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A qualitative exploration of the presence of psychological capital in community college student experiences

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the experiences of community college students, particularly non-traditional learners, through the lens of psychological capital (PsyCap), which encompasses hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism. A sample of 209 students completed an online survey, providing open-ended responses about their academic journeys. The data were analyzed thematically, revealing that PsyCap components may influence students' academic experiences and levels of distress. Specifically, high levels of hope were related to increased motivation and perseverance, while strong self-efficacy was related to greater reported academic effort. Resilience was associated with effective problem-solving and coping strategies, and optimism fostered positive future aspirations. The findings highlight the interconnectedness of these components in promoting student success. However, many students also reported mental health challenges, indicating that while PsyCap can enhance academic outcomes, addressing psychological distress is crucial. The study recommends implementing personalized support systems, improving access to mental health services, and conducting early PsyCap assessments to bolster student success. Future research should focus on diverse student populations and refine PsyCap interventions to provide better support for community college students.

1 Introduction

Community colleges play a crucial role in providing educational opportunities and pathways to 4-year institutions, particularly for marginalized students who have historically faced barriers due to race, ethnicity, gender, or economic status [1]. Despite this mission, community colleges often show lower academic success rates compared to 4-year institutions, with 3-year graduation rates typically around 30% or lower [2]. A key concern is the low transfer rate to bachelor's programs, with only 14% of community college students successfully transferring to a 4-year institution [3]. Due to the typical student makeup at community colleges, there are often unique challenges compared to those experienced by their 4-year counterparts, such as difficulties in adjusting to college life and academic distress [4, 5]. These issues are particularly pronounced among ethnic

minorities and economically disadvantaged students [6, 7]. Addressing these challenges is critical for improving student success and ensuring that community colleges fulfill their mission of equitable access to higher education [8, 9].

Community colleges serve a diverse student population, including both traditional and non-traditional learners. Traditional students are considered the typical student, who are recent high school graduates, enrolled as a full-time student, work fewer than 20 h per week, and have no children [10]. In contrast, non-traditional students are often older, attend part-time, work full-time, and may have dependents [10–12].The open-access nature and reduced tuition of community colleges have increased enrollment among marginalized groups, including students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic minorities, first-generation college students, and those with disabilities [13–17]. Despite this inclusivity, some additional challenges such as students being underprepared, lead to higher dropout rates, conflicting employment demands from full-time work, additional caregiver responsibilities, and mental health issues [16–18]. Since it is common to have students with these experiences attend community colleges, there is a need for targeted support to aid in improving their success rates [7, 19].

1.1 Psychological capital

In looking for ways to improve student outcomes, research into positive psychological resources may offer some valuable insight. The theory of psychological capital (PsyCap) emerged from positive psychology's emphasis on healthy and protective qualities as opposed to traditional negative mental processes [20]. The developers of PsyCap, Luthans and colleagues [21], define it as a state-like construct incorporating four psychological components: hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism.

Snyder and colleagues [22] defined *hope* as "a positive motivational state based on an interactively derived sense of (a) agency (goal-directed energy) and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)" ([22], p. 287). Hope encompasses both the determination to pursue goals and the capacity to develop alternative strategies to achieve them [22]. The concept of *efficacy*, as introduced by Bandura [23] in his social cognitive theory, refers to an individual's belief in their ability to perform tasks within a specific context [23, 24]. High levels of efficacy are associated with confidence in one's ability to succeed in a given situation, and the concept has been extended to include job and role-specific efficacy [24]. *Resilience*, a construct rooted in developmental psychology, refers to an individual's capacity to recover from adversity and negative events [25]. Resilient individuals demonstrate the ability to adapt positively and respond constructively to challenges and setbacks [26]. *Optimism* is characterized by a positive explanatory style, where individuals attribute positive events to personal factors and negative events to situational influences [27, 28]. Optimistic individuals generally anticipate favorable outcomes [28].

While each of these elements is theoretically distinct and supported by extensive research, Luthans and Youssef-Morgan [29] suggest they collectively represent a deeper characteristic, termed "the HERO within." PsyCap integrates these HERO resources to create a comprehensive reservoir of psychological assets that individuals can leverage for success [30]. Luthans and Youssef-Morgan [29] illustrate this expanding effect with the following example. Individuals who possess high levels of optimism are more likely to believe that success is achievable. This belief fosters confidence (efficacy), leading them to set more challenging goals and boosting their motivation to attain them. Their

hopeful perspective further encourages the development of alternative pathways to reach these elevated goals. Additionally, their resilience enables them to recover swiftly from setbacks and adjust their efforts, redirecting them toward new strategies for goal attainment. Efficacy and hope are both internal aspects of the construct, while optimism and resilience are external. The HERO resources are not merely additive but synergistic, with PsyCap potentially being greater than the sum of its parts [31]. Individuals who demonstrate high PsyCap exhibit greater determination, effort, and resilience, and they are better at overcoming obstacles and recovering from setbacks [32].

