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Fueling Resilience with Courage: Perspectives of Women in Housing and Residence Life

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WOMEN IN HOUSING AND RESIDENCE LIFE demonstrate resilience and courage in their professional lives, navigating structures that demand a high degree of emotional labor and a depth of student care that often exceed professional expectations. Resilience and courage can work together to counter the negative effects of this challenge: Courage represents an important choice that women can make as an act rather than as a reaction, and resilience allows them to bounce back from difficulty or recover from any setbacks. When understood as a choice, courage becomes a powerful leadership practice. Through narrative reflections, this qualitative study examines themes of internal conviction, systemic resistance, boundary setting, and the interplay of vulnerability and leadership. Findings highlight the intersectionality of gender, professional identity, and institutional culture, offering both a critique of current structures and a roadmap to create more empowering workplace environments for women. Participants made it very clear that resilience and courage are not static traits; they are dynamic capacities that can be cultivated through internal practice and reflection and can be strengthened by self-compassion and supportive networks.

In the ever-evolving and high stakes landscape of higher education, housing and residence life professionals continue to serve as frontline educators, community builders, and first responders and are thus exposed to a high level of occupational stress and the constant potential for burnout. In this climate, resilience (the ability to adapt to or bounce back from difficulty or change) becomes a critical tool for not only surviving but also for thriving as a professional.

For women in the field, resilience carries additional complexity. We navigate institutional structures that demand a high degree of emotional labor and intellectual rigor and a depth of student care that often exceed standard professional expectations. These demands are compounded by gendered norms and cultural stereotypes (Bierema, 2016) that shape how our leadership is perceived and how our labor is valued. In this context, resilience requires more than what could be called bounce-backability or adaptability; it must be fueled by courage—an intentional commitment to act despite fear, difficulty, uncertainty, or contrary prevailing circumstances.

CHOOSING COURAGE

Most often, courage is described with an emphasis on fear and is framed simply as the ability to act in its presence. Yet when understood only in this way, courage is reduced to a classic fight rather than flight psychological response. In leadership, and particularly

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for women navigating systems where gender-based discrimination, pay inequities, and underrepresentation persist, courage must extend beyond instinct because without an action-oriented mindset, these challenges can easily derail our growth and diminish our contributions.

Courage, then, is not reactive; it is internally fueled, rooted in self-awareness and choice. It is a deliberate decision to move toward what matters despite fear, uncertainty, or external expectations. When understood as a choice, courage becomes a consistent leadership practice rather than a momentary response, one that aligns actions with values and strengthens inner integrity. This intentional practice of choosing courage is the engine that drives resilience, and when courage is exercised consistently, resilience emerges as its natural and sustaining result.

To explore this context, the study posed the following research questions:

- *How do women in housing and residence life describe their experiences of resilience in their professional lives?*
- *In what ways do women in this field understand and express courage in their roles?*
- *How do women make meaning of resilience and courage as part of their personal and professional journeys in housing and residence life?*

In seeking to answer these questions, this article centers the lived experiences of women in housing and residence life (and, by extension, in higher education) who fuel their resilience through courage. Through their narratives, we uncover a powerful story of strength, advocacy, and authenticity and offer insight into how women lead and persist and how they transform the spaces they inhabit.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in two complementary theories: Self-Leadership Theory (Manz, 1986) and Maslow's Holistic-Dynamic Theory (1970). Together, they offer a lens through which courage is understood as a critical underpinning for resilience.

Self-leadership consists of "a comprehensive self-influence perspective that concerns leading oneself toward performance of naturally motivating tasks as well as managing oneself to do work that must be done but is not naturally motivating" (Manz, 1986, p. 589). It involves self-regulation, self-management, and self-motivation (Kim et al., 2024; Stewart et al., 2010) and relies on both behavioral and cognitive strategies to enhance personal effectiveness (Goldsby et al., 2021; Norris, 2008).

