

NAVIGATING THE FIRST YEAR

**Navigating the First Year: Exploring College Students'**

**Lived Experiences with Life Skill Development**

**A Qualitative Study**

**By**

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## NAVIGATING THE FIRST YEAR

### **Abstract**

The transition from high school to college is a crucial developmental stage where students are exposed to new academic, social, and personal challenges. This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore the experiences of second-year college students in the development of life skills during their first year of college at a small private Catholic university in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how students perceive the development of life skills and how these skills affected their self-esteem and adjustment to college life. Using a phenomenological approach, virtual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 second-year undergraduate students. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Google Meet. Coding was used to analyze the data to determine the significant statements, themes, and meanings. Results indicated that students perceived life skills including time management, communication, self-advocacy, resilience, independence, and decision-making. Students identified the first year of college as a developmental stage characterized by both struggle and positive change. Themes included greater personal accountability, the function of involvement in skill attainment, the influence of supportive relationships, and the relationship between overcoming adversity and enhanced self-confidence. The results have contributed to the knowledge of life skills education in higher education settings and reinforced the importance of student personal development in addition to academic success. Implications for practice include the design of first-year programs and interventions that aim to develop key life skills to enhance resilience and self-esteem in college students.

**Keywords:** life skills; self-esteem; first-year college students; college transition; phenomenological research; student development; higher education

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## Chapter 1 Introduction and Background

Education is one of life's most paramount and fruitful experiences. Education is a lifelong journey and does not stop at a certain point. People sometimes learn when they don't even realize it is happening. For instance, social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube have become prominent sources of information, with a significant portion of adults using them to stay informed (Pew Research Center, 2025). Educational experiences prepare individuals to think cognitively and critically, enabling them to succeed through academic achievement by learning from subjects such as science, history, writing, and mathematics. Although life skills are not explicitly categorized as academic, they serve as foundational tools that support students in achieving academic success (NASSP, 2018).

The World Health Organization defines Life Skills as “abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life” (Wiesen et al, 1997). Life skills are essential to learn and encompass both social and personal skills. Life skills are necessary for managing daily activities effectively. Some of these skills include time management, effective communication, decision-making, and emotional management.

Historically, there has been a significant focus on a liberal arts education, preparing students for careers they will choose soon after high school. By focusing on these crucial subjects, the results have left little room in the curriculum for life skills (Prajapati, Sharma, & Sharma, 2017). Other significant focuses in high school education by administrators have included raising standardized test scores and achieving high scores on Advanced Placement (AP) courses (PBS, 2019). Despite increasing attention to the importance of teaching life skills, they remain underemphasized in formal education systems (NASSP, 2018; Education Lifeskills, n.d.).

Not providing opportunities at all or having minimal opportunities to explore life skills can have a profoundly adverse impact on overall development, especially for those transitioning to college after graduating from high school.

Students transitioning from high school to college may face several challenges and changes. Adapting to new environments, developing friendships, and gaining new independence can be daunting for many first-year students. Many "firsts" happen in the first year of college that can potentially affect students mentally, physically, and emotionally. Students may be living away from home for the very first time in their lives. Adjusting to this new chapter can take time, and students may feel a range of emotions, especially during the first semester. Students aren't just being challenged academically but also socially (making new friends, being more culturally aware and open, etc.). Combining all these new experiences, academic pressure, and social pressure, without introducing students to the importance of life skills before college, can adversely affect first-year students' overall self-esteem.

If students do not receive instruction in life skills or opportunities to practice them, the education sector may fail to prepare students for real-world challenges adequately. College students, especially, will experience a range of emotions during their first year that can lead to anxiety, stress, and depression.

College students trying to navigate their daily lives and balance academics can feel daunting, as they often face overwhelming pressure to succeed academically while managing personal responsibilities, social relationships, and their mental well-being. To help alleviate the stress of the transition from high school to college, many campuses offer a range of student services, including academic tutoring, mental health counseling, and office hours with academic advisors. However, students may not be aware of or interested in the services and may feel lost

and alone in dealing with day-to-day issues during college, especially during their first year. Some students report preferring to manage emotional or mental health issues independently or with support from family and friends, with 19% indicating this as a reason for not utilizing available campus services (Inside Higher Ed, 2024). Seeking help and advice from friends and family may be the most comfortable for first-year students, especially if they are living away from home for the first time. Colleges and universities can integrate services into campus-wide events, such as new student orientation or presentations in University 101 classes, while exposing and educating first-year students to all the services provided to them.

Forming and fostering positive relationships with a student's academic advisor may launch the student into a successful first year. Forming a relationship with an academic advisor can yield numerous positive outcomes during the first year of college. Some of these involve entrusting the academic advisor with personal issues that extend beyond the classroom, as well as addressing educational matters related to the student's major and the classes they are taking. While advisors traditionally focus on helping students select courses and stay on track for graduation, their roles have expanded to include connecting students with broader support services across campus (US News and World Report, 2024).

Getting to know the student beyond their schedule could often lead to a proactive relationship with the student. Seeing what the student's interests are outside the classroom and getting to know the student's own story are just a few ways an advisor can foster a positive relationship with the student. Demonstrating that the academic advisor genuinely cares about each student and supports them as they grow is a prime example of a great academic advisor. When these skills are not adequately taught or supported in the educational environment, students may face difficulties in their academic and personal lives, which can affect their sense

of self-confidence. This is essential in helping students adapt to the complex demands of university life. However, the educational focus on academic content often overshadows the importance of cultivating life skills. As a result, first-year students may feel unprepared to face challenges, which can impact their self-esteem and overall adjustment to college life.