Research on Psychological Capital (PsyCap) originated in the field of industrial and organizational psychology and has since been applied across a diverse range of disciplines [33]. Generally, PsyCap has been found to be strongly associated with attitudes and behaviors that lead to positive outcomes [33]. It has been explored in various cultural and professional contexts [32] and is considered a more effective predictor of outcomes than the individual constructs it comprises [31]. Researchers have called for further investigation into PsyCap and the ways it can be nurtured in individuals [29].

The connection between PsyCap and positive academic outcomes is an emerging focus within positive psychology research. While the individual components of PsyCap have been extensively studied in relation to academic outcomes, findings indicate that each construct is positively related to a wide range of student outcomes [29, 34]. Given that previous research shows PsyCap reflects the combined effects of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism on outcomes [31], it is reasonable to expect that PsyCap would positively influence student performance. However, there remains a notable gap in research concerning PsyCap and college student success [34]. Studies on academic PsyCap have primarily focused on undergraduate students, exploring areas such as academic achievement [32], engagement [35], adjustment [34], and stress [32]. Most of this research has been conducted with business school students and international undergraduates. Although this is an important area of study, research on PsyCap in college students is still in its early stages, and, to the author's knowledge, no studies have yet examined the effects of PsyCap on community college students.

1.2 Purpose of this study

This study aimed to examine the presence of psychological capital with community college students. This was a qualitative survey-study where researchers sought to understand how community colleges students perceive their experiences with their academic experience, including both their successes and challenges, and the extent to which the components of psychological capital impact their academic experience. This shaped the primary research question of this qualitative study: *how do community college students utilize psychological capital as part of their academic experiences?*

2 Method

2.1 Participants

The participants for this study included a convivence sample of 209 students enrolled at a local community college in a northeastern state. This study was completed following the policy as expressed in Title 45, Part 46 of the Code of Federal Regulations, also known as 45 CRFR Part 46, and the protocols developed from this as monitored by the Collaborative IRB Training Initiative (CITI) and the Office of Human Research

Table 1 Percentage demographics comparison host institution, state, and national public 2-year student population

Race & ethnic origin	Study sample	Host institution	National 2-year college student	State census
Asian	3	3	6	4
Black or African American	9	9	13	9
Hispanic or Latino	21	22	27	16
White	55	52	44	71
Two or more of the above	9	6	4	*
Group not listed	3	8	4	*

College Board *Trends in Community College Research Brief*. Host Institution 2020 enrollment records, Host Institution State's Census Data

*data for comparable category is unavailable

Protections (OHRP) as adopted by the Rhode Island College Institutional Review Board that oversaw this project (Protocol: 2021-2177).

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Rhode Island College, recruitment and data collection were initiated. Students were invited to participate in this research project via the college's email system, with an invitation sent to all first-time students enrolled in the Fall semester who were over 18 years old (approximately 2,500 students). Those willing to participate were instructed to complete the informed consent process and study materials through an online survey platform. Participants completed quantitative scales related to psychological capital as part of a separate research project, and then completed four open-ended questions related to the research question of this study. Once completed, the participants' responses were de-identified and stored in a research database.

The gender breakdown of the sample was 31% male, 61% female, and 2% identifying as transgender or non-binary. According to the host institution's enrollment data, the gender breakdown is 38% male, 60% female, and 2% transgender. A chi-square analysis reveals that the sample is not significantly different from the population; χ^2 (4, n = 209) = 0.196, p = 0.99.

The ethnic and racial composition of the sample is presented in Table 1, along with comparisons to the host institution's and host state's demographics, as well as the national population of community college students. The chi-square analysis indicates that the sample demographics differ significantly from the enrolled population at the host institution; however, the power and validity of this finding are weak, χ^2 (6, n = 209) = 16.49, p = 0.01.

Additional demographic data revealed that the average age of participants was 19 (M = 19.21, SD = 3.95), with the mode and median age being 18. This is notably lower than the host institution's general population, where the average age is 25.

