping students develop higher levels of academic engagement. This research experience, led by Davidson researcher Lauren Stutts, represents one element of the project that was particularly rewarding for the faculty researchers and a select group of students.

During the summers of 2014–16, each of the four schools sent two students to live on Davidson’s campus to work with Stutts as a research mentor. Students had individual research questions that they selected in collaboration with a research mentor at their school, and then studied project data to answer it. Stutts felt strongly that students should have the opportunity to add their perspectives to research that was being conducted about themselves. “It was critical to me that they were involved in that process and continue to be involved.”

**Collaborating with diverse students and perspectives**

Each summer, the eight students also worked together to address a general research question, such as the prevalence of stress, across the whole data set. “The students had such varied backgrounds,” said Stutts. “They were a very rich and diverse group, given how different our four schools are. I think it was rewarding for them to hear others’ perspectives and experiences.”

**Gaining presentation experience**

Giving students the opportunity to develop research expertise



was one objective. The other was to help them develop professional and presentation skills. Every year, the eight students presented their work to the Endowment and gave poster presentations at Furman’s summer research symposium. Students reported on optimism, sleep and technology use, self-compassion, belongingness and negative self-talk, among other topics.

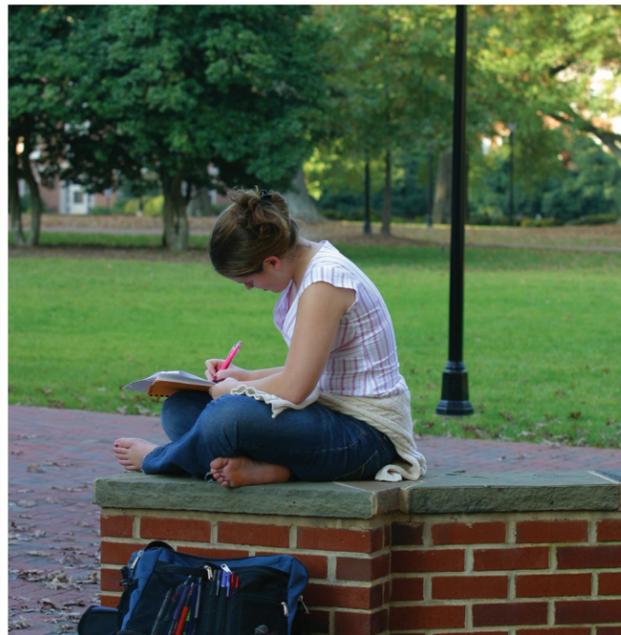
“The opportunity to go to another campus for the summer and interact with students from the other colleges, with faculty members helping them develop not only their research skills, but also their professional skills, was an invaluable experience for the students,” said Johnson C. Smith’s Antonio Henley, Dean, University College, Johnson C. Smith.

Project team members expressed pride in seeing their students develop research questions, analyze data to find answers and work so collaboratively with students from the other institutions.

# Next Steps

Stakeholders await the final results and reflect on the collaboration experience

Four years of research. Eleven waves of one-hour student surveys. Parent input. GPA information. Retention metrics. Researchers have collected mountains of data. As analyses are being completed and conclusions are being drawn in this final year of the project, data collected will continue to be valuable for years to come.



## RAISING AWARENESS OF STUDENT RESILIENCE AND WELL-BEING

“Having all the data from the disparate campuses is a gold mine,” said Endowment Evaluation Director Bill Bacon. “It will be a resource for these four schools and researchers beyond for the foreseeable future.”

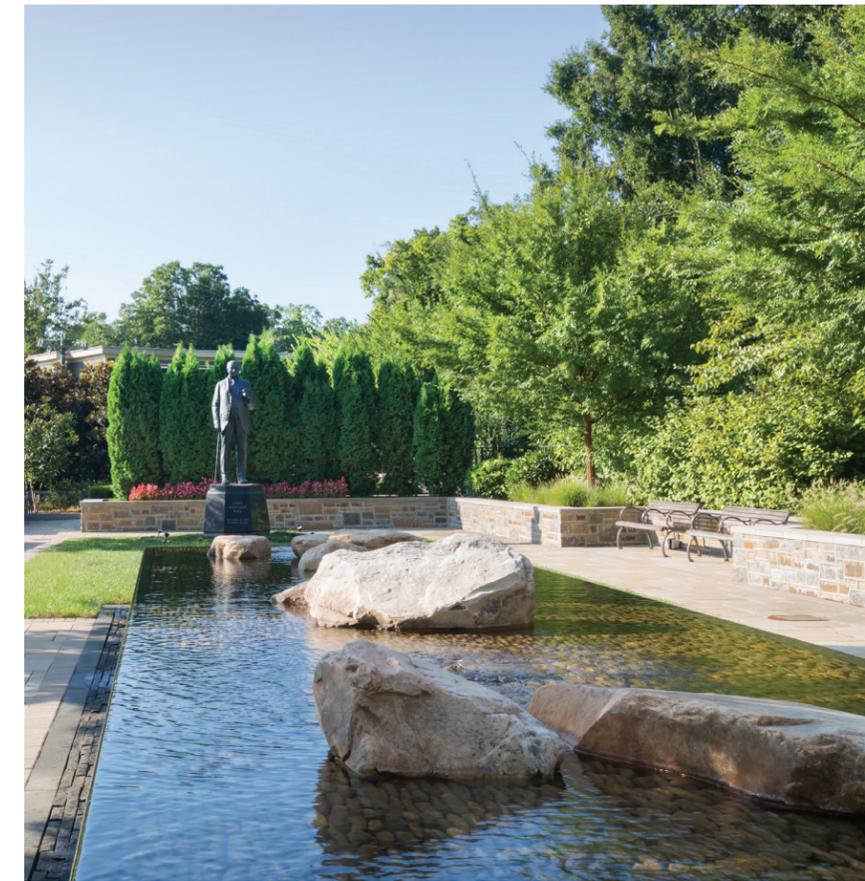
The project raised awareness of student resilience and well-being at the four schools in ways that may never have happened. Through wide-ranging discussions and broad initiatives, the project has influenced many areas of academic life and significant portions of the student experience at each institution.

