

## **Faith, Family, and Friends as Integral Factors in Student Resilience in the Ateneo de Manila School of Science and Engineering**

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**What makes Filipino students resilient in times of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic? Even as some students succumb to anxiety and despair and lose motivation to learn, others actively take charge of their learning and remain hopeful and strong amid severe trials. What keeps them going, and what can we learn from them? 25 professors of the Ateneo de Manila School of Science and Engineering selected 92 college undergraduate and graduate students whom they observed to display resilience in learning and prodded them to reflect on how they overcame challenges in and out of the classroom. Whatever their circumstances, our study reveals that these resilient students rely on three main sources of support: deep faith, solid family bonds, and close friends and mentors who hold them accountable. As contrasted to the more individualistic context that gives rise to resilience as posited by Western literature, Filipino resilience is instead truly a community affair.**

Keywords: Ateneo School of Science and Engineering, faith, family, friends, pandemic learning, resilience

### **INTRODUCTION**

What makes Filipino students academically resilient in times of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic? This is the research question behind this exploratory and descriptive qualitative study. Affecting more than 94% of the global student population, the COVID-19 pandemic is deemed “the largest disruption of education systems in human history” (Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021). The Philippines is reportedly one of the most adversely affected, with many elementary school students suffering more “learning poverty” compared to those of other countries (World Bank 2022), with factors ranging from inadequate digital infrastructure and societal inequality to lack of government preparation and mental health issues in the young.

While many higher-education institutions in the Philippines struggle to meet the needs of learners (Dayagbil *et al.* 2021), the Ateneo de Manila University, a top private school where I have served for more than three decades, is better-equipped and better-prepared than most. When the pandemic hit, administrators fine-tuned online logistics and communication procedures, teachers brainstormed ways to deliver content, and students and their families invested in online learning tools. Up to today, laptops and tablets are loaned to students who need them, and portable learning packets are delivered to those with ongoing internet problems.

To prepare for online learning, at the request of our school administration, I conducted multiple webinars: explaining to parents why our school structure and support outweigh the impersonality of commercial online platforms, modeling to teachers how to manage the online

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classroom, suggesting best practices to students to take charge of their learning.

Many students continued to take their studies in stride but not others—so much so that in February 2021, the School of Science and Engineering (SOSE) came up with a pledge for faculty and students, which read in part:

“The pandemic is not an excuse for us to hone students who are less than what they should be (i.e. who may lack the skills, attitudes, or expertise expected of their profession). Neither has it changed our vision of the ideal Ateneo graduate or the core values of SOSE: finding God in all things, Ignatian service, passion for excellence, integrity, and professionalism... We renew our promise to uphold our core values, including a passion for excellence. We strive to be outstanding scientists, mathematicians, and engineers. We innovate strategies for pedagogy and learning that adapt to evolving knowledge. We produce research and innovation that push the boundaries of science and transform society.”

Many learners took these words to heart. But as the mental health and academic motivation of some students plummeted in the pandemic, so did the emotional equilibrium of several faculty. At one point, since I was also trained as a clinical psychologist, I was counseling as many disheartened and frustrated instructors as troubled and anxious students.

To bolster hope and strength, Bienvenido F. Nebres—National Scientist, mathematician, and former Ateneo president—delivered this message to SOSE in early-2021, which was later disseminated to the wider university: “During this pandemic, I have been spending time to see how I can be of help to pupils in the public schools, in Zoom sessions organized by Synergeia Foundation with parents, teachers, mayors in Pasig, Northern Luzon, Northern Mindanao, Basilan, and Jolo. I see how they soldier on, doing their best to help their children have an opportunity to learn despite immense difficulties... Why? Because they know that is the way for them to help their families in the future. The teachers give their time and effort because they love the children and want them to have a better future. It is the love of our students and our desire to help them towards a better future that will carry us through our frustrations with the national situation, with what we experience to be failures or inadequacies of Ateneo. In SOSE we have many scholars, who look to their Ateneo education as their way to build a better life for their families. Let us encourage them to continue to work and study hard, no matter what their peers do or say. They will do it out of the same love as the children

and teachers in Gabaldon. Others have dreams of really contributing to those in need in our country... Let us not let our frustration with those who feel entitled distract us from caring for these students of ours, who really want to work and study hard out of love for their families and of a genuine desire to serve. It is my love of and appreciation for these students and graduates of ours as well as the many dedicated teachers and students I meet across the country that keeps me going, despite failures of our national leaders and our own failures, too.”

What motivates many teachers to keep going is the tenacity of several students, who actively participate in every synchronous class, who desire to go beyond minimum competencies, and who remain hopeful despite severe challenges. What can we learn from them? Thus was born the SOSE Student Resilience Study.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

From the Latin word *resilere* (to jump back), the term “resilience” was first used in the 1800s to describe how metals bend back again when placed under pressure. The American Psychological Association (APA 2012) defines resilience as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress,” and other definitions include “a stable trajectory of healthy functioning after a highly adverse event; a conscious effort to move forward in an insightful and integrated positive manner as a result of lessons learned from an adverse experience; the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the viability, function, and development of that system; and a process to harness resources in order to sustain well-being” (Southwick *et al.* 2014).