2.2 Materials

The online survey on various demographic topics was sent to students attending the host institution. Included at the end of the survey were four open-ended questions where participants were asked to describe their experiences related to the PsyCap constructs and their relationship to academic studies. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences with psychological capital, the survey questions were designed by the researchers to explore the experiences of the four HERO elements, and were piloted

with college student volunteers prior to the study for clarity. The final versions of these questions were:

- *"Do you believe you will face challenges in obtaining a degree? What do you think about these upcoming challenges?"* [Hope].
- *"How has your confidence level affected your studies? Do you believe that your confidence level has helped or hindered your studies?"* [Efficacy].
- *"In the past, how have you overcome obstacles to your success? How do you feel about the future?"* [Resilience].
- *"How will having a college degree affect you and your goals?"* [Optimism].

2.3 Procedure

As part of the thematic analysis of the qualitative data, participants' open-ended survey responses were coded using a two-stage process in order to understand broad themes present within the data. Initially, first-cycle employed initial coding techniques [36, 37] to generate preliminary codes by examining the responses line by line and assigning codes that summarized the main concepts. This phase included in vivo coding, using direct participant quotes, and process coding, categorizing actions with gerunds [38, 39]. The flexibility of initial coding made it suitable for this research, accommodating various qualitative data forms [40]. Following this, second-cycle focused coding [38] grouped these preliminary codes into broader thematic categories, utilizing both inductive approaches—derived directly from the data—and deductive approaches—based on PsyCap constructs (hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism) as theoretical frameworks [29]. The final stage involved reanalyzing the data to align responses with these established categories. Responses from 176 of 209 participants, who answered at least one of the qualitative questions, were analyzed after excluding simple "yes/no/maybe" answers. Each set of responses was coded independently by question, followed by thematic categorization to identify broader patterns and themes, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of the qualitative data. Throughout the coding process, the authors took extensive notes and memos, using these sources of data from triangulation and comparison.

The first phase of coding employed an initial coding technique [36, 37], which involved reviewing participant responses and identifying recurring themes. The qualitative responses were organized into a dataset and transcribed into a spreadsheet. This process generated several inductively derived codes. After completing the first-cycle coding for each dataset, the researcher wrote memos to document the process and highlight information that would be useful for the subsequent coding phases. Once all datasets had been analyzed in this manner, the initial codes were reviewed, finalized, or revised, and the updated first-cycle codes were recorded in the spreadsheet.

Second-cycle coding commenced once the initial codes were established. These codes were organized in a spreadsheet, categorized by the open-ended questions posed to participants. The second-cycle coding strategy used was focused coding, which involved grouping the initial codes into common thematic categories [38]. These categories were developed using both inductive and deductive approaches to identify broader themes.

3 Results

Utilizing thematic analysis, the researchers reviewed the participant responses to the PsyCap open-ended questions and coded data using inductive and deductive categorical themes. Inductive categories aimed to capture the themes directly reflected in the participants' responses, while deductive categories were based on the primary elements of the PsyCap constructs, identified a priori. Notably, due to the overlap among the PsyCap constructs as discussed in the literature [29, 32], a deductive category of "synergy" was included in each second-cycle analysis. This category was defined as instances where one or more PsyCap constructs were referenced or alluded to in the participant responses. Deductive categories were established based on separate elements of the PsyCap constructs identified in the literature on these constructs. After the categories were established, the data was reanalyzed line-by-line to align each segment with its corresponding final category. The results of this coding, with the categories matched to the relevant questions and concepts, are presented below.

3.1 Hope

To assess hope among community college students, participants were asked about their anticipated challenges in obtaining a degree and to expand on these challenges. Of the 160 acceptable responses, initial coding generated 32 codes, refined to 29, including themes like mindfulness and motivation. Second-cycle coding organized these into the following categories: motivation (deductive, reflecting the 'willpower' component of hope), waypower (deductive, from the *waypower* component in hope literature), and hopelessness (inductive). A final deductive category, synergy, was also included.

Motivation.

> *"Yes there will be lots of challenges and obstacles but I love a challenge so I can't wait!"*
> *"I can get past these challenges by setting goals and keeping up with my classes"*

Motivation emerged as a significant theme, with students expressing enthusiasm for overcoming challenges. This category was established deductively as the 'willpower' component of the hope construct [41]. Participant statements like the ones above reflect the 'willpower' aspect of hope [22]. The students described their drive to achieve their goals despite facing adversity, recognizing both general and specific barriers to their success and the necessity of overcoming these obstacles. Despite these challenges, students expressed enthusiasm for the college experience and a proactive approach to planning for goal achievement. Many students reported feeling a sense of pride in being part of demanding academic programs, such as nursing, or in being first-generation college students. These ambitious goals, coupled with a sense of pride, contributed to heightened motivation for success. Participants indicated that goals, personal pride, and excitement about their academic paths enhanced their motivation to succeed.