Maslow's Holistic-Dynamic Theory (1970) frames human motivation as a progression toward self-actualization, which is achieved by the fulfillment of hierarchical needs. Human motivation in the context of self-actualization is holistic, complex,

need-driven, and universal (Feist & Feist, 2008; Maslow, 1970) and can be viewed as a survival response; it is an individual's continued and learned quest to maintain their existence in meaningful ways.

For women in housing and residence life, courage is both a learned process and a product of striving toward self-actualization. It fuels resilience through intentional growth, which is defined here as the conscious effort to change, evolve, and meet personal and professional goals. And even though the individual journeys are unique, success within professional contexts requires acknowledging and pursuing survival, security, and psychological well-being. Doing so demands character: self-awareness, dignity, vulnerability, a growth mindset, self-advocacy, competence, and interdependence. These capacities shape courage—understood not merely as a reaction to fear but as a conscious, intentional choice to act in alignment with one's values despite uncertainty or risk—and they direct it toward resilience, empowering women to lead with clarity, navigate adversity with purpose, and become self-directed, emancipated professionals.

Framed by these two theories, while drawing on the lived experiences of women in the field, this article illustrates how courageous resilience leads to personal transformation.

METHODOLOGY: HARNESSING PROFESSIONAL VOICES

This qualitative study gathered data through an anonymous open-ended questionnaire and follow-up semi-structured interviews. All participants were women working in housing and residence life at 4-year public or private institutions. A total of 16 professionals completed the questionnaire, and 13 participated in interviews. Participants represented a range of institutional types (7 private, 9 public), years of experience (from 1 to over 10 years), and career levels (2 entry-level, 9 mid-level, 5 senior-level), offering diverse perspectives across the field. Participants were asked to reflect on resilience and courage within their lived and professional experiences, with attention to how these concepts intersect, develop, and endure. To protect anonymity, participants are referred to as P1, P2, P3, and so on.

The following sections weave together qualitative data from surveys and interviews, insights from existing literature, and my own reflections to create a narrative framework that invites deeper understanding of resilience and courage and offers pathways for cultivating both.

EXPLORING RESILIENCE

Resilience can be described as claiming and channeling one's power despite resistance. It includes the ability to bounce back from failure, setbacks, and even self-doubt (Barsh et al., 2009; Hass, 2021). As a woman in one of higher education's more difficult roles, resilience has been all those things to me and more. It represents my insistence on living with hope as my visor, focusing on the possibilities ahead as motivation to recover from any setbacks, and continuing to push for a better version of me and my future.

Similarly, participant responses revealed a multifaceted understanding of resilience: the ability to bounce back from adversity, adapt to change, maintain well-being under stress, persist through challenges, and seek support when needed. This framing moves resilience beyond simple perseverance and into a more nuanced, intentional practice.

Several participants had very clear definitions of resilience, seeing it, for example, as "tenaciously digging in and working within my locus of control so that I am always growing and getting better" (P9) and highlighting the agency and internal clarity required to endure. Another defined it as "the commitment to succeed no matter what" (P14), pointing to the deep well of intrinsic motivation that sustains persistence. For others, resilience meant staying in the profession long term and remaining productive despite seemingly insurmountable odds or as the ability to "keep going knowing that you are going to get knocked down in your daily work and finding ways to sustain your work long term" (P13).

Resilience also encompasses self-advocacy and the ongoing negotiation of personal and professional roles. These definitions challenge narrow views of resilience as mere endurance and instead frame it as the capacity to recover from adversity, to advocate for oneself amid injustice or disenfranchisement, and to pursue one's goals without compromising identity or values. This complexity aligns with Grove's (2018) framing of resilience as multiple, contradictory, and simultaneous in what it represents and achieves.

Another way to conceptualize resilience is to examine what it looks like in practice. In my experience, resilience manifests itself as self-awareness, self-development, resistance, and growth. I recognize adversity, work to overcome it, and use it as a catalyst for personal and professional development. This pattern also emerged among the women in this study. Despite varied experiences, a common theme was resilience through self-care: both as a response to adversity and a proactive strategy for protection. For many, this included affirming work/life balance as a vital form of self-preservation.