While life skills may not be an integral component of formalized education, they must not be overlooked. These skills support personal development for students transitioning from high school to college. Without these skills, students may struggle socially, personally, and professionally, experience a lack of self-esteem and decision-making ability, and suffer from poor well-being. Life skills can prepare students academically and help them navigate real-world challenges that they may face now and in the future. A well-rounded education that incorporates academic challenges and teaches life skills can empower students to succeed both inside and beyond the classroom.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Two known theories are used to frame this qualitative study are self-determination theory and social cognitive theory. "Self-determination theory seeks to explain how being self-determined impacts motivation, that people feel more motivated to take action when they think that what they do will have an effect on the outcome" (Cherry, 2024). The relationships we form in our lives, whether personal or familial, are critical factors in self-determination theory. People often feel a sense of accomplishment when they complete a new task or learn a new skill. Having a positive outlook on things can boost motivation and self-esteem. There are three concepts in self-determination theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is the state of being in control of one's actions and understanding one's surroundings and self-worth.

Competence refers to the ability and effectiveness of a set of skills. Relatedness refers to the need to feel a similar connection/bond and be understood by others, specifically their peers.

Developing and learning life skills can foster a sense of pride and accomplishment among students. When students feel competent and have autonomy while learning and mastering life skills, it can lead to increased self-esteem. When students observe others learning these skills in real-time, positive feedback from peers and teachers can enhance their self-determination. One's confidence can be boosted by seeing others get positive feedback, and then the student can copy that behavior. This peer-based encouragement often leads students to share what they've learned, further reinforcing their confidence and contributing to a supportive learning environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Social cognitive theory, developed by Albert Bandura, provides a foundational framework for addressing the research question. The theory suggests that people are not passive recipients of knowledge but actively shape their learning by interpreting their experiences and adjusting behaviors accordingly (APA, 2025). This theory emphasizes the acquisition of new skills and behaviors through social interactions and the various role models in one's life. Within the theory, key concepts include self-efficacy—the belief in one's capacity to complete tasks—and reciprocal determinism, the idea that individuals, their behaviors, and their environments influence each other in a continuous loop (Nickerson, 2025).

Enhanced self-esteem from learning through observation may also contribute to improved student self-efficacy. Observing and interacting with other students throughout the first year of college may help alleviate some of the concerning behaviors that many first-year students exhibit.

**Conceptual Framework**

When considered, together, social cognitive theory and self-determination theory present a combined explanation of how life skills build self-efficacy and self-esteem in first-year college students. Social cognitive theory emphasizes the role of self-efficacy, observational learning, and reciprocal determinism in influencing behavior and self-confidence (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Students will be able to receive the confidence to apply life skills such as time management and communication efficiently, thanks to the belief in their capacity to handle adversity, coupled with exposure to high-achieving peers.

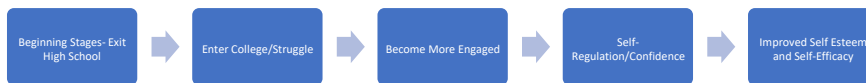
Confidence reinforces self-esteem. Self-determination theory builds on this process by outlining how fulfillment of the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness enhances motivation and growth (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2017). By learning skills to manage responsibilities, make self-controlled decisions, and grow nurturing friendships with classmates and teachers, students will likely experience more fulfillment of their needs.

The intersection of social cognitive theory and self-determination theory emphasizes the two-way relationship between intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy. For example, students who learn how to manage time not only enhance their achievement in school but also instill a sense of competence and self-worth. Similarly, when students join clubs or engage on campus, they instill relatedness, which favors continued participation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Combining these theories suggest that the development of life skills generates both increased self-efficacy and psychological needs satisfaction, ultimately leading to increased self-esteem and a stronger foundation for long-term student achievement (Basileo, 2024).

The integration of social cognitive theory, social determination theory, and student involvement helps to identify the process through which the life skills of first-year students develop. In this process, involvement in campus life can provide the students with an environment that meets their psychological needs as proposed by social determination theory, and thus enhances the student's motivation to become involved and further develop. The more the student becomes involved, the more they are exposed to mastery experiences and observe other students coping with similar challenges, as proposed by social cognitive theory, thus enhancing their self-efficacy.

The more successful the student becomes, the more they are likely to develop important adaptive skills (e.g., communication, time management, academic success), which are considered essential for the success of first-year students. Research suggests that the more the student is involved, the more the student is likely to persist, succeed academically, and develop the student's identity (Kuh, 2008).

*Figure 1: Developmental Process Associated with a “More Engaged” Pathway Based on a First-Year Student Intersection of Self Cognitive Theory and Self Determination Theory*



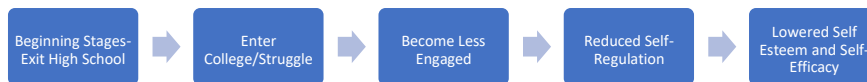
The figure above illustrates how the intersection of social cognitive and self-determination theory can result in improved self-esteem and self-efficacy following an initial adjustment period as first-year students become more engaged during their academic year. The beginning stage starts when the student exits high school and begins their new journey at a college or university. Many firsts can occur during the first chapter of life after high school

graduation. A student may be living away from home for the very first time, and this may be the first time they have known another student like themselves.