Waypower.

> *"Time management has definitely become a challenge. Trying to juggle working part-time along with being a full-time student. Time blocking or scheduling time to get homework done/study has definitely helped"*
> *"My only concern when it pertains to obtaining a degree is keeping up with the workload and preventing burnout from studying. I feel obligated to take on these chal-*

lenges however since this is my future I am dealing with and I don't want to mess it up."

In addition to their motivation to achieve goals despite obstacles, students also described their strategies for overcoming these barriers, reflecting the concept of waypower, which involves problem-solving and finding alternative pathways to success. These responses were seen as part of waypower, an element of hope defined as an individual's ability to navigate challenges and identify solutions to overcome barriers [41]. Students acknowledged the need to address previous academic "bad habits" as they began college and recognized the heightened difficulty of academic life, emphasizing the necessity of developing coping skills to manage the increased stress [22]. Responses highlighted the need for improved coping skills and adaptation to increased academic stress, while looking for alternative methods of responding to barriers.

Hopelessness.

"I definitely will [face challenges] and I already am. I struggle to balance my work, school, and social life. I constantly find myself in a battle with myself on what I should do in the moment. My time feels so limited and I have difficulty finding the urge to do school. I'm already falling behind and making last minute attempts to catch up."

"We don't qualify for aid…we can barely afford to live so I'm unsure if I'll even be able to get through another semester before having to give up on college."

Unfortunately, many students responded to this question by identifying barriers that they could not overcome. Some of these responses reflected hopelessness, where students felt overwhelmed by barriers they perceived as insurmountable. Many participants reported financial strain, exacerbated mental health issues, and uncertainty about their future, contributing to feelings of burnout and avoidance.

Synergy with resilience, efficacy, and optimism.

"Yes, college is meant to be a test of aptitude, in order to prove you are capable of excelling in the field you have chosen. I believe challenges will make for a great experience, becoming a better person through the crucible" [Resilience]

"I feel like there will definitely be challenges in obtaining a degree. The fact that these challenges will inevitably come is scary, but I have confidence that when they do arise I will have the resources and ability to overcome them." [Efficacy]

"I do believe that I will face challenges in obtaining a degree. What I do think about these challenges is that they are able to be overcome with the right persistence, the right attitude, and a great mentality" [Optimism]

In their responses to the hope question, the students' descriptions included aspects of the other PsyCap constructs. Confidence, often used interchangeably with efficacy, was frequently evident as the students considered the challenges they would encounter. Many participants expressed confidence in their skills and abilities to achieve success, although several also acknowledged the obstacles in their way (as discussed in the section on hopelessness) and noted that their confidence was sometimes low. This suggests that confidence was closely linked to how participants perceived their ability to reach their goals. The students also demonstrated resilience and optimism when discussing the difficulties ahead, displaying a general acceptance that these challenges

were an inherent part of "the journey" and could not be avoided. They anticipated personal growth through these trials, which they believed would further contribute to their success.

3.2 Efficacy

The second open-ended question explored how participants' academic self-efficacy influenced their studies: "How has your confidence level affected your studies? Do you believe that your confidence level has helped or hindered your studies?" Of the 166 student responses, initial coding produced 17 codes, refined to 14, including themes such as high expectations and failure. Second-cycle focused coding categorized these into determination, self-doubt, and synergy.

Determination.

> *"I have high confidence that I will [succeed] because I know my capabilities. Yes I do!"*
> *"I think my confidence level has helped me because I am confident that I will succeed, therefore I keep up with my work. The more confident I am, the more I am willing to work."*

On a positive note, students reported that high confidence positively influenced their studies and was seen as an asset. They indicated that their confidence levels fueled their determination and fostered high expectations for their success. Many students mentioned that this confidence led to greater engagement in their academic work and a stronger focus on their future goals. In fact, several described a self-fulfilling prophecy, where increased confidence motivated them to work harder, resulting in higher achievements, which further boosted their confidence. Despite this growing confidence, some students expressed caution about becoming overconfident, with many striving to "stay grounded" as they approached their studies.

Self-doubt.