## PROMOTING UNIQUE CROSS-INSTITUTION COLLABORATION

The new researcher/practitioner partnership forged by the project has led to ongoing collaboration among team members. Susan McConnell, Director of the Endowment’s Higher Education program area, observed that colleges and universities typically seek out similar institutions for research collaborations. “I don’t know how many opportunities colleges and universities have to interact with institutions that are so different from one another,” she said, “but I think there is benefit to this type of collaboration, and our four schools have experienced it.” Bacon continued, “For all the schools, having the opportunity to work with researchers and practitioners from the four campuses, who each brought unique experiences and expertise to the table in collecting and analyzing this volume of data, enriched the project immensely and was a real driver of professional growth.”

The ability to collaborate across campuses, and even across disciplines within the same campus, was widely seen as particularly valuable.

- “Collaboration is what made this research so different,” noted Furman’s Connie Carson.
- “It’s been invaluable to learn from these other schools,” said Georgia Ringle at Davidson. “Getting out of our environment and seeing what other schools are struggling with, and how different we are, how similar we are, sharing ideas and research, and talking about students in very deep ways...I will miss those meetings.”



- “Our annual meetings let us engage with each other and learn from each other,” said Johnson C. Smith’s Antonio Henley. “We’re all in this collaboration together. These four institutions are really in a unique relationship. What if we opened this opportunity to faculty and staff across the institutions?”
- “The collaboration among our four schools really enriched the study in terms of broadening the range of topics we covered and combining everyone’s expertise—both researchers and practitioners,” said Duke’s Molly Weeks.

The Endowment anticipates ongoing benefits to accrue to the students and institutions they support—and to higher education nationally—as the project team shares the full results of their research and practitioner interventions.

# Sharing Across National Higher Education Landscape

Endowment leaders and project participants from the four schools are also enthusiastic about sharing their learnings with a wider audience. They are presenting early findings at national conferences, fulfilling a goal to lead awareness of student resilience across the higher education landscape. The following chart provides a sample of presentations and publications highlighting the insights from this project.

## Sample Symposia Presentations

### Symposium on Academic Resilience in Higher Education, Philadelphia, PA

The Student Resilience and Well-Being Project: A four-institution research-practice partnership

Weeks, M. S., Carson, C., Jones, C., McCrae, B., Moneta, L., Pontari, B. A., Strauman, T. J., Stutts, L. A., & Terrell, D. F.

### American College Health Association, Denver, CO

Building resiliency: Data-informed interventions

Ringle, G., Parsons, T., Cassidy, J., Szigethy, T., McCrae, B., & Weeks, M. S.

### Association for Psychological Science, Washington, DC

Resilience and well-being in the college years: Perspectives from developmental, social, and health psychology

Weeks, M. S., & Strauman, T. J.

### Association for Behavior and Cognitive Therapies, Washington, DC

The moderating role of self-compassion on weight and shape concerns and eating pathology: A longitudinal study

Blomquist, K. K., & Stutts, L. A.

### 19th Annual European Conference on Personality, Zadar, Croatia

New directions in wisdom research

Hoyle, R. H.

### NASPA Strategies Conference, Washington, DC

Building resiliency: Data-informed interventions

McCrae, B., & Ringle, G.

### Association for Behavior and Cognitive Therapies, Washington, DC

Longitudinal investigations of the complex relationships between body dissatisfaction, coping behaviors, and health outcomes

Stutts, L. A. (Chair), Timko, C. A. (Discussant), Kipela, L. S., Blomquist, K. K., & Kramer, R.

## Sample Invited Talks in 2018

### Davidson

Lunch and Learn for Holistic Advisors

(Spring 2018)

Research Talks to Student Life Group

(Summer 2018)

### Duke

Resident Assistant training

(January 2018)

Task Force on the Experience of International Students at Duke

(March 2018)

Women's Center staff retreat

(May 2018)

Ivy+ Wellness Consortium

(June 2018)

Wellness Center staff retreat

(July 2018)

### Furman

Cultural Life Program, "Stress Happens! Who's Resilient in College?"

(January 2018)

### Johnson C. Smith

Project Report-Out, University College Unit Managers Meeting

(May 2018)

## Sample Manuscripts Submitted For Publication

### International Journal of Eating Disorders

The moderating role of self-compassion on weight and shape concerns and eating pathology: A longitudinal study

Stutts, L. A., & Blomquist, K. K.

### Self and Identity

A longitudinal analysis of the relationship between self-compassion and the psychological effects of perceived stress

Stutts, L. A., & Blomquist, K. K.

### Group Processes and Intergroup Relations

A lasting sting: Examining the short-term and long-term effects of real-life group rejection

Martin, J. L., Richman, L. S., & Leary, M. R.

### College Student Affairs Journal

A longitudinal examination of study abroad: Student characteristics and the impact on psychological health

Maultsby, K. D., & Stutts, L. A.

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*James B. Duke*

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THE DUKE ENDOWMENT

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Since 1924, The Duke Endowment has worked to help people and strengthen communities in North Carolina and South Carolina by nurturing children, promoting health, educating minds and enriching spirits.

James B. Duke had little formal schooling himself, but he selected four institutions of higher education in North Carolina and South Carolina as beneficiaries of his Trust. Davidson College, Furman University, Johnson C. Smith University and Duke University have unique cultures and priorities, but each has received the Endowment's annual support.