As the student exits high school and starts a new chapter at a university, there can be many things students struggle with during their first year, including the demands of college academics and curriculum, forming friendships, getting to know professors, joining new clubs, and stepping outside their comfort zone.

As the semester progresses, students become more comfortable within their new surroundings, both inside and outside the classroom. Students may take a few weeks or longer to work through this adjustment period and begin shaping the potential outcome of their own college experience. Having self-confidence and the ability to control one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors is critical in the first year as a college student.

*Figure 2: Developmental Process Associated with a “Less Engaged” Pathway Based on First-Year Student Intersection of Self Cognitive and Self Determination Theory*



The “less engaged” pathway shown in Figure 2 symbolizes a developmental process where students face issues during the transition from high school to college that can hamper the development of life skills and self-esteem. The first stage of the transition from high school to college symbolizes a critical phase of adjustment where students need to cope with new academic demands, greater autonomy, and new social settings. When students have trouble adjusting to academic and social demands, they may have problems managing their time, making relationships, and understanding the institutional setting. These initial struggles can lead to a lack

of confidence in their abilities and may affect how they view their potential to succeed in the college setting.

From the perspective of self-determination theory, struggles can occur as the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are not adequately met in the transition from high school to college. When the individual does not feel connected or part of the larger group or faculty at the college or university, or if the individual does not feel confident in their ability to succeed in the academic environment, this can cause the individual to have low levels of engagement in the college or university environment. This can cause the individual to have low levels of engagement in the college or university environment, as the individual avoids opportunities for personal growth and development that can be provided through these experiences.

Likewise, Social Cognitive Theory can provide a framework to understand the impact of such experiences on students' beliefs about their ability to succeed. Social Cognitive Theory focuses on the importance of self-efficacy and observational learning in the explanation of behavior. When students face academic or social barriers, they may begin to doubt their ability to succeed in life, which may lead to poor self-regulation skills. Without proper self-regulation skills, students may not be able to cope well with academic or stressful situations. As such, students may begin to have low self-esteem and self-efficacy, which may lead to a negative belief about their ability to succeed.

The combination of Self-Determination Theory and Social Cognitive Theory offers a framework to understand the interaction between environmental obstacles and student beliefs during the college transition. When students are not provided with or engaging an environment that supports autonomy, competence, and relatedness, their motivational and engagement levels

may decrease. When first-year students consistently perceive their adjustment to their new setting being filled with obstacles, their self-efficacy and self-regulation skills, which are necessary to achieve college success, may decrease. This interaction of factors may place students at risk of disengaging or dropping out of college, emphasizing the need to provide college students with an environment that supports life skills development, self-confidence, and meaningful engagement in college life, particularly in the first year of college.

**Purpose Statement**

This phenomenological qualitative study aimed to understand and further explore the lived experiences of students in developing life skills among second-year students at a small, private Catholic university in Northeastern Pennsylvania. This study aimed to provide an understanding of how life skills can foster a rich and positive environment in addressing the entire student experience during their first year of college. The goal of this study was to understand how these abilities contributed to academic and personal development as students transitioned to college life. The study aimed to clarify how life skills contributed to creating a nurturing and stimulating environment for current second-year students by examining these experiences.

**Research Question**

What is the lived experience of students in developing life skills in relation to life skill development and self-esteem at a small, private, Catholic University in Northeastern Pennsylvania?

### Definitions

**Life Skills:** A life skill is defined as a skill that is useful or important in everyone's life (Cambridge, 2025). In this study, life skills will be defined as a set of general cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal skills that equip individuals to deal with the challenges, transitions, and demands of life. Life skills help build self-confidence, resilience, and self-esteem, ultimately benefiting students' overall well-being and success in higher education.

**Self-esteem:** Self-esteem is a confidence and satisfaction in oneself (Merriam Webster, 2025). In this study, self-esteem will be defined as confidence in one's ability to do specific tasks and refers to a person's overall sense of value or worth.

**Self-efficacy:** “Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments” (American Psychological Association, 2025). In this study, self-efficacy will be defined as the confidence in one’s self to learn and complete a new task.

**First-year students:** A student who has no prior postsecondary experience (except as noted below) attending any institution for the first time at the undergraduate level. This includes students enrolled in academic or occupational programs (Texas Tech, 2020). In this study, first year students will be defined as students who are 18 years of age or older and are currently registered as full-time students (12 credits or more) in their first year of undergraduate studies.

**Second-year students:** A student studying in the second year of a program at a US college or high school (Cambridge, 2025). In this study, a second-year student is defined

as a student who is over 18, has started their first year of college in Fall 2024 and started their sophomore year during the Fall 2025 semester.

**Small, private university:** According to the Carnegie Classification of colleges and universities, colleges considered "small" have fewer than 5,000 students (College Data, 2022). A private school is any organization that is funded and run by a non-governmental entity or entities. (Niche, 2023) In this study, a small, private university will be defined as an undergraduate enrollment of less than 5,000 students that does not rely on state funding and offers bachelor's, graduate, and doctoral degrees.