> *"…my confidence level has hindered my studies due to the fact that I participate less in class and I am setting myself back academically by not asking questions I feel that I need to"*
> *"I believe my confidence level has been hindering my studies. I don't feel confident enough in my ability to perform well at my studies, leading me to have a difficult time starting my assignments."*

While some students expressed high confidence regarding their academics, the majority reported low confidence levels that were hindering their studies. Many students shared a history of struggling with confidence, mentioning challenges with academics dating back to primary and secondary school, and expressing doubts about their abilities even before entering college. Early in the semester, students reported feeling overwhelmed and "stressed out," doubting their ability to succeed. The inverse self-fulfilling prophecy was also evident: students believed that their lack of confidence was contributing to poor performance, which further diminished their confidence and created a downward spiral toward failure. This self-doubt negatively impacted their self-esteem, leading to harsh evaluations of their abilities and perceived worth. Many students expressed concerns

that they were unlikely to complete the semester and felt that they "didn't belong" in college.

Synergy with optimism and hope.

> *"In high school my confidence was very low but I started making habits I never used in high school like using an agenda and now my confidence is super high and I feel very proud of myself so yes it has helped my studies." [Hope]*
> *"My confidence level has hindered my studies. I'm often unmotivated and lazy. I'm not built for school" [Optimism (example of pessimism)]*

As with the responses to the hope question, student replies to the efficacy question suggested overlap with other PsyCap elements, particularly hope and optimism. The synergy with hope was evident in responses where students described how their confidence levels influenced their motivation (willpower), either positively or negatively. This effect was linked to the recurring "self-fulfilling prophecy," where confidence either boosted or diminished motivation, impacting performance and, in turn, influencing confidence levels. Additionally, confidence fluctuated based on the student's ability to overcome obstacles using new skills or perspectives (waypower). Elements of optimism were also apparent, as students associated a "positive mindset" with their sense of efficacy, which contributed to a positive and stable self-assessment of their abilities. In contrast, as noted in the previous quote, low confidence was often accompanied by a pessimistic appraisal, where students viewed their challenges as reflections of personal, inherent limitations.

3.3 Resilience

There were initially 20 unique codes that emerged from the 168 responses, including focused persistence, confidence, and "build back better." In the second-cycle analysis, these codes were further refined into three primary thematic categories: bouncing back, using assets, and synergy.

Bouncing back.

> *"Our lives have been extremely hard for as long as I can remember, we've been through some pretty horrible things so you just have to push through, there isn't another option. Surviving is necessary and when that's all you can do there isn't another option but to find your way through and endure it. I'm confident I can make it through a lot. It doesn't mean it won't drastically affect me, but I know I can do it."*
> *"I toughened up. It's good to be down once in a while. But at some point you need to see life as it is: hard. And the only way you can get through hard times is by getting stronger."*

In their responses, many students acknowledged past difficulties that had strengthened their resolve to succeed, with some referencing traumatic experiences. This notion of "bouncing back" ([33], p. 150) after trauma aligns with research on the construct of resilience [42] and was used as a deductive code in this analysis. Several students identified the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as a source of recent trauma that contributed to their positive mindset as they entered college. Students demonstrated focused persistence, choosing to concentrate not on past challenges but on how they had persevered through them. They recognized that previous negative experiences had helped them

"build back better." Many adopted a mindset of "if I can survive that, I can survive anything" as they faced the new challenges of the college environment.

Using assets.

> *"I have overcome obstacles to my success in the past by reaching out to people and asking for help as well as coming up with unique ideas to solve the problem."*
> *"In the past, I have just found other ways around the obstacle, whether it be a difficult essay or hard to get along with teacher, I always figure out what to do. In [the] high school I attended [I would] go to the guidance counselor and talk it out or figure out a different plan."*

In responding to this question, students frequently identified specific strategies they had used in the past when facing challenges. Reflecting the concept of resilience [42], their responses demonstrated an ability to recognize risks and leverage psychological assets to overcome obstacles. A commonly mentioned risk was the increasing demand on time and attention required for success in college, prompting students to develop better organizational and efficiency skills. The students overwhelmingly highlighted social support as a key asset, noting that they sought advice and assistance from experienced peers and supportive faculty members.

Synergy with hope.