Participants described self-care as the intentional act of pursuing professional goals without sacrificing family commitments. It's about "making waves professionally but not at the cost of my number one commitment: family" (P1), while others emphasized resisting unrealistic workplace expectations and modeling the value of family life. For these women, self-care also meant tending to their own well-being and doing so through rest, nutrition, exercise, and emotional health; it involves "taking time to care for yourself . . . not neglecting yourself" (P15). Across responses, self-care emerged not as indulgence, but as essential to sustaining both personal and professional effectiveness and as a necessary act of survival. For example, one participant reflected on the shift from prioritizing others' needs to recognizing that caring for oneself enhances the ability to care for others—both at home and professionally—and she emphasized the importance of focusing inward: "If you're not taking care of yourself, it's gonna be

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really hard to take care of other people" (P1). For her, resilience is practiced through consistent, intentional self-care: taking walks, resting when sick or burnt out, and even pausing for a 15-minute break without communication devices. These small acts help her stay grounded, manage stress, and show up fully for those she supports. Such narratives affirm research that frames self-care not as indulgence, but as an existential necessity for survival (Sprunt & Capello, 2022; Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022).

Participants also described resilience as the act of defining and redefining boundaries, which involves acknowledging limits, delegating responsibilities, and advocating for themselves to manage others' expectations. One recalled that she "learned to draw boundaries and [to] communicate that" (P8) and to recognize when saying no was necessary to sustain her leadership. For some, this meant resisting institutional pressures and role creep: "You should be able to do a job that doesn't require you to be superhuman" (P15). Others emphasized the importance of setting expectations about how they are treated. One recounted confronting inappropriate behavior, first reporting it and then directly addressing the colleague by saying, "I need you to understand that this is not appropriate behavior" (P14).

Resilience emerged as a commitment to personal growth. Participants described their continued presence in the field as rooted in a commitment to ongoing learning, including self-directed study and professional development opportunities: "I have become a scholar of higher ed" (P4); "There's no other option but to be resilient . . . and that means learning to out-strategize, out-think, out-work" (P9). Resilience holds transformative potential (Hewlett et al., 2024). For these women, it is not just about surviving adversity; it's also about deliberately evolving within systems not built to support them. In line with Aldrich (2018), resilience here is a cultivated competence, shaped through intentional reinvention.

One clear finding from this study is that resilience often emerges in response to adversity. Participants did not begin with a belief that they were intrinsically resilient. Rather, they discovered resilience through necessity, when they were forced to confront difficulty. The practices they described, such as self-care, boundary-setting, learning, and advocacy, were initially reactive rather than proactive.

Many participants developed resilience in response to institutional failures, lack of support, or ineffective supervision. Nearly 80% cited challenges with leadership or supervision as defining moments: "There have been multiple times where I have felt completely belittled, misunderstood, and ignored. It is really hard to continue doing the work when there are dysfunctional team dynamics at play" (P3). One described feeling discouraged by compensation policies, saying, "It was a good lesson in the institution is not 'on my side' and that I need to advocate for myself" (P8), and another recounted facing serious health issues and being pressured to keep working:

> *Pressure from work should not make me "not listen" to myself . . . The experience helped me see that to be truly resilient is to listen to my internal self, own my values through action, and not be ruled by fear (P1).*

These women became resilient by reclaiming agency in the face of resistance, a form of cultivated resilience that creates the strength that women in higher education need to thrive (Hass, 2021). However, over time, resilience shifted from reactive to proactive. Participants began to intentionally build practices that helped them stay resilient—not just in response to adversity, but in preparation for it. This proactive stance became key to sustaining resilience, which involves both internal and external factors. Internally, participants developed greater self-awareness and motivation. They learned to prioritize their well-being, advocate for their needs, and make informed decisions about their work environments. "You can't rely on other people to be there. You have to take care of yourself" (P13); "I make rest a priority, I do things I enjoy, I walk, listen to music, read" (P15).