**Northeastern Pennsylvania:** "Northeastern Pennsylvania (NEPA) is a geographic region of Pennsylvania that includes the Pocono Mountains, the Endless Mountains and the industrial cities of Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, Pittston, Hazleton, Nanticoke, and Carbondale (Bendick, 2023). In this study, Northeastern Pennsylvania will be defined as a region in Pennsylvania comprising over 500,000 people in the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton metropolitan area. It is centrally located, just two hours from New York City and two hours from Philadelphia.

**Catholic University:** "A Catholic university is an institution of higher education rooted in the Christian faith and the Catholic intellectual tradition, dedicated to integrating faith and reason in research, teaching, and community service. These institutions are characterized by a commitment to human dignity, academic freedom within the context of truth, and the pursuit of knowledge in light of the Catholic faith" (Catholic University of America, 2026). In this study, a Catholic University is identified as an institution that balances traditional Christian teaching with a mission to develop well-rounded individuals and responsible global citizens.

**Delimitations**

The study is limited to full-time students. The study does not include part-time students. The study is delimited to students over the age of 18, focusing on students who have only completed their first year of college. The study is delimited to one college in Northeastern Pennsylvania and does not focus on all institutions of higher education.

**Limitations**

This study primarily focuses on the life experiences of second-year students in relation to life skills and their self-esteem and self-efficacy. Students who have been in college for longer than one year may provide more depth and insight into their experiences than those who have completed only their first year of college. This study heavily relies on interviews of second-year students, and their answers may not be genuine. Students may think the interviewer wants to hear a specific answer and have a bias or recall bias, which can make it difficult for them to remember a time when they used life skills.

Designing this study as qualitative may have provided some subjectivity bias when analyzing and coding results from the student interviews. The various themes and coding the researcher compiled are subjective, based solely on their thoughts using standard data analysis techniques. Different researchers may interpret the results differently, leading to inconsistencies in the findings. This study focuses exclusively on a singular school within a specific region of the United States. Focusing solely on one small university in Northeastern Pennsylvania may not yield results for all college students. College students at a much larger institution may have different experiences with life skills.

The timing of the semester when these interviews are held may yield different results/experiences for the students being interviewed. Midterms and finals are known as highly

stressful times for college students. Interviews did not occur during midterms and finals and did not impact a student's mood and their discussion of self-esteem. The interview only captures data at a single point in time. Students may experience various waves of anxiety and stress during their college experience. Depending on how the student feels on the day of the interview, it may affect how they respond to specific questions.

**Assumptions**

The researcher assumes second-year college students may have varying levels of ability to reflect on their experiences with life skills development. Students may not fully recognize the relationship between self-worth and personal development during their early college experiences. The researcher assumes students will be honest and open during their interviews. The researcher also assumes students will feel comfortable discussing their personal lives during interviews.

The researcher assumes that students may have different experiences with life skills. They may not come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds and similar high school experiences. The researcher may assume that interviewing first-year going into second year college students will provide rich, in-depth information and personal experiences. Allowing students to have an open discussion about their experiences may provide more insightful answers than a simple survey sent to them. The researcher assumes that second-year college students are still developing life skills and may have limited experience applying these skills independently. Life skills development is an ongoing process that may influence the perspectives shared during interviews.

**Significance of Study**

This qualitative study aimed to understand the importance of life skills development, self-esteem, and self-efficacy by examining the experiences of second-year students attending a small, private Catholic university in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Through in-depth virtual student interviews, the focus was on their own perceptions of life skills, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Understanding student experiences with life skills and self-esteem development is paramount to success outside the classroom and lays a foundation for personal and academic growth. This study can benefit many stakeholders directly and indirectly (such as faculty and family members).

This study provided valuable feedback based on students' direct experiences with life skills development and self-esteem. By observing how life skills impact a student's self-esteem and the outcomes of incorporating life skills into their curriculum, educators may consider adding life skills to their curriculum. This study provided insight into students' perceptions of life skills and self-esteem. Parents and/or guardians may now decide to teach these skills at home to their younger children. This study may serve as a source of empowerment for parents and guardians to recognize the importance of life skills and their impact on their children's overall well-being and personal development.

This study provided valuable insights into the importance of life skills and their impact on future generations' self-esteem. It may lead to other studies on different student populations and academic settings. Life skills affect not just college-aged students but also students of all ages. Life skills are vital to a person's overall well-being, both professionally and personally.

In summary, this study aimed to shed light on and investigate the lived experiences of first-year college students in relation to their life skills development and self-esteem. The results of this study may significantly influence future strategies for implementing life skills education before and after college, which has a profound impact on an individual's personal growth and emotional well-being.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **System Challenges Teaching Life Skills**

A regulated public-school year consists of 180 days in a calendar year. Teachers must adhere to and follow curriculum guidelines and students, teachers, and administrators have to meet specific outcomes and expectations, giving the teacher limited time to cover all topics and discussions. A major portion of instructional time is often dedicated to standardized testing, which continues to play a critical role by offering consistent, statewide data on student performance (McDougald, 2024).

Preparing students for state testing and other national standardized tests, such as the SAT and ACT, remains significant; however, it can be burdensome, especially with the test-optional policies now in place at many colleges and universities. Due to curriculum pacing and emphasis on standardized testing, many teachers report that there is not enough time or institutional support to incorporate life skills into daily instruction (Stein, 2020).

There are many reasons why life skills are not taught in high schools in the United States, but a common theme is often due to budget constraints. Many schools are facing budget cuts, and funds must be allocated and prioritized according to the specific needs of the school district. School years are only in session 180 days out of the year, so there are

limited days to fit the mandated curriculum for its students. Lippman et al. (2015) found that despite widespread agreement on the importance of life skills like communication and decision-making, U.S. schools often lack the time and resources to implement these effectively due to competing academic priorities.