> *"I have not handled obstacles well in the past, but I also did not take steps to mange either my ADHD or Depression. Recently, I have been implementing changes to mange my self through behavioral/mindset changes wit the help of medication… Despite my current situation being more chaotic than [it] has been in the past, it has been much more manageable by maintaining a calm, problem-solving attitude and keeping good routines to reach my deadlines." [Hope]*
> *"[I have overcome obstacles] mostly by pushing myself through and making sure I talk to others about solutions to keep a level head. I just have to keep telling myself that there's an end product that I'm going towards and that I'm luck to understand what I have to do and how to do it." [Hope]*

In the context of inter-construct synergy, the PsyCap component of hope was frequently evident in student responses. Initial coding revealed some overlap with the construct of optimism, particularly regarding the presence of a "positive mindset," though these statements were often accompanied by elements of hope. Students discussed how their past experiences with stress and trauma had equipped them with strategies for solving future problems, encouraging collaboration with peers to explore alternative solutions (i.e., waypower). Additional assets, such as improved organization through careful scheduling and proactive attention to mental health needs, were identified as essential for adapting to a changing environment while continuing to pursue established goals.

3.4 Optimism

The final qualitative survey question explored the PsyCap element of optimism. Thirty four distinct codes emerged from the 169 responses, which was then reduced to 30 in subsequent coding procedures. The final 30 included excitement about the future, accomplishment, and listlessness. In the final analysis, these codes were organized into three thematic categories: reasons, positive mindset, and pessimism.

Reasons.

> *"I feel anxious but excited about the future, I want to succeed by my mental health is going against me. Having a college degree would affect my goals in a positive way. For 4 years I have wanted to be a nurse. This is something special to me because I feel like it is what I am meant to do. I love helping people whenever I can and I am passionate and kind. My schooling means a lot to me."*
> *"I feel good about my future, I have it well planned out and I am so far meeting my requirements towards that goal. A college degree is important to me in order to travel internationally and live in a different country, as well as being financially and spiritually successful."*

The theme of reasons was closely linked to the PsyCap construct of hope, particularly with regard to goals, and emerged from students' emphasis on the outcomes and benefits of obtaining a college degree. Students' reasons for pursuing a degree included specific career requirements, pragmatic considerations, and existential growth. Specific goals were often tied to meeting the qualifications for future careers, such as nursing or engineering. Many students viewed a college degree as a "means to an end," with the ultimate aim being securing a particular job or certification. Those without defined career goals frequently cited pragmatic reasons for pursuing a degree, such as the potential for increased income, job security, and overall stability. Lastly, students also reported that their pursuit of a degree was linked to existential goals, believing that it would provide greater control over their lives, enhance their sense of pride and achievement, and enable them to pursue altruistic ambitions.

Positive mindset.

> *"I feel great about my future. I already have my career choice in mind and the many steps that I need to take. Having a college degree will better my chances at a better future and career. I feel excited."*
> *"I feel optimistic. Having a college degree will be one of my biggest goals reached."*

This theme encompassed the general concept of optimism as described by Seligman [43], where optimistic individuals view themselves positively, believe that success is within their control, and expect favorable outcomes [31]. When envisioning their future, students expressed excitement and anticipation about accomplishing great things. Many described feeling a sense of fulfillment at the start of their college journey and were eager to continue progressing. Hope was also evident in these responses, as students noted increased motivation (willpower) when focusing on their future and the benefits they anticipated from obtaining a college degree.

Pessimism.

> *"I feel scared for what the future may hold. I feel like if I do not get a degree I am not skilled or talented enough to get a good paying job. I feel like I have no future."*
> *"My future is uncertain. Having a college degree probably won't affect much. There's no many unemployed people with diplomas"*

In contrast, the pessimism category encompassed responses reflecting a negative outlook. Pessimism is considered the opposite of optimism, with individuals holding a pessimistic outlook typically expecting negative outcomes, believing that success is fleeting,

and internalizing failures [43]. Unfortunately, many student participants' responses contained elements of this pessimism, as they viewed the future as uncertain and bleak. Many believed they would not succeed or that a college degree would not improve their lives, feeling that they had little control over future outcomes. Students reported that their lack of academic skills would prevent them from completing their degrees and hinder future success. A similar theme of hopelessness emerged in these responses, with students feeling aimless, lacking goals, or seeing no way to achieve what they wanted (waypower). Many students expressed a sense of questioning, asking "why am I here?" and feeling as though they were "just going through the motions" without a clear goal or path forward.

4 Discussion

Community college students are frequently overlooked in higher education research and there is limited research on their experiences related to psychological capital. The aim of this research study was to gather qualitative data on Psychological Capital (PsyCap) and examine the impact of HERO constructs on community college students. The responses were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis to identify recurring themes in participant responses, which were then linked to the individual PsyCap constructs. The deductive approach of the coding analysis guided the analysis in identifying established elements of psychological capital constructs, while the inductive coding allowed the unique experiences of the participants to come through in the interpretation.