For some, this clarity led to job changes. The internal commitment to self-care and boundaries shaped some participants' job search: "I asked several questions to determine if they would be a good institutional fit: flex time, work hour expectations, child-care benefits, etc. . . . ensuring that my internal regulator for resilience would be easily maintained" (P1). Externally, participants leaned on faith, family, mentors, and professional networks. Many sought out support systems like mentorship, counseling, and peer communities that helped them survive and thrive. Several of them emphasized the impact of a supportive supervisor and departmental culture: "Having a supervisor who respects boundaries . . . doesn't pressure for work over the expense of self is HUGE" (P1); "When times get tough, it has meant the world to me to have colleagues that support me" (P14); and, for one, her Christian faith and her "personal board of trustees" were foundational: "Mentors and peers who provide a space for me to vent, brainstorm and get counsel" (P9).

Whether shaped by internal clarity or external support, sustaining resilience was described as essential to success. These women have learned to anticipate difficulty and prepare for it by building mental, emotional, and physical strength and developing strategies for resistance. For them, resilience is not just survival; it is the catalyst for transformation. This can be described as "bouncing forwards" (Ames & Greer, 2021, para. 3), a process of growth rooted in personal responsibility.

EXAMINING COURAGE

Data from this study reveal that courage is not always rooted in fear. Instead, it often stems from a person's will or intention to change their thoughts, behaviors, or environment in pursuit of positive outcomes. The women in this study were not courageous simply because they acted despite fear. They were courageous because they chose to act in service of change and felt grounded in conviction and a desire to advance the greater good.

For these women, courage meant identifying what needed to be done and then doing it. Sometimes that work was internal, requiring deep self-awareness. Other times, it was external, demanding competence and strategic action. This understand-

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ing aligns with the definition of courage as a cognitive and voluntary act aimed at achieving moral or positive goals, not necessarily accompanied by fear (Gruber, 2011; Woodard & Pury, 2007).

What stands out most in these narratives is not just that these women are courageous, but that they have learned how to be consistently courageous. Courage, for them, is no longer reactionary. It has become a way of being and an ongoing practice shaped by lived experience. Some described courage as boldness in challenging injustice, "the willingness to speak truth to power, knowing it might create tension but trusting it's the right thing to do" (P8) and recognized the moral clarity behind their actions: "Courage is what helps me put equity above convenience" (P15); "Courage is me leaning into those uncomfortable situations . . . even when there's no guarantee of success" (P9). Others described courage as vulnerability: "In my professional life, courage is showing vulnerability with my team . . . trusting that collaboration will create better solutions than I could alone" (P11). Courage can also mean setting boundaries: "It takes bravery to say no or to step away, especially when there's an unspoken culture of overwork" (P2).

Courage also showed up as authenticity: "I don't have to mimic others' styles to be effective; courage is owning my own voice" (P4), and it involves "staying calm and decisive in moments of crisis" (P12), a quiet mastery of self. It also requires some measure of selflessness: "Mentoring and empowering younger professionals . . . choosing collective growth over personal comfort" (P3).

Participants described how their understanding of courage evolved over time: "I used to think courage was only individual . . . Now I see it's also about collective advocacy" (P3); "At the start of my career, I thought courage meant always speaking up loudly. Now I realize courage also means listening deeply and holding space for others" (P8); "Courage isn't one big act but many small choices . . . Some of the most courageous moments have been quiet" (P6); "Courage is simply showing up every day and being there for your team and the people you see every day" (P13).

This evolution of courage reflects a continuous journey toward self-actualization, fueled by learning. As Chowkase and colleagues (2024) suggested, the practice of courage creates a feedback loop, with each act of courage deepening the capacity for more. In this way, courage generates more courage.

The Interconnection Between Resilience and Courage

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that courage and resilience are inseparable, describing them as intertwined forces that sustain one another. Courage provides the initial push to act, whether speaking up, taking a risk, or confronting something

overwhelming or unjust, while resilience enables that action to continue. Together, they create a rhythm in which courage invites resilience, and resilience makes courage possible again, forming a continuous feedback loop reinforced through cycles of action, reflection, and growth.