Teachers in the United States education system are tasked to teach students to become model citizens upon graduation from high school. If students are not taught the importance of life skills, teachers may be doing a disservice to students, resulting in students not being prepared to enter the real world after high school graduation. However, teachers, parents, and family members want their children to be ready to enter the world, whether that next step is attending college, joining the military, or entering the workforce.

#### **Student Opinions Regarding Life Skills Development**

According to an article in the New York Times, high school students were interviewed about the United States education system preparing them to enter the real world and voiced concerns about being unprepared for life after graduation. Many expressed anxieties over adult responsibilities and felt that schools emphasized academic knowledge over practical, real-world skills (The Learning Network, 2019).

As more students graduate and enter college or start a career after high school, a concern that comes to mind is how truly prepared they are. Understanding what high school students think about life skills can further the issue. A recent survey by Panorama Education (2023) was sent to high school and college graduates to gather their views and opinions on coping without acquiring life skills during their high school or college careers. The survey found that 68% of recent graduates believe that courses with a focus beyond

academics would better prepare them for adulthood, with this sentiment particularly strong among those from public schools and colleges.

Since they are so broad, many life skills cannot be realistically taught in an entire academic school year. Students take learning into their own hands if their school and school district do not teach these essential life skills. Students are not just talking – they are taking action to supplement their knowledge of basic life skills. The same survey report found that more than half of graduates reported learning life skills through the internet, specifically search engines and social media, while many also turned to family, friends, or personal experience. Currently, schools primarily focus on college preparation, honors, Advanced Placement, and even dual enrollment classes (enrolling in college courses while in high school), all of which are vital to a high school student's curriculum. Adding life skills can only enhance the students' experience. Many students echo concerns about graduating without essential life skills, a sentiment supported by Kyllonen (2013), who found that soft skills such as time management and emotional regulation are not emphasized enough in secondary education, despite being critical for adult success. Duckworth and Yeager (2015) argue that while cognitive ability is traditionally emphasized in schools, students' concerns about preparedness reflect a larger need to support character and life skills development through formal educational assessments and interventions. Adult perspectives also highlight missed opportunities for life skill instruction. CBS Philadelphia (2019) reported that adults frequently cited a desire to have learned budgeting, taxes, wellness, loans, and negotiation skills in school. Many respondents also noted that academic subjects, such as calculus, were less applicable to

their daily lives. Nearly nine in ten believed life would be easier if they had been taught such practical skills during their school years.

### **Who is Responsible to Teach Life Skills**

The topic of who should primarily teach life skills is a subject of debate. Some argue that it should strictly come from the student's household and taught by the person with whom the student is living. Today, many children come from different backgrounds. Unlike in the 1950s, when it was more socially acceptable for students to come from a two-parent household, which provided more support for them in the home, however, it is not the case in today's world. Some students live with only one parent, are being raised by grandparents, aunts or uncles, or are even in the foster system. Ideally, life skill development begins in the student's home, but it can also start in school. According to Steinberg (2014), adolescence is a critical period for acquiring life skills, and while family environments play a role schools must act intentionally during this developmental window to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students.

Lahey, as cited by Carpenter (2021), supports teaching autonomy to foster motivation and competence in children. However, determining which life skills are most important—and which can be learned independently—can feel overwhelming for parents. According to Carpenter (2021), essential areas include finances, cooking, mental health, and even car repair. Families vary widely in the life skills they can effectively pass on to their children.

Alternatively, some students come from families with a better understanding of these life skills than others. Some students may be more knowledgeable due to socioeconomic background and other factors. Hamaker (2016) observed that overemphasis

on academic preparation and rising parental anxiety—sometimes manifesting as overprotection—have sidelined hands-on skill development. Some families may be better equipped than others to support life skills education due to differences in socioeconomic status, education, or available time.

Many students have taken at least one or two classes in what was called, at one point, home economics. Students may have learned how to cook, sew, and take care of their household. These classes are still essential, but their numbers have been dwindling in recent years. Courses like home economics, now often referred to as Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS), were once common avenues for teaching practical life skills such as cooking and sewing. However, Danovich (2018) reported a 38% decline in FCS enrollment over a decade, driven by factors such as budget cuts, teacher shortages, and academic testing pressures. These courses are usually elective, further limiting student access.

However, one area in Minnesota is making life skills education available during the school day in a unique way. Juleigh Prowser offers classes for women in her local community, focusing on skills such as gardening, pottery, sewing, and crocheting. She surveyed the women in the class about offering these classes for girls in high school. She kept thinking about the life skills classes she took in school and wanted to have an impact by providing these workshops for young girls as well. With the approval of the local school district's superintendent and other administration, Julie is introducing Life Skills for girls at the local high school in town. Some communities are addressing the gap by integrating life skills instruction through unique school-based programs. For example, Prowser initiated a workshop series at a local high school in Minnesota that teaches students skills such as sewing, managing stress, and completing job applications. With school

administration support, these workshops occur during study hall and are facilitated by vetted school employees (Otto, 2025).