The identified themes aligned with existing research on PsyCap, with students describing various elements of the PsyCap constructs, such as waypower, which is a key component of hope. Students shared how they used their ability to problem-solve and develop alternative strategies to overcome academic challenges, demonstrating a strong connection to the concept of waypower. Furthermore, students' responses reflected elements of self-efficacy, where confidence in their abilities positively influenced their motivation and academic engagement, as well as optimism, where they exhibited a positive outlook on their future success and the college journey. Resilience was also evident as students described how past challenges and setbacks had strengthened their ability to persevere in the face of adversity.

These findings support the notion that the individual constructs of PsyCap, including hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, play an integral role in shaping academic success. The themes identified in this study confirm the interconnected nature of these constructs and their collective impact on students' ability to navigate challenges and achieve their goals. By highlighting the presence of these psychological resources in students' lives, the results strengthen the broader theory of Psychological Capital, suggesting that PsyCap can serve as a valuable psychological asset in higher education. As Avey et al. [32] proposed, PsyCap has the potential to significantly enhance college success, equipping students with the motivation, resilience, and confidence necessary to overcome obstacles and achieve their academic potential.

Additionally, a prevalent theme among the participants' responses was synergy, reflecting the interdependence of multiple PsyCap constructs. Although each qualitative question focused on a specific construct, responses frequently incorporated elements from other constructs, showcasing their interconnectedness. For example, students described how their sense of hope was closely linked to their self-efficacy, with confidence in their

abilities fueling their motivation and determination to overcome obstacles. This synergy between constructs highlights the dynamic and collaborative nature of PsyCap, where the combined strengths of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism work together to support academic achievement. These findings align with the theoretical foundation of PsyCap [31], reinforcing the idea that these constructs do not function in isolation but rather interact in a way that enhances overall success, providing students with a holistic psychological resource for navigating the challenges of higher education.

However, the qualitative findings also revealed concerning issues. Students reported significant distress, trauma, and mental health challenges that hindered their success. For each PsyCap construct, participants frequently mentioned its opposite—hopelessness, self-doubt, debilitating trauma, and pessimism. These findings corroborate existing research indicating that community college students, in particular, experience substantial interpersonal distress and mental health issues [44, 45]. Thus, addressing these interpersonal challenges and enhancing PsyCap constructs (e.g., instilling hope) may improve academic outcomes. If validated, these qualitative insights would provide additional support for the quantitative findings mentioned above.

4.1 Limitations

This study has several limitations that affect the generalizability of its findings to other community college populations. Given the diversity of community college students, the applicability of these findings to different institutions is somewhat limited. While recent international research on academic psychological capital (PsyCap) has yielded promising results, cultural differences may influence the applicability of these constructs across different settings. Although the demographic profile of the host institution aligns closely with the broader community college population, its unique characteristics may not fully represent other community colleges nationwide. For example, the experiences and needs of students at larger, urban, or cosmopolitan community colleges may differ significantly from those at the host institution.

Although, many students at the host institution are part-time and older than traditional students, the sample primarily consisted of full-time, traditional aged students, which further limits generalizability [10, 12]. The perspectives of full-time, first-time students may differ markedly from those of part-time and non-traditional students [4].

Additionally, participant recruitment occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which likely influenced both recruitment efforts and the number of responses gathered. The pandemic caused widespread disruptions to daily life and education, leading to increased stress and mental health challenges among students [46, 47]. These factors may have shaped participants' perspectives in ways that are not representative of future students or those in more stable educational environments. Moreover, the pandemic has had a profound impact on academic performance across various student groups [48], further limiting the generalizability of these findings to post-pandemic contexts.

Moreover, the qualitative questions were focused on separate but similar themes. This could explain the synergy found, but the questions themselves were complex and this synergy may have the result of confusion between the themes.

Finally, due to the anonymous nature of the data collection, member-checking and confirmation of the participants' intention of their responses was not possible. This may affect the accuracy of the data and thus the findings derived from it.