Resilience and related factors such as grit are extensively studied in the U.S. (Duckworth 2016), and the few studies in the Philippines that touch on academic resilience use Western frameworks (Leysa and Malnegro 2016; Rendeza 2020).

However, because this is an exploratory study on what resilience truly means in the context of Filipino college science majors, my SOSE faculty researchers and I deliberately did not operationalize the variable “resilience.” Instead, faculty chose students who displayed certain behaviors in the pandemic—such as actively participating in synchronous classes even if attendance was not checked, learning effectively rather than cheating in class or weaponizing mental health to justify negative behaviors, submitting requirements with care and on-time rather than cramming at the last minute or blaming the internet (deadlines were already extended beyond the

usual ones), among others. Because we wanted to capture the lived experience of resilience, we deliberately did not circumscribe its manifestations.

To provide more relevance to the situation, my SOSE faculty researchers and I heeded Nebres' advice (2016) to start from the ground up, listen with care to local respondents, examine common patterns that emerge, and only then check existing literature to see whether it sheds light on empirical data.

Nebres counseled us to conduct a literature review after data gathering, rather than before. Thus, in our study, we researched international findings when needed, but at the core are the experiences and insights from participants. Purposive and convenient sampling schemes were implemented, which meant that all students who were chosen by professors, based on observed behaviors like those previously mentioned, and who agreed to be interviewed became study participants.

92 participants came from all departments and programs: Biology (BIO); Chemistry (CH); Electronics, Computer, and Communications Engineering (ECE); Environmental Science (ES); Health Sciences (HS); Information Systems and Computer Science (ISCS); Mathematics (MA); Physics (PS); and Science Education (SCIED).

Our exploratory study adopts a qualitative approach to provide in-depth, contextual, and experiential bases for analysis. To delve into meanings that participants use in making sense of their experience, we use narrative inquiry (Smith *et al.* 2009) to capture the "what" (instances of growth and learning), the "how" (experiences that are meaningful and strategies that worked), and the "why" (motivations for resilient behavior) as perceived by participants themselves. By engaging participants in narrating their experiences and discussing their perspectives, the study provides a grounded perspective on what, how, and why they think, act, and believe as they do, to unravel the meanings contained in their stories.

### Guide Questions for Participants

Following university ethics guidelines, the study gathered data from students—through reflection papers, one-on-one or paired interviews, or focus group discussions, which revolve around the following guide questions:

1. Describe instances in your life when you experienced major stressors (e.g. family dysfunction, poverty, loss of loved ones, etc.). How did you cope with these?
2. Online learning is more challenging, in many ways, than onsite learning. But learning from home also has its advantages. Many students continue to learn well, with grit, optimism, and persistence. Reflect on your personal experience with online learning. Do

you think you managed to learn and grow? Describe in detail the strategies that worked for you.

3. Many people are uncertain about the future. What do you think will make you learn, thrive, and grow despite uncertainty, etc.?

SOSE faculty researchers reflected on the data given by their student respondents, and after I publicly presented preliminary findings, we refined analyses, such as providing childhood context by participants who mentioned family upbringing extensively, or elaborating on how peer support helped in mental health. By the end of the study, data were analyzed from 92 students: 52 undergraduate and 40 graduate students.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The backgrounds of our student participants are not homogeneous. Many are financial aid scholars, whereas some are economically comfortable. Many were top achievers in high school, whereas several consider themselves average learners. Many underwent childhood poverty or parental absence, and others experienced family dysfunction or the loss of loved ones before and during the pandemic. Many remain optimistic despite overwhelming odds, whereas others grapple with mental and emotional issues.

But these students are all resilient, and three significant support factors emerged: deep faith, solid family bonds, and close friends and mentors who support them while holding them accountable. These also help them manage mental health issues.

We now discuss these factors in depth. In the quotes that follow, aside from indicating the programs that they are housed under, student initials are used with their permission and placed in single-quote marks.

### Deep Faith

Faith is not a significant factor that generally appears in Western grit studies [like Duckworth (2016)], but it was practiced by the majority of our student respondents. During crises, many students turn to God, whom they view as a personal being who loves and cares about them.

Despite intense bullying by college batchmates, inadequate resources during the pandemic, and homesickness due to prolonged separation from loved ones in the province, respondent 'ALF' (SCIED) advises us to "invest in prayer, take comfort in God's words of truth, surrender our wounds to Him. He will not give us battles beyond what we can bear. He will provide a way, maybe not the way we wanted, but His way, which may become our life's greatest testimony."

***Faith serves as an anchor during stress.*** To quell pandemic-related anxieties about becoming a medical doctor, respondent 'DNS' (HS) finds regular Bible studies to be an anchor in stressful times, since the "lessons apply to life, and I worry less because I lift up anxieties to God. I trust that He will guide my decision-making."

During his mother's hospitalization during the pandemic, when faced with the dire possibility of losing her, respondent 'RIF' (MA) prayed, "Lord, comfort me at this moment. I need your comfort right now. Lord, grant us the peace that we need now." His motto is Philippians 4: 6-7, which can be summed up as: "Be prayerful with thanksgiving because the Lord will give you peace."

When confronted by problems engendered by the pandemic, respondent 'MCL' (MA) sings these verses her mother taught her as a child: "Christ is the answer to all my longings, Christ is the answer to all my needs. Savior, baptizer, the great physician, Oh Alleluia! He's all I need."