Participants highlighted the deeply interconnected nature of courage and resilience in housing and residence life: "They're connected in cycles. I need courage to take on challenges, resilience to endure them, and then courage again to step into the next unknown. The connection is constant, and both are essential to thriving in housing" (P10); resilience and courage "show up almost always interconnected. I can't keep pushing forward when there's no guarantee of success unless I draw on courage. And then resilience makes me draw on courage" (P15). Courage and resilience are deeply intertwined and are mutually reinforcing rather than sequential traits.

> *Courage is the spark, and resilience is the endurance. Courage pushes me to confront challenges, like speaking up in a meeting where my perspective might be dismissed. Resilience is what keeps me returning to those spaces, even if the first attempt didn't go well (P5).*

Participants defined courage and resilience in many ways: "In being resilient, I step up in courage and refuse to curl up and be smaller or to give up" (P1); they are "two sides of the same coin . . . [and] courage helps me take the first step into a difficult situation, while resilience allows me to keep going when the outcome is uncertain or when setbacks occur" (P2). These perspectives underscore that thriving in the high stakes environment of housing requires an ongoing interplay between intentional courage and sustained resilience.

For these women, courage and resilience are not merely traits; they are cultivated capacities. Together, they form the foundation for self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and career adaptability. These intertwined practices fuel personal and professional growth, transformation, and the ability to thrive within systems that demand both strength and strategy (Santisi et al., 2020; Sternberg, 2022).

Modeling Resilience and Courage

Modeling resilience and courage means embodying these qualities in the spaces where our presence, reactions, and choices shape the tone of the community. In this context, modeling is not about perfection. It is about authenticity, consistency, and intentionality. For me as well as the women in housing and residence life represented in this study, modeling resilience and courage often involves navigating systems not

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originally designed with us in mind. It may require stepping into leadership with confidence despite self-doubt, setting and maintaining healthy boundaries, or challenging gendered expectations about emotional labor.

By modeling these qualities, we demonstrate to colleagues and students that resilience is not silent endurance and that courage requires action in pursuit of positive change; it means showing up fully (with purpose and integrity), not because of a title, but because leadership is about character and the capacity to transform communities. This is the deeper purpose behind modeling resilience and courage: to reshape our institutions and society by "fostering the development of leadership within and among others" (ACPA & NASPA, 2015, p. 13).

Modeling these traits means "balancing persistence with adaptability [and] when plans fall apart, I show my team how to pivot gracefully. When students see me adapt instead of giving up, they learn that resilience is active, not passive" (P3). And practicing self-care involves establishing boundaries: "I practice self-care openly. I talk about taking mental health days or setting boundaries with work. Modeling resilience means showing that strength includes knowing when to rest" (P2). One participant recognized how sharing her own mental health journey during staff training created space for others to be honest and vulnerable, fostering a culture of trust and care (P11).

Some participants became role models for resilience and courage without ever having seen those traits modeled for them. In fact, many had to unlearn messages that discouraged or distorted these qualities: "Implicitly, it's frowned upon to be strong as a woman, so I take it as a personal mission to be strong for my team even if it gives me the title of 'bitch'" (P13), a strength that also allowed her to discuss harmful behaviors with her supervisor in order to protect the team environment. Some recognized how their early lives shaped their understanding of strength: "At an early age I was taught to normalize suffering and to step up . . . I did this despite being only a few years older than my brothers" (P14); "I think I was often taught that being strong or brave as a woman was for the sake of someone else . . . I find myself asking whether I'm doing something to serve others or acting in a way that is true to who I am" (P7).

Being perceived as too strong was almost as damaging as being thought of as too weak: "I've been told several times that it's not always in my best interest to appear strong . . . I've also seen my strength misconstrued and perceived as a threat" (P9); "In every space, I've seen how being a strong woman is frowned upon . . . Sometimes even women tell you to ease back on strength or boldness" (P15). These experiences illustrate how early socialization and societal expectations continue to influence women's understanding and expression of strength.

For these women, modeling resilience and courage is also about redefining what strength looks like in housing, residence life, and higher education. Their stories show that these qualities are not about stoicism, doing it all, or engaging in a constant struggle. Instead, they reflect the ability to be self-aware, seek support, recover with grace, and lead with empathy and conviction.