4.2 Recommendations for policy

First, community colleges should strengthen their academic support systems to better assist students in navigating their collegiate experiences. Given that many community college students enter without adequate preparation [49] and often lack the academic capital needed for success [50], it is essential that institutional policies address these challenges. To support these students, colleges should implement a variety of interventions, including personalized academic advising for course selection and transfer planning, as well as supplementary support services such as tutoring and academic coaching at no cost. Additionally, providing career counseling services to assist with career planning and securing financial aid or scholarships would benefit students. Strengthening academic support systems can be achieved by providing personalized advising, where faculty or advisors work closely with students to tailor course selections, offer transfer guidance, and connect students to supplemental resources such as free tutoring and academic coaching. These services can be made accessible both in-person and virtually, ensuring inclusivity. Additionally, career counseling and financial aid guidance should be integrated into academic advising to provide a comprehensive support system. These initiatives could help facilitate a smoother transition to college, alleviate academic distress, and enhance both achievement and retention rates.

Second, the qualitative data from this study reinforces the need for comprehensive mental health support for community college students, as they often experience significant psychological distress [51–53]. Therefore, community colleges should offer robust, accessible counseling services or establish clear referral pathways to community mental health providers. Colleges should not only increase on-campus counseling services but also establish partnerships with local mental health providers to create a seamless referral process. In addition to mental health support, addressing other interpersonal challenges, such as food insecurity, homelessness, and parental responsibilities, is essential. Creating a "culture of caring" [54] is critical in fostering an environment that supports student well-being. This involves enacting policies that raise awareness, promote inclusion, and encourage the use of available support services, thereby reducing stigma associated with mental health issues. By enhancing student mental health and wellness, colleges can improve retention, foster success, and ensure the overall safety and well-being of their student populations.

Finally, the study's findings highlight the role of positive psychological constructs in promoting student wellness and success. However, these constructs are often addressed too late in the educational process to have a meaningful impact [55]. Community colleges should adopt a proactive approach by incorporating early screening and assessment during orientation, followed by recommendations for relevant services. This could include PsyCap-related assessments, with students who demonstrate lower scores being referred to interventions designed to enhance their psychological resources. While various interventions focus on improving specific elements of academic PsyCap, research suggests that broader, PsyCap-focused interventions are more effective [56–58]. Such interventions could be integrated into first-year orientation programs or included in academic probation initiatives to better support students early in their college careers.

5 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the potential benefits of academic psychological capital (PsyCap) for community college students. While research on academic PsyCap is still in its early stages, no studies to date have specifically investigated its impact on this student population. As such, this research study responds to this gap in the literature and will hopefully encourage further exploration. This study aims to identify key constructs that could support community college students, who have historically faced significant challenges in achieving academic success. By undertaking this research, the study seeks to lay the groundwork for future investigations in this area. Ultimately, the findings contribute to the expanding body of research on PsyCap and college students, while also addressing the often-overlooked group of community college students in academic scholarship.

PsyCap has demonstrated a positive impact on various personal outcomes, including academic success. This study supports the notion that PsyCap could be beneficial for community college students as well. However, further research is needed to confirm these findings and explore how they might improve student outcomes. It is crucial to approach this research with caution to avoid deficit-modeling [59], where tools intended to support students are misused, as historically seen with educational assessments [60, 61]. The aim is to use positive psychological constructs to assist students, not to justify exclusion or neglect.

There is also a concern that positive psychological constructs may not always be uniformly beneficial. While psychological resources are advantageous during stressful times, some researchers suggest that excessive focus on these constructs might lead to diminishing returns or even negative outcomes [30, 62]. Overemphasis on reinforcing these resources or pursuing success could potentially impair other valuable resources and relationships. Therefore, recommendations for policy and individual practice regarding PsyCap must be made with caution.

Exploring the relationship between PsyCap and student success is only the beginning. Establishing a relationship between academic PsyCap and community college success is an initial step, but subsequent research should focus on developing interventions and policies to enhance PsyCap. This study represents a preliminary investigation that highlights the need for extensive future research to bolster student success and promote equity among community college students. Without further study, PsyCap could either become a negligible factor or contribute to negative labeling and exclusion.

Author contributions
K.G and K.R. wrote the introductory and Discussion sections. K.G. wrote the Method and Results sections. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

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Data availability
The datasets generated analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to participant confidentiality but de-identified data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate
This research was conducted following the policy on human subjects research as expressed in Title 45, Part 46 of the Code of Federal Regulations of the United States of America, also known as 45 CRFR Part 46, and the protocols developed from this as monitored by the Collaborative IRB Training Initiative (CITI) and the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) as adopted by the Rhode Island College Institutional Review Board that oversaw this project (Protocol: 2021-2177).

Consent for publication
Not applicable.

Informed consent
All participants signed Informed Consent forms prior to their participation. These forms were approved by the Rhode Island College Human Subjects Review Board and explained the nature of the study, benefits of participation as well as possible negative outcomes.

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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