Religious beliefs provide answers to existential questions, thus "reducing existential angst" (Koenig 2012). Respondent 'MXT' (ISCS) is convinced that "God gives each person a specific purpose in this world," and despite the difficulties engendered by the pandemic, he forges on with his graduate studies. "This helps me detach myself from more materialistic dreams, and allows me to be completely happy and satisfied with just a simple dream of being a teacher."

***Faith becomes a buffer against adversity.*** "Because religion encourages the helping of others and emphasizes a focus outside of the self, engagement in other-helping activities may increase positive emotions and serve to distract from one's own problems" (Koenig 2012). For respondent 'AM' (PS), the hardest thing in the pandemic was when church masses closed down. "At first, I was angry, but this ironically increased my faith and that of my family. I used to pray the rosary by myself, and then my sister joined me. When my parents saw us, they decided to join also, and now for over a year, we've been praying the rosary together every day. God had a hand in this."

When the pandemic restricted onsite laboratory work, respondent 'PRS' (ECE) worried about his thesis and had to "think outside the box." While consulting a lot of online materials, he "prayed and surrendered myself to God, for He knows best. To God be all glory and praise, He provides everything I need, including knowledge and skills, to finish my graduate studies on time."

Respondent 'C' (ES) sums up the integral role of faith in Filipino resilience in this way: "Stress comes from thinking we are in full control of and, thus, totally to blame for our crisis situation, in an attempt to maintain a certain image or stature. Submitting ourselves in prayer

puts us in a position of humility to acknowledge our role in support of God moving in our situation, and an atmosphere of discernment of what is in accordance with His will, regardless of our fate to lose or save. We put ourselves in a position to recognize and receive His favor, grace, and provision. Thus, where stressors are involved, prayer is not [the] last resort but a battle plan. What makes me learn, thrive, [and] grow despite the pandemic storm raging about, is not so much knowing that we are all in the same boat, but rather, who it is that is in the boat with us. God has proven Himself real and all-powerful in my life thus far. As the saying goes, those who put everything in God's hand, see God's hand in everything. This sense of connection and faith in His promises for our good is what keeps me persevering in faith, hope, and joy. I recount past situations when I was at the end of my rope, and how they got resolved in a manner beyond my expectations. I remind myself, 'This too shall pass.' Destination determines direction, and since our destination is the childlike joy and complete peace God has willed and has in store for us—hope is what keeps us putting one foot in front of the next along our journey, albeit bumpy and tumultuous at times."

### **Strong Family Bonds**

As with faith, family as a factor is seldom highlighted in American studies of resilience, which may stem in part from their self-sufficiency emphasized since the founding of their republic (Guelzo 2020).

But in our study, the formative role of family, especially parents, is integral—which is not surprising in the Philippines, where close kinship ties predominate. Though some students in our study experienced conflict with their parents, many others credit their parents for inculcating in them and modeling for them the values they strive to live by.

***Family models resilience.*** Since respondent 'C' (SCIED) was a child, her father had been working abroad. Since he studied in a vocational school, "his greatest dream" was for the children to finish college and get a good job. "When we were kids, our parents always reminded us about the importance of education for our future, and that we should not waste their efforts. Time is gold. We have to be obedient, and we have to choose our friends wisely. We followed our parents, we prayed to God, we had strong family bonds, and most of all, we displayed *pagtitiis* in difficult situations."

A volcanic eruption near their home forced 'C' and her siblings to migrate to the city and live with extended family, which engendered "culture shock," since they lived in a neighborhood where the children were exposed to neighbors who "cursed, quarreled" or who were

“drunkards.” But the values instilled by their parents held firm: “Even if we lived in Manila, we did not make *lakwatsa* or *laboy*. Our lives revolved around home, school, [and] church. My siblings and I practiced good mind setting; we valued our parents’ love, care, and dreams for us; we looked on the bright side; we solved problems confidently; we went to church and sang praises to God.” In the pandemic, ‘C’ buckled down despite difficulties and garnered her master’s degree.

“My resilience comes from my family who [has] always been supportive of me,” says respondent ‘M’ (PS). “My parents are role models because they have been persistent in challenging times. My mother, who has a disability, even studied law in her fifties and she graduated in May 2021, during the pandemic. I am inspired by my parents to take on challenges in life.”

**Family promotes solid learning habits.** Education is often considered by Filipino families as the path to a better future, so early on, many parents strive to inculcate in their children discipline in mind, attitude, and behavior. In fact, ensuring that children maintain discipline, particularly in school, is the most significant strategy practiced by the families of 2,077 student achievers in Marikina and Bulacan public high schools in our previous study (Lee-Chua *et al.* 2007). So integral to a strong life foundation is a positive discipline that it is “not only a child’s need but also a child’s right,” says Filipino child and clinical psychologist Maria Lourdes Carandang (Carandang and Lee-Chua 2008).

“My family is the primary reason for my resilience,” says respondent ‘AM’ (PS). “From a young age, I was taught by my parents to practice self-discipline. Studying hard, waking up early, [and] going to bed at regular times frankly do not require much effort or willpower on my part because they are already habits that I have been practicing for years.”