If life skills are not taught in the classroom, students can learn them from family members. Every family is different, especially in today's society. While life skills instruction may begin at home, Turner and Welch (2012) argue that disparities in parental involvement and household stability mean that schools must help fill these educational gaps to ensure all students are adequately prepared for adulthood. Communities also see the importance of life skills and actively fulfill this need through community programming. If our teachers are not actively teaching these life skills, then people outside the classroom in their communities will. These life skills are also being taught on college campuses.

#### **Teaching Life Skills in Community Settings**

Many Adulting 101 classes are being taught at local libraries and other community events. Community-based learning opportunities provide critical alternatives for life skill development, offering experiential learning environments where youth can practice independence, problem-solving, and social responsibility (Larson, 2000). Organizations within the community take it upon themselves to educate our youth, rather than our educators inside the classroom. Ford (2018) noted that one library developed its series based on student feedback and included topics such as finances, apartment living, and household maintenance— topics that students said were missing from school and home.

In Monroe, Michigan, a local community center offers life skills classes to both youth and adults. Topics include emotional intelligence, resume building, budgeting, and workplace etiquette. Grassley emphasized that these courses are open to the public and

often fill a critical gap left by schools. Such programs demonstrate how community-based learning environments can successfully deliver practical life education (Lans et al., 2004).

### **Life Skills in College**

While teaching life skills is often overlooked and not among the most important topics to teach college students throughout the school year, some colleges consider the importance of and support life skills education. If students do not receive instruction in these skills in high school, college is the next phase for some students. College readiness must extend beyond academic competencies to include non-cognitive life skills, such as persistence and goal-setting, which Conley (2007) identifies as crucial for student retention and long-term success in higher education. Tinto (2012) emphasized that student persistence and success in higher education are not just about academics, but also about non-cognitive factors—such as resilience, self-management, and interpersonal skills—that can be nurtured through targeted life skills programming.

Even though being an adult in the United States is legally considered to occur when a person turns eighteen, students are often still seen as learning and growing at their institutions. For example, the education department at Texas Tech University created an "Adulting 101" workshop for its students, as they believed that life skills were vital to students' development during their college years. Their "Adulting 101" workshop teaches students practical competencies, including budgeting, communication, conflict resolution, and healthy living. The course is also rooted in a science-based approach and includes instruction in health, employability, and family management (Houey et al., 2020). These efforts underscore the need to supplement traditional academic education with real-world readiness.

Their professors see the importance of life skills even if they are not taught in secondary schools. Obtaining these skills is essential even after high school. Students are still trying to determine what path to take during college (decide what major to pursue). Access to these skills can further enhance a student's professional and personal development.

If students are missing the opportunity to learn life skills by not being taught in high school or even by family members, the next chance for them to acquire this knowledge is in college. First-year college students, many of whom are only 18 but considered legal adults, are still developing, maturing, and finding themselves. Offering life skills courses, seminars, and workshops can provide numerous opportunities for learning for college students. Shields (2023) proposed that colleges offer zero-credit life skills courses to bridge the gap between theoretical learning and practical application.

College students are learning to live independently, especially those who live on campus. Many students living on campus are experiencing what it's like to live independently for the first time. This can be daunting and overwhelming, and some students may feel lost in the process of learning how to live independently. These students must take it upon themselves to master essential skills such as time management, financial responsibility, and academic success throughout their college careers. Another aspect where life skills are essential in college is when college students decide to live off campus. Many students are likely unaware of the various elements of a rental lease for an apartment or house, including what is included in the rent and what is not (such as utilities like electricity, water, garbage, and fees). Other areas that would be beneficial for developing life skills knowledge include financial management and literacy. Living off campus

requires students to shop for groceries independently and not rely on a meal plan provided by the college or university.

Living off campus provides students with an early and real-life scenario of living independently. However, not having a support system from family or the college can adversely affect students' perspectives on living independently. High schools and colleges may be doing a disservice to their students by not providing knowledge of life skills before they enter the real world after graduation. Porter (2020) suggested that colleges should expand workshops and training opportunities to support life skill development, which not only benefits students but also enhances university retention and workforce readiness.

#### **Goal Setting with Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy**

When students ask about their own self-worth, they are asking about their own self-esteem. On an even broader level, increased self-esteem can evolve into overall increased self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a person's belief that he or she can do certain things or perform well in certain situations. When individuals possess high self-esteem, they view themselves as capable, enhancing their confidence and self-efficacy in dealing with new challenges. This association is evidenced by the Goal-Setting Theory postulated by Locke and Latham (2019), where higher self-efficacy, usually due to having high self-esteem, is said to allow students to set more difficult goals, commit more fully to them, and maintain effort when facing obstacles. Life skills training programs also provide evidence for this link.

For example, a quasi-experimental investigation that used anxiety-disordered students revealed that targeted life skills training improved self-esteem significantly, and this, in turn, boosted self-efficacy. Students reported a greater sense of confidence in their competence and personal value and psychological resources that predisposed them to apply and practice the

learned skills (Ghaedi et al., 2023). These findings suggest that reinforcing self-esteem not only benefits emotional well-being but is also a significant component of developing self-efficacy, which plays a direct role in the acquisition and use of life skills.

### **International Countries Approach to Life Skills**

The development and learning of life skills is taking on a different approach outside the United States. More and more countries are recognizing the importance of acquiring these skills and their vital role in a person's development and readiness for the real world. Some countries, such as China, are developing life skills curricula at colleges and universities.

