

Training the brain: resilience program helps student-athletes adjust to college life

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Genevieve Chandler leads UMass football players N in a yoga posture known as tree pose. Credit: UMass Amherst

Imagine the impact on first-year college student-athletes in highly competitive programs if you could teach them resilience—if they learned skills to cope with high expectations, challenging academic courses, rigorous training and physical injuries, homesickness and even

the stressors of life beyond college.

In newly published research, a unique and expanding program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst has been shown to improve decision-making and emotional awareness, lower perceived stress and build resilience among diverse and sometimes at-risk college athletes, according to survey data reported by the student participants, compared to a control group of student-athletes. Part of the research was supported by funding in 2017 from the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Innovations in Research and Practice Grant Program, which is designed to improve the psychosocial well-being and mental health of the student-athlete.

"Participants gained skills key to victory on and off the field, including a sense of belonging, persistence, leadership and the ability to negotiate for the resources they need," says lead author Genevieve Chandler, a mental health nurse and UMass Amherst nursing professor who developed the innovative program from studying the effects of resilience for two decades.

The new study, published in the *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association*, focused on 47 first-year football players and 15 women's basketball players in Division 1 programs at UMass Amherst between 2016-2018. The participants were 18 or 19 years old; 66% were African American, and the rest were non-Hispanic white, with the exception of one Hispanic participant. The control group consisted of student-athletes who did not receive the training because they arrived later on campus.

Resilience—the ability to persist through challenges and recover from adversity—is no longer considered a character trait by researchers but a "practiced interaction between person and environment," the study points out.

"Negative thoughts stick to us like Velcro," Chandler explains. "We have to train our brain to hang on to the positive things. We are experts in stress, so we need to practice building up the calm side of the [brain](#), the focused side."

Chandler developed the resilience-building workshop as a one-credit academic course called Changing Minds, Changing Lives to address the predictable stresses students face as they adjust to college life—especially those with a history of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs emerging from a child's social experience within the family and community "have a tremendous impact on future violence victimization and perpetration, and lifelong health and opportunity," according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Initially offered to nursing students, Chandler's class caught the interest of psychiatric social worker Jim Helling, a UMass Center for Counseling and Psychological Health senior clinician who was then working in the Athletic Counseling Office. Helling thought that in a predominantly white university, black student-athletes in particular could benefit from a new kind of support system better suited to helping them cope with chronic stress exposure. "We needed a new approach, a psychological wellness program that would be culturally resonant for students of color," Helling says. "Ginny's work focuses on strengths, celebrates resilience and empowers black athletes to express themselves in their own voice. This model has been a game changer for our students."

Together, they began teaching the course to first-year football student-athletes, who in turn used their newly developed leadership skills to [mentor high school football players](#) in nearby Springfield.

In 2018, Chandler and Helling added basketball players, and interest has now spread across campus to target student groups facing particular stress, such as female and minority engineering students in a program

traditionally dominated by white males. They have been featured at conferences and conducted resilience course trainings across the country so other educators can teach the curriculum.

Chandler points out that the 50% of study participants who reported ACEs showed greater increments of positive change in emotional awareness scales than participants without ACEs, illustrating the distinctive importance and benefits of resilience training for an at-risk group. An estimated 60% of the U.S. population has at least one ACE.

"I'd hope that it's a class that everyone could take, honestly," says Caeleb Washington, a UMass Amherst defensive lineman from Melbourne, Fla., who took the resilience course and later served as a teaching assistant.

The course is interactive and experiential. The content focuses on what Chandler calls the ABCS: active coping, such as exercise or meditation; building strength by focusing on and advancing one's aptitudes rather than weaknesses; cognitive awareness, which involves being aware of automatic thinking; and garnering social support. To gain the neuroplastic benefits of repetitive practice, each class follows the same format. It begins with each individual describing a "positive practice exercise" they did as homework. Breathing exercises and yoga poses follow. Relevant research is presented and then students, as well as teachers, complete a five-minute, deeply personal writing reflection related to the research. The writing is read aloud, after which class members share feedback about what they found strong in the writing. Class ends with each participant sharing an affirmation, appreciation or appraisal about that day's class.

"This class has taught me how to breathe. It taught me about leadership and it taught me how to just stay calm," says UMass Amherst senior Vashnie Perry, a health administration major from the Atlanta area and co-captain of the women's basketball team. "It's the best advice I've had

since I've been in college."

More information: Genevieve E. Chandler et al, The Efficacy of a Resilience Intervention Among Diverse, At-Risk, College Athletes: A Mixed-Methods Study, *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/1078390319886923](https://doi.org/10.1177/1078390319886923)

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