Even in the pandemic, ‘AM’ continues to learn. “There are so many things I know now that I did not before. For example, right before the lockdown in March 2020, we had just finished differential calculus [onsite]. We were about to start the topic of integration, but classes stopped, so the professor posted handouts online and told us to send him our solutions for checking. Though not graded, they were super-important for my foundation. When there’s an opportunity to answer something, graded or not, just do it because it’s an investment. In the lockdown, we had the chance to just rest which was also good, but sometimes, doing a little bit of something is actually a way of resting. It’s still less than what we used to do, and it’s better than doing absolutely nothing. I noticed that in high school you learn a lot in the school year, but when summer break happens, you forget everything. I wanted to

avoid that. When the professor gives [ungraded] formative assessments, just do them.”

Respondent ‘ERA’ (ES) says, “Our family has a decent life, but I did not grow up with a silver spoon. Early on, my parents told me that if I wanted to go to a good university, I had to study hard and do my best to qualify for scholarships. The sacrifices of my parents drove me to do well in school. I wanted to return the favor and spare them from worrying about college expenses. My family became my biggest motivation to do well.” When her mother passed away, ‘ERA’ had to be “strong” for her younger brother, while staying focused on her studies to maintain her scholarship [during] the pandemic. “I know my mom would have wanted that.”

**Family inculcates a sense of responsibility.** Family influence is key to resilience not only for many financially-challenged students in our study but also for several who lead more economically comfortable lives. Respondent ‘MXT’ (ISCS), who is thriving despite the pandemic, says, “I grew up in a good family and we always had enough for necessities and even some pleasures. However, it was important that I was never too comfortable growing up. Our family had money, but our parents never spoiled us. We were given an allowance in school and made to stick to it. If we made bad decisions, it was made clear to us that we had to live with the consequences.”

For respondent ‘RA’ (ES), even if his family is in the upper class, “My parents did not make me feel that I had a wide safety net. They emphasized that because I chose what I wanted to do in life, I had to make my own safety net. This taught me to value what I have and to learn from mistakes in a more meaningful way. There is a sense of accountability in every action I do.”

In line with Nebres’ observations in the Introduction, many resilient students in our study maximize learning even in a crisis because they want to give back to their families in some way. American psychologist Angela Duckworth (2016) famously defines grit as the “power of passion and perseverance,” but in our study, while perseverance remains a factor, passion may not be as necessary. Of course, interest in and love for what they are learning helps students persevere (and this does hold for some participants in our study), but for many others, personal interest or passion for their course is secondary to the impetus of doing the best they can for the benefit of their family. In our study, resilience does not always stem from individual passions, but rather, it provides the momentum for students to work towards a better future for their loved ones.

Parental pressure regarding student academics—whether misguided or not—is increasingly blamed for student anxiety and depression in India (Deb *et al.* 2015), China

(Deng *et al.* 2022), and the United States (US) (Chua 2011). Few, if any, peer-revised studies on this have (yet) been published in the Philippines, but interestingly, this topic is explored by several student-authored papers on the website Course Hero, at the undergraduate or even secondary levels (Fernandez *et al.* 2018; Abrillo *et al.* 2020).

However, in our study, even when parents exert pressure for them to do well, resilient students take it in stride, even in the pandemic. “Doing good in school might hopefully translate to a good life after school,” says respondent ‘J’ (MA). “There is pressure from the family to do well, but it does not affect me badly. The pressure is moderate enough to have a positive impact on me.”

Respondent ‘AMR’ (MA) says, “I cannot afford to take a pause from my studies as I want to contribute to our household expenses as soon as I can. I have the means to take online classes today, and because it is uncertain when things will go back to normal, I try not to take this opportunity and privilege for granted.”

Respondent ‘L’ (ISCS) wants to help his parents, who do not have a job. “There is a lot of pressure on me because I am the youngest and my siblings are abroad. I did not study well in high school, but when my parents lost their jobs, my perspective changed. I told myself I have to be *matino*. While I was taking the entrance test, I knew that if I did not get a scholarship, I could not enter Ateneo. Once I made it, I [resolved] not to waste this opportunity, even in the pandemic. It’s not just my parents—a lot of benefactors also provided scholarships.”

**Family instills a growth mindset.** American psychologist Carol Dweck (2006) contends that success boils down to mindset. We develop a growth or a fixed mindset at early ages (from parents, *etc.*), and from such springs our behavior, including our perspective on success and failure. Individuals with a fixed mindset view intelligence as innate and static, avoid challenges and give up easily, see effort as futile, resent or ignore negative constructive feedback, blame outside factors for setbacks, feel threatened by other people’s success, and seldom achieve their full potential.

On the other hand, people with a growth mindset view intelligence as an ability that can be developed, embrace challenges and persevere amid difficulties, regard effort as essential for mastery, learn from critiques, and take heart in other people’s achievements. Failure is not the end of the world but a chance to learn and grow.

In high school, respondent ‘E’ (MA) was at first intimidated by “talented” classmates. But he grew to realize that “people are diverse. There are math gods in class, but at the end of the day, what really counts

is determination and perseverance. Sometimes if you are smart, if you are always overwhelmed, nothing will happen. Perseverance is really the most important.”