Outside the United States, other countries are recognizing the value of formal life skills education. In China, Professor Fu Yiqiang at the Communication University of China introduced a popular elective course on adulting after noticing students' struggles with real-world challenges. Enrollment in the course far exceeded expectations, covering topics such as renting an apartment, resume writing, money management, and cooking (Wenjie & Wuhan, 2025).

His life skills course began as an elective and soon became very popular. The course was originally designed for 100 students, but 200 enrolled, which Fu did not expect. Students were standing in the back of his classroom, with barely any standing room left. A range of topics was covered in the Guide to Adult Life Course at the Communication University of China. Topics such as navigating the rental process, managing finances, refining one's resume, and developing basic cooking skills were taught to college students. International models, such as those discussed by Singh (2015), highlight the importance of validating informal life skill learning often through community engagement or work-based experiences as a legitimate and essential component of student development.

### **Life Skills Technology**

With the abundance of technology available at teachers' fingertips, embracing technology to introduce life skills to students is a viable option. There are numerous excuses for why teachers and administrators seem to prioritize other aspects over life skills. Some reasons include budgeting issues, timing conflicts within the school year, and teachers' opinions that the responsibility lies with the student and their family, among others. In 2025, a significant technological breakthrough occurred in the realm of life skills teaching.

Technology has the potential to address barriers to life skills education. Schools often cite budget constraints, limited time, and conflicting priorities as reasons for not offering life skills instruction. To address this, a new curriculum called "The Edge" was developed in alignment with the CASEL framework. This digital platform offers over 100 modules on communication, negotiation, financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and self-awareness for students at all grade levels (eSchool News, 2025).

The platform is customizable for all grade levels, including those beyond high school, and is also suitable for the college level. This learning platform offers over 100 modules and teaches more than 20 life skills. The platform combines real-world examples and situations to relate to the students. Colleges and universities, such as Georgetown University, have utilized this platform to help students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds enhance their life skills. Life skills are important to the overall well-being of students. If schools invested in technology as mentioned above, it would demonstrate that the school is committed to the development of the whole student. Learning these skills can benefit students for the rest of their lives. Investing in the teaching of life skills can be seen as a proactive approach from a school district. Recognizing that life skills should not be relegated to the back burner or taught outside the classroom by family/guardians can be a significant step in the right direction for the future of life skills

curriculum and development. Technology, when thoughtfully integrated, can support life skill development by offering interactive and personalized learning opportunities. Bowers et al. (2015) found that digital tools can be especially effective in promoting communication, problem-solving, and goal-setting in adolescents.

In their meta-analysis, Durlak et al. (2010) found that structured programs, including those that integrate technology, can significantly improve students' social and emotional competencies, suggesting that digital platforms can play a critical role in delivering life skills education.

### **The Debate Over Life Skills**

Learning and acquiring life skills is a significant and essential part of a child's development. Being mindful and knowledgeable of these skills can better prepare today's youth while entering the real world. The biggest question at hand is, how does one define life skills? The World Health Organization defines life skills as the abilities needed to manage everyday challenges and function adaptively (Parapati et al., 2017).

Life skills can encompass a wide range of things. They can include soft skills such as critical thinking, conflict resolution, team-building skills, and effective communication. Life skills can also include detailed skills such as financial management/literacy, paying taxes, applying for a credit card, and finding an apartment. They can also be coping skills to manage stress and anxiety.

Deciding which skills are essential and which should be excluded is a matter of debate. The definition of life skills is a very subjective matter. What someone believes is a crucial skill may not be as important as others. For example, parents deciding on which life skills to teach their children can be subject to debate based on various answers from parents and/or guardians.

We come from diverse backgrounds, and not every family will have the exact definition or process regarding teaching and learning these essential skills.

Other families will have other priorities, and it will not be easy to standardize life skills training. Indeed.com (n.d.) suggests that employers seek out many of the same traits, such as organization, problem-solving, empathy, and public speaking skills, that are necessary to excel outside the work environment. Life skills can also contribute to emotional well-being. *Mind in the Making* (2023) asserts that they include executive functions that harmonize cognition, emotion, and social capabilities to achieve goals. Davis (2024) categorizes life skills into three dimensions: thinking, emotional, and social, all of which are necessary for long-term success.

However, research indicates that members of Generation Z often lack the basic life skills that earlier generations typically acquired. Reyes (2025) stated that Gen Z struggles with cooking, writing in cursive, and conversation in person, due to technological dependence. Apps like DoorDash and Instacart have reduced real-life interactions, turning daily chores into a passive experience (Buzzfeed.com, 2024). However, technology can be used to facilitate the acquisition of life skills. Search engines, video websites, and the internet provide learners the opportunity to access information at their discretion, despite the variation in which abilities are instructed and by whom. Heckman and Kutz (2012) noted that soft skills, such as perseverance and self-control, are just as important as academic ability in terms of predicting educational, employment, and health outcomes.

Overall, there is no set definition of what life skills should be taught to our kids. Whoever teaches life skills to a student, whether a teacher or parent, will draw on their own experience and what they believe the student needs, considering the individual they are teaching. While some argue that life skills are secondary or subjective, Heckman and Kautz (2012) demonstrate

robust evidence that soft skills, such as persistence and self-control, predict long-term education, labor market, and health outcomes to the same degree as academic achievement.