By embodying resilience and courage in these ways, women not only sustain themselves, but also help others do the same, thus contributing to an environment characterized by compassion and equity. When modeled with intention, resilience and courage become a shared culture of strength and care.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WOMEN IN HOUSING AND RESIDENCE LIFE

As true role models, the women in this study offered thoughtful advice for those currently working in housing and residence life. Their insights serve as a meaningful compass for sustaining both professional effectiveness and personal well-being.

Set Boundaries

In a profession that prizes responsiveness, saying "no" can feel like failure. Yet for these participants, boundary setting emerged as a vital act of self-preservation and leadership. Setting limits is not selfish—it is strategic: "Give yourself permission to set boundaries. It takes courage to say 'no' in a field that always asks for 'yes,' but protecting your well-being is essential for resilience" (P2). When women in housing and residence life learn to protect their time and energy, they become better equipped to sustain long-term career success. Without this commitment, the risk of occupational burnout increases (Marshall et al., 2016).

Nurture Self-Compassion and Joy

The work in campus housing and residence life often demands constant availability and emotional labor, which can lead women to internalize perfectionism and a sense of obligation to always "be there" for others. Yet that same care is rarely extended inward. Participants emphasized that resilience grows not from relentless striving, but from self-compassion and joy. "Be kind to yourself. Resilience grows when you practice self-compassion instead of self-criticism" (P3); "Protect your joy. Find hobbies and communities outside of work. Courage means resisting the idea that your entire identity has to be your job, and resilience grows when your life is balanced" (P12).

These reflections invite us to offer ourselves the same grace we extend to others. That means acknowledging mistakes without harsh judgment, recognizing our limits, and giving ourselves permission to rest. It also means actively pursuing joy through creative expression, meaningful relationships, or spiritual and community engagement. Joy replenishes our emotional reserves and strengthens our ability to adapt to life's stressors. It acts as a protective factor, buffering against burnout and helping us maintain perspective and purpose.

Embrace Imperfection and Growth

For women in housing and residence life, having resilience and courage is not about having it all figured out. It is about being honest with ourselves, staying open to growth, and giving ourselves permission to evolve. The participants in this study reminded us that embracing imperfection is not a flaw; it's a practice, one that requires self-awareness,

> Modeling resilience and courage means embodying these qualities in the spaces where our presence, reactions, and choices shape the tone of the community.

humility, and the courage to keep becoming: "Take the time to be self-aware and reflective. Identify who you are, who you want to be, and what it takes to get there. It takes courage to really see yourself; this will help form the backbone for resilience" (P12). That kind of reflection is not always easy. It asks us to slow down, look inward, and name both our strengths and our growing edges. But it is in that honest reckoning that we begin to build a more grounded and sustainable version of ourselves: "Be yourself, while understanding that you are always evolving and growing. And find your community, folks who believe in you and will support you so you stay true to your goals. Be intentional about self-care" (P3). These words are a powerful reminder that growth is not a solo journey. We need people who see us clearly, who hold us accountable with care, and who remind us of who we are when we forget.

Embracing imperfection also means releasing the myth that we must always be strong, always be ready, always be everything to everyone. It means recognizing that we are allowed to be in process. That we can lead and learn at the same time. That we can be both confident and uncertain, both capable and still becoming.

Build Supportive Networks

Resilience and courage are not meant to be practiced in isolation. For the women in this study, one of the most consistent themes was the importance of building and sustaining supportive networks. These networks, whether made up of peers, mentors, supervisors, or trusted colleagues, serve as anchors in the work and as mirrors for growth. They help us stay grounded, remind us of our worth, and offer strength when ours is depleted: "Remember that resilience doesn't mean doing everything alone. Have the courage to ask for help, lean on your peers, and admit when you're struggling. True strength is collective, not solitary" (P2). These words reflect a powerful shift away from the myth of self-sufficiency and toward a model of interdependence that honors vulnerability and shared strength.