Effort counts more than innate ability. Emphasizing effort rather than natural talent is the sixth best practice (out of 10) in our Ateneo High School study of student achievers (Lee-Chua and Sison-Dionisio 2004). Relying on the self rather than blaming outside factors is the third best practice (out of five) in our study of top students in Marikina and Bulacan public schools (Lee-Chua *et al.* 2007).

When he failed his research subject in Grade Eleven, ‘E’ managed to turn it around the year after. This experience “ingrained” in him the conviction that “as cheesy as it sounds, even if I fail, I can rise again.” When he entered college, his mindset became “it is okay to fail as long as my scholarship is not threatened. If you fail, you can always make up for it.” He stresses the importance of consistent practice to cement learning, including during the pandemic.

“However much *pagmumukmok* you do about online class, will the online class adjust for you? The world will not adjust for you, so you have to be the one to adapt. Even in the pandemic, make the best out of online learning. [Nobel Prize-winning economist Daniel Kahneman talks about] Type One thinking as impulsive. For example, if you see a speeding car, you run away instinctively. Type Two is critical thinking, which is reflective. If all you do is think badly about online class, that’s Type One, so a change of perspective with Type Two thinking is needed.”

**Family provides unconditional support and purpose.** Aside from parents, the support of other loved ones is crucial. “It’s normal to be sad and to feel uncertainty, as we are in the middle of a pandemic,” says respondent ‘FRP’ (PS). “However, it is important to have a support system of people who matter, who could make a difference in our perspective. Sometimes I feel discouraged about my dissertation, but having my partner encourage and assure me that I have the ability to continue has a really big impact.”

Married students look to their own families as the impetus for them to do their best. Respondent ‘AY’ (SCIED) derives resilience from her husband, who possesses “wisdom and a positive outlook. He taught me to be goal-oriented, even in the pandemic.” Respondent ‘JRM’ (MA) says, “We can only rent a small apartment, and my two-year-old daughter’s voice is loud. It is difficult to study and work onscreen with my daughter beside me. But I find my family to be a support rather than a challenge because they are my inspirations to continue in life.”

**Support and Accountability from Peers and Mentors**  
For our participants, resilience is a community affair. Respondent ‘C’ (SCIED) lives by the dictum: “Together

we stand, divided we fall.” She affirms: “Our classmates work together and help one another to stay resilient in the pandemic.”

When problems crop up in the family, friends are invaluable. With good study habits, respondent 'KADS' (MA) had been coping well with online learning, but when his father and mother died within a few months of each other in the pandemic, he took time off to grieve and heal, while confiding in friends who could “validate and empathize” with him.

When he was going through a difficult time, respondent 'DDA' (MA) says, “I cannot understate the value of my friends. I did not totally confide in them, but we played video games and did debate tournaments together. They were a release valve for the stress.”

Growing up in a dysfunctional family environment that led to suicidal ideation, respondent 'EG' (PS) credits his classmates and professors for providing “a family environment in Ateneo” that helped him heal and forge on in the pandemic.

**Friends exert positive rather than negative peer pressure.** Peer influence can be for good or ill, particularly for young adults. For instance, cheating and other forms of dishonesty have long been a problem in the Philippines, but in the pandemic, online cheating reached new heights, even as then-education secretary Leonor Briones asked the help of authorities to investigate the Facebook group Online Kopyahan, with more than 600,000 members in September 2021. “Cheating in schools is a lingering problem,” Briones tells the Inquirer (Galvez 2021). “I am not justifying it. I am merely stating that it exists and we are not tolerating it.” (The Facebook group has since been archived.)

In our study, several resilient students emphasize the importance of choosing friends who exert positive influences. For respondent 'CKP' (CH), a friend who was serious about studies was invaluable. “*Naghahatakan kami*, physically, to study, and this friend helped me in math, big time,” she says. She is thankful that she never got into the habit of “copying answers” from peers, which forced her to delve deep into the chemistry material. She advises students to find a “study buddy” for support and accountability.

**Friends engage in helping behaviors rather than toxic competition.** Focusing solely on grades rather than learning “paralyzes you,” Nebres tells students (personal communication). Grade obsession significantly raises the risk of anxiety disorders, compounding the mental state of teens who are already prone to excessive fears and worries. “Anxiety symptoms are associated with impairment of memory and cognitive functions and can contribute to

poor school performance and academic failure, which can, in turn, lead to further psychiatric disturbances” (Mazzone *et al.* 2007).

“Rather than competing with each other [in a toxic way],” respondent 'PRA' (ECE) says, “my classmates are very approachable, and we helped each other. It was my friend who introduced me to the Ateneo Innovation Center, where I worked on a project for my thesis.”

**Friends buttress each other rather than display entitlement behaviors.** Partly to ease the perceived emotional stressors of many students today, and partly to cater to them and their families as consumers who demand good grades in return for tuition, schools may at times lower expectations, leading to academic entitlement and grade inflation—even at elite Western universities (Lindsay 2019). “Academic entitlement is a common source of frustration for college personnel” (Sohr-Preston and Boswell 2015), and it does not benefit anyone, students least of all. “A significant negative correlation was found between academic entitlement and satisfaction with life for all students” (Reysen *et al.* 2017).

During the pandemic, teachers in several schools in the Philippines are asked to show “compassion” by giving various student accommodations, including not flunking any of them even for substandard work. This invariably resulted in grade inflation, “the culprit behind the explosion in the number of students who are graduating with the so-called Latin honors: *cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, and *summa cum laude*,” says sociologist Randy David (2022), who teaches at the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman. “This year alone [saw]...a total of 1,433 honor graduates, or 38 percent of the 3,796 graduates who completed their bachelor’s degrees in the different disciplines in UP Diliman in 2022... To ease the multiple challenges of online learning, UP admonished its faculty to exercise leniency in evaluating student performance. Accordingly, it was decided that no grade lower than 3.0 (the lowest passing grade) would be given during this health emergency. The unavoidable consequence of this has been to push up the grades.”

A similar situation exists in many other schools, including ours. Ironically, even as faculty are extra-lenient and student grades are at a historic high, many students say they are suffering emotionally. In Ateneo, students with severe mental health are highly encouraged to take a leave of absence to prioritize treatment rather than academics.

Mental health issues are real. But according to several frustrated and disappointed professors in our school, a major concern is the increasing student use of alleged mental illness—without a proper diagnosis from a licensed professional—as an excuse for poor performance. In the US, several groups—including health professionals—are

warning against “weaponizing mental illness” in school and at work (Oladipo 2020; McCrae 2018; Optimist Minds 2022).

While some students likely do “weaponize” mental health to get what they want, the resilient ones in our study, such as respondent ‘RA’ (ES), view challenges with equanimity. When his father passed away, he told himself that “it was the natural order of things.” But when his toddler nephew died, he “plunged into depression.” With a strong faith and a loving family, he told himself that “life doesn’t follow a plan, whether you like it or not, things happen. Our family believes that suffering is part of our existence in this world. We offer our sufferings to God, as St. Therese of Lisieux said, ‘Offer your sufferings at the foot of the cross.’”

‘RA’ has no patience with students who decry school stress. “I avoid calling it academic stress because that’s part of the thing you signed up for: Studying is hard. My relative, a doctor who teaches in medical school, says that students complain about stress. He tells them, ‘Saving a life is stressful, your job is inherently stressful, so welcome to the life you chose!’”

“I am frustrated with some students who blame the professors or the school during these trying times,” says respondent ‘M’ (PS). “The professors are trying their best. Some even invested in electronic pads [and] expensive laptops to give quality education to their students. Hence, we shall also do our fair share of effort and not take undue advantage of their kindness. If I see people giving their best efforts, it allows me to learn from them and inspires me to keep pushing on.”

Respondent ‘MVH’ (ES) says, “School is easier now, the professors are lenient. The challenge of online learning is studying on your own. You have to read the modules, and if you don’t understand them, you have to watch instructional YouTube videos or search for further explanations with peers.” Respondent ‘NJL’ (ECE) agrees, “Learning is not just the role of the professor, but also the student. We have to do our part.”

Respondent ‘JIC’ (ES), who overcame depression with family, peer, and therapeutic support, says, “It’s important to have the right group of friends, who can give you a positive kind of pressure. Going through uncertainties together won’t make them any less uncertain, but they can be more bearable with the right company.”

***Friends genuinely connect with each other rather than indiscriminately rely on social media.*** Cementing trusted relationships is not easy in our digital age, since technology “can provide the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship [or] intimacy...[resulting in] real-world isolation and loneliness, emotional disconnection, anxiety, and mental exhaustion” (APA 2014). US

psychologist Sherry Turkle (2012) says, “As we ratchet up the volume and velocity of communication, we set up a pace that takes us away from each other.”

Rather than relying on the number of likes on social media feeds, in times of crisis, more than ever, young people need a close circle of trusted peers to whom they can release pent-up emotions and from whom they can seek consolation, strength, [and] counsel. Social media, with its highs and lows, can heighten fears and harm mental health. Respondent ‘AY’ (SCIED) distances herself from social media because “reading about COVID cases or communicating with disturbing people stimulates anxieties.”

At the start of the lockdown, respondent ‘C’ (PS) knew that her mental health was negatively affected every time she opened Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, so she deleted them. Even before the pandemic, respondent ‘M’ (PS) mutes Facebook notifications and has Messenger open only with people she cares about the most.

In freshman year, ‘P’ (HS) failed organic chemistry. “It was a wake-up call. I did not want to go down that road: I did not want school, family, [and] friends to fall apart. I went to the Church of the Gesu and asked the Lord what to do. I know there is a higher power but humans also have a responsibility to act. My parents worked hard; was this [the] only what I could offer? It was not a problem of the mind, but of the will. I had to decide who among my peers were really my friends. Who will be there at the end of the day, not just momentarily fun to be with? I opened up to those who cared, but I deleted my Twitter and Instagram accounts. Social media was a stressor because many people posted either achievements or mental breakdowns, which were not helping me. Social media is supposed to connect people, but I am not connecting at all. Now I prefer to text and Zoom with close friends; I don’t need the social media extravaganza.”