Trusted relationships offer perspective, accountability, and encouragement, especially in moments when clarity feels out of reach: "Find people to talk to. Be vulnerable with them and take their feedback into consideration. A trusted team will help. Mentors are amazing if you can find one without overburdening them or yourself" (P15). Support is not just emotional; it is also strategic.

Balancing internal mindset and external connection can help these women maintain critical relationships:

> *I would say some of this work is internal. Having a good and positive attitude not just about work, but about life is important. But there are also many external factors that are key. Build a good team around you. The most important parts of work are human connections and helping people do their work and meet goals that are important for them (P9).*

This comment reinforces the awareness that resilience is relational. It is cultivated not only through personal reflection but also through meaningful collaboration and shared purpose. For women in housing and residence life, building supportive networks is not optional; it is essential! These networks help them confront institutional challenges, affirm their leadership, and sustain their well-being. They also model for others what it looks like to lead with empathy, humility, and collective care.

Ultimately, supportive networks are the scaffolding that allows resilience and courage to flourish, and these qualities remind us that we are not alone, our growth is witnessed, and our leadership is strengthened in community.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that resilience and courage are not static traits, but are dynamic, cultivated capacities that emerge through intentional practice, reflection, and connection. Grounded in the dual framework of Self-Leadership Theory (Manz, 1986) and Maslow's Holistic-Dynamic Theory (1970), the findings illuminate how women in housing and residence life navigate professional landscapes that often demand more than they were designed to support. Within these spaces, courage becomes both a process and a product: an internal compass that guides women toward resilience and a visible stance that models strength, authenticity, and care.

Self-leadership offers a lens through which we understand how these women lead themselves through adversity. Through self-regulation, self-management, and self-motivation (Kim et al., 2024; Stewart et al., 2010), they build the behavioral and cognitive strategies necessary to thrive. Maslow's (1970) theory complements this by framing the pursuit of self-actualization as a survival response and a deeply human drive to live meaningfully, even within systems that may not fully affirm one's existence (Feist & Feist, 2008).

The women in this study demonstrate that personal transformation is possible when we commit to growth, embrace imperfection, and build networks of support. Their stories show that resilience is not just about enduring difficulty, but is also about reclaiming agency, setting boundaries, and choosing joy. Courage, in this context, is not performative; it is purposeful. It is the quiet decision to speak truth, to rest, to lead with vulnerability, and to advocate for oneself and others.

For these women, growth was not about chasing perfection; it was about staying rooted in purpose, even when the path was unclear. It was about making space for joy, for rest, for reflection. It was about choosing to show up, not as a polished version of themselves, but as their full, evolving selves. In doing so, they model a kind of leadership that is deeply human, one that says: you don't have to be perfect to be powerful; you just have to be present, reflective, and willing to grow.

> In a profession that prizes responsiveness, saying "no" can feel like failure. Yet for these participants, boundary setting emerged as a vital act of self-preservation and leadership.

Ultimately, this work calls us to reimagine leadership in housing and residence life. It invites us to center the lived experiences of women, to recognize the burden of emotional and relational labor they carry, and to honor their resilience and courage—not only as individual strengths but also as collective assets that enrich our campuses and communities. In this way, we help shape institutions that are more equitable, more compassionate, and more capable of fostering collective growth.

This is also a call to all women in residence life and housing to lead in ways that are restorative, developmental, and deeply human and to model resilience and courage not just for ourselves, but also for the communities we serve. And in doing so we can become catalysts for transformation, both personal and institutional. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the article's framing of courage as an intentional, values-driven practice expand current understandings of leadership in housing and residence life?

2. In what ways do expectations of care and emotional labor shape how resilience is experienced and enacted by women in the field?

3. The findings suggest that resilience is often developed in response to challenge. How might this influence how institutions think about support, development, and sustainability for staff?

4. How are practices such as boundary-setting, self-care, and self-advocacy understood within housing and residence life, and what role do they play in long-term professional sustainability?

5. What might it require for departments to move beyond reliance on individual resilience and toward cultivating conditions that more intentionally support both resilience and courage?

Discussion questions were developed by Crystal Lay, California State University Monterey Bay.