The importance of a close circle of trusted friends in building resilience is highlighted by respondent ‘P’ (ES). “Early in the pandemic having a ‘bubble’ was key advice to staying safe. I have been doing this long before that, in the sense that I paid close attention to the relationships in my social life. I have had many opportunities to meet a lot of people, but [I have] carefully only chosen to build and nurture a select few relationships over the years. I’m extremely proud of the people in my life, my source of love, inspiration, craziness, silliness, and my devil’s advocates. Fast forward to the pandemic, these ties keep me sane because they’re strong enough to stand the test of time, space, [and] prolonged disconnect. Most importantly, I have built a community of people who are determined to grow as well. I never lack the support needed for peace of mind or for friendly competition and motivation to keep moving forward.”



***Mentors act as guides toward growth.*** Aside from supportive peers, wise teachers retain high expectations for students and guide them accordingly. Respondent 'VUE' (ES) credits his mentors in his science high school, where he "went through an enormous amount of hardship" that helped him "grow and mature." "I am already familiar with failure; thus, I don't keep [unrealistic] expectations for myself. I am also used to sudden changes, thus adjusting to the pandemic setup was not difficult. I maintain a passionate heart and mind, and I remain rigorous and diligent despite everything." He attributes his resilience to: "40 percent life/learning experience (so you don't experience that same difficulty again), 40 percent family (the 'why' so you keep pushing yourself), 20 percent hope (every difficulty is just a phase, for things will get better)."

"Little encouragements from professors keep me going and striving for more in online learning," says respondent 'D' (MA). "They believe in me, and I do not want to let them down."

Friends, family, and teachers who walk the talk serve as real-life inspirations. Respondent 'RJM' (SCIED) relates, "At the start of online learning, I woke up early and changed into formal clothing for my classes since I was taking things seriously. But there came a time when I was losing interest because of anxiety from COVID news. To overcome this, I made my parents, teachers, and classmates as inspirations. I see my parents wake up every day just to prepare breakfast before I go to class. Our teachers who are hardworking and patient inspire me to finish requirements and to attend classes. My classmates who are working scholars strive hard and inspire me to do the same. We are all in the same boat in this pandemic."

***Faith, family, and friends build student resilience in overcoming mental health challenges.*** Because our guide questions for participants were deliberately open-ended, this exploratory study lived up to its name—which means that participants discussed their own mental health issues in relation [to] resilience, even if specific queries on this topic were not posed. Mental ill health, particularly depression and anxiety, has been exponentially on the rise for the past decade (Lee-Chua *et al.* 2016) and has burgeoned during the pandemic. Because of its prevalence and severity, I decided to include participant insights on how their resilience enabled them to manage mental and emotional issues.

A survey of 1,879 Filipinos revealed that even in the early stages of the lockdown, "one-fourth of respondents reported moderate-to-severe anxiety and one-sixth reported moderate-to-severe depression and psychological impact" (Tee *et al.* 2020). The pandemic made the situation even more "drastic" for Filipino youth (Malolos

*et al.* 2021). "It's so easy to fall into the trap of depression now," says respondent 'RA' (ES). "You see it everywhere in all forms: social media, personal relations, *etc.* I am acutely aware that we have to walk a certain line, or else we might fall into complications."

But with faith, family, friends, and mentors, resilient students emerge from the depths and face difficult times with empathy, courage, [and] strength. Respondent 'ALF' (SCIED) is academically resilient today in the pandemic, a response to how she endured bullying in early college. She became depressed then, but looking back now, she says, "Life is hard, but I am grateful for what happened because those difficult experiences made me wiser and stronger. Even if some people bully you, do not be afraid to be yourself because the good ones see the beauty in you. Invest in good relationships, and above all, surrender your life to God." In graduate school during the pandemic, she also sought therapeutic help from professionals. "Do not think less of yourself. Healing may not be instant, but you will get there. Trust the process."

Whatever their circumstances, resilient students do not use mental health as a crutch or an impetus to give up. Instead, they view these challenges as an opportunity for growth. Therapy, medication, [and] social support are invaluable, but "resilience is a protective factor against [the] development of mental disorders...and a number of clinical conditions, *e.g.* suicide" (Shrivastava and Desousa 2016).

Resilient people learn to adapt amid anxiety and depression. At the start of the pandemic, respondent 'LB' (SCIED) realized that "I would not survive if I did not pull myself together." With support from family and friends, panic attacks have not assailed her in many months. "Life is hard, but it will always be hard if I just see it that way. The pandemic taught me to be resilient [and] to reassess things. Life is so much better without this virus, but we cannot give up."

Today respondent 'NJL' (ECE) is academically resilient in the pandemic, but only after being diagnosed with clinical depression and seeking therapy in Grade Twelve. He sought help from a psychiatrist, and learned to check on himself, rest when needed, and "to accept that I cannot control everything." When he returned to school, he increased the intensity of his studying, since "it was not fair to my batchmates if I skipped anything. That's why today during [the] lockdown, I can manage my time because I already learned focus and discipline before. I definitely think that dealing with that mishap in life made me stronger. Looking back, I always relied on my parents if something went wrong. But depression was a struggle that was necessary for me to grow. For the first time in my life, I had to handle this on my own. It gave me room

to contemplate who I was as a person away from my achievements and family reputation [in our hometown].”

‘NJL’ also credits his Jesuit priest-adviser, with whom he had “deep conversations” during his depression. “Reflection, taking a pause and thinking things through, contributed to making me stronger; and that was only possible if I had gone through the necessary struggle.”

Respondent ‘CC’ (BIO) says, “My mother passed away when I was in Grade Nine. It was hard to process. At that time, there was not much conversation about mental health. I did not know that I had to go to a psychologist for therapy, or a psychiatrist if I developed depression. I spiraled down through Grades Nine and Ten, but only got diagnosed in Grade Twelve. It was hard, but I coped because of my family and friends, who made me go into therapy in the first place. They cared so much that they pushed me to get help. In the past, my friends were my emotional outlet, and it got to the point when it was not healthy anymore. Through therapy, I learned how to manage my own emotions instead of dumping my feelings on others. These days I don’t need therapy as much because [of] the skills I learned—taking care of myself, being compassionate toward myself, and managing my own emotions—I now practice myself. Taking medication helps to stabilize my moods, which no longer fluctuate up and down.”

Today ‘CC’ is extremely resilient, even in a pandemic. “I have hope for myself. I know that things get better: I’ve been in a bad place before and I survived. Now I am more able to become resilient, to withstand these uncertainties. Things will change. Change is constant.”

Respondent ‘P’ (ES) says, “My parents have given me a very good life. I have everything I need, [and] opportunities for everything I want. My family is whole and healthy. Unfortunately, that doesn’t account for bad decisions in college. Like many cliché teenagers, I dealt with a lot of bad experiences that affected decisions, broke relationships that should have mattered more, [and] wrecked my self-image and self-respect. To these experiences, I attribute my constant struggle with [a] lack of self-worth, a crippling fear of failure, and worst of all, poor health-seeking behavior. It took a while to truly confront these issues, and some still linger years down the road.”

The courage and the honesty to confront the self—with no excuses—is paramount. ‘P’ now relies on “people I can confide in who would not echo my own thoughts but actively challenge my opinions and encourage better choices, however harshly. When I had little confidence or self-respect, I had people in my life who respected and loved me enough to keep my head above water. Talk sessions with a counselor who respected the way I wanted to approach therapy [were] extremely helpful in

making better and stronger decisions. Taking time to deal with these mental issues was key to getting me to where I am now, where I am finally comfortable in my own skin and can proudly claim and validate my own life and decisions. I acknowledge and accept that the little coping mechanisms will likely be a regular practice in my life. I have an honest and open relationship with my parents despite our many differences in opinion. I perform to the best of my abilities [at] work and in school. This is not to say that I am particularly strong in terms of mental and emotional health; I still struggle with many things like anxiety before public engagements and doctors’ appointments, and some memories still haunt me. But I learned to trust and respect myself despite everything. Building strength of character and sense of self has set a good foundation for me to face other challenges in life.”

***Faith, family, and friends engender gratitude, which increases resilience.*** Being grateful for people, things, [and] events instead of taking them for granted positively impacts mental and emotional health (Sansone and Sansone 2010). “I learned to celebrate little triumphs,” says respondent ‘LD’ (PS), such as “my ability to go forward and make baby steps in my thesis, with a good support system (my partner, my family, my friends, [and] my thesis adviser). This helps me let go of anxiety over a seemingly bleak future if the pandemic continues.”

“No matter how bleak the situation, there is always a blessing [to] be grateful for,” says respondent ‘C’ (ES). “And if the blessings seem outnumbered by the stressors, I examine myself and get out of my rut by identifying an easy deed for the day where I could be a blessing to someone—reaching out to a friend, sending a family member a little something so they know they are thought of, inviting my *kasambahay* to join me in watching a Netflix movie of her choice.”

## CONCLUSION

Whatever their circumstances, our study reveals that resilient students in the Ateneo de Manila School of Science and Engineering rely on three main sources of support: deep faith, solid family bonds, and close friends and mentors who hold them accountable. In contrast to the more individualistic context that gives rise to resilience as posited by Western literature, Filipino resilience is truly a community affair.

After preliminary data were presented publicly to the entire SOSE in late-2021, several professors began using the findings to encourage students to learn more effectively in their classes. Compelled by this sense of urgency, I detailed the findings in a handbook designed

specifically for our college students, and in May 2022, after undergoing review under the aegis of the Ateneo de Manila University Press, came the launch of the handbook titled “Bouncing Back: Life and Learning in a Time of Crisis, A Student Resilience Study of the Ateneo de Manila School of Science and Engineering.”

Future researchers can replicate the study in their own contexts, keeping in mind Nebres’ dictum not to start with Western models of resilience but instead to remain open to what empirical data reveals. Research can also hone in on a certain variable, say friends, to further elucidate its influence on student resilience. Later on, when enough studies have been done in the local context, a Filipino scale on academic resilience can be posited, which can be more relevant than Western measures for our studies.

Rather than focusing on the negative aspects of teaching and learning during the pandemic, our study focuses on the resilience of our students. “We can only pull ourselves up from our strengths,” says Nebres (Lee-Chua 2022). “We cannot pull ourselves up by dwelling on our weaknesses. As the study documents the impressive strength of many of our undergraduate and graduate students, it also invites us to focus on those strengths, on our resilience and toughness as a people, and move our country forward by leveraging those strengths. As a seminal work, this study hopefully can lead to more reflection and study on how to identify and nurture our future leaders.”

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