Life skills have been and continue to be a vital topic and matter to analyze and review. These skills help students during a crucial transition period in their lives and can benefit them as they mature into adults. Teachers and parents may be doing a disservice to today's youth by not teaching these skills. Many students expressed a desire to learn these skills before graduating from high school.

Other themes found in the literature included the settings where these life skills were taught. Since a school year is only 180 days, there is limited time to learn many things within the school year. Many students take it upon themselves, thanks to YouTube and other online tools, to learn these necessary skills. Colleges and universities also see the need for students to learn these skills. For example, Texas Tech has an Adulting 101 series for which students can sign up. Free workshops or zero-credit-based classes can serve as an alternative avenue for colleges and universities to provide these life skills to students.

Another theme is the responsibility of parents in teaching life skills. If the school district cannot provide the time or the resources, parents and guardians should be knowledgeable outlets for their children. Since so many life skills exist, honing in on the most important ones can prove challenging. There are many categories of life skills, and deciding which ones to focus on varies by each person. Being financially stable might be a top priority for someone, rather than learning how to vote or change a flat tire.

Analyzing these different themes and viewpoints on the importance of life skills is paramount to the future and continuation of life skills. However, there is a missing piece or link that can provide further and more detailed insights into the phenomenon of life skills

development. If students are not taught life skills in high school and need to learn these skills in college, how exactly are they learning these skills? How is it affecting their personal development and growth as a member of Generation Z? The third chapter of this dissertation will further explore the phenomenology of second-year college students, examining their thoughts and insights into life skills and how these skills impact their self-esteem.

### **Chapter 3: Methods**

#### **Research Question**

What are the lived experiences of first-year students in developing life skills and self-esteem at a small, private, Catholic university in Northeastern Pennsylvania?

#### **Research Design**

This study aimed to understand the lived experiences of second-year students in developing life skills and self-esteem at a small private Catholic college in Northeastern Pennsylvania. To research this phenomenon, a qualitative research design was utilized. Qualitative inquiry is founded on the belief that reality is formed through social interaction and individual experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and therefore, it is particularly well-suited for research endeavors examining meaning, perception, and change at the personal level.

Qualitative design enhanced the primary question of the research by providing participants with an opportunity to reminisce about their individual experiences of transitioning from high school to college as well as reminiscing about their first year of college. This process is multifaceted and highly personal, and various emotional, cognitive, and social considerations influence it. Qualitative methodology captured these complexities and yielded rich, descriptive

accounts that provided insight into how life skills are conceptualized and enacted, as well as how they are connected to the development of self-esteem during the first year of college. The open-ended, adaptive nature of qualitative data collection protocols, i.e., semi-structured virtual interviews allows for the emergence of themes not predetermined, but essential to understanding the phenomenon in context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Within qualitative research, this study adopted a phenomenological tradition, which investigated how individuals experienced and understood a given phenomenon. Phenomenology has its roots in the philosophical works of Edmund Husserl (1931), who emphasized the practice of returning "to the things themselves" so that one can gain an understanding of human consciousness. The tradition has since been researched by experts like Heidegger (1962), van Manen (1990), and Moustakas (1994).

Phenomenology seeks to uncover the natural essence of an experience by examining it in great detail through the first-hand knowledge of the people involved. The main characteristics of phenomenology include a focus on lived experience, as articulated in the words of the participant (Van Manen, 1990); intentionality, or the idea that consciousness is always consciousness of something, a feeling, an event, or a relationship (Husserl, 1931); epoché or bracketing, where the researcher sets aside assumptions to approach the data with an open mind (Moustakas, 1994); and description instead of explanation, letting the phenomenon speak for itself without inserting external theory or assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This questioning tradition is particularly suitable for the current study, as it is aligned with the research objective of uncovering students' inner processes and experienced meanings as they learn life skills and form self-esteem and self-efficacy. These personal, private occurrences can only be understood best by hearing students' voices and creating space to discuss how they

give meaning to the experiences. Phenomenology's emphasis on depth, meaning, and participant perspective situates it as an ideal method for this study, which prioritizes understanding over prediction or generalizability, focusing on knowing at a human and profound level how students learn to develop during a formative period in their lives.

Using this approach, the researcher aimed to identify recurring themes and primary patterns of experience among participants without compromising the individuality of each student's story. The results contributed to the broader understanding of how life skills and self-esteem development improved during the first year of college, and may inform future support services and programming in such educational environments.

#### **Study Target Population and Sample Size**

The target population of this study consisted of sixteen students (fifteen female students and one male student) who were in their sophomore year of college, who were over 18 and had taken a traditional path from high school to college, without taking a gap year. These students were also attending a small, private Catholic university in Northeastern Pennsylvania. These students had already experienced the transitional phase being studied and offered valuable insights into life skills and self-esteem development based on their own lived experiences while reflecting on their high school experiences throughout their first year of college studies.

A blast email was sent to students who completed their first year of college (with no reported gap year) and were over 18. The primary sampling method that was used in this study was voluntary response sampling. At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher asked if the student would recommend any other students who fit the criteria to participate in the study, however, this snowball sampling method was to be utilized only if the researcher was having

difficulty meeting the study's participant quota. Snowball sampling was not used due to the quota being met based on volunteer response sampling.

Beginning second-year college students that were 18 or older were chosen and selected as the primary population for the study, as they had just experienced their first-year transitional experience from high school to college, in comparison to college students that were just entering their first year. Some were having to deal with living away from home for the first time, some were the first in their family to attend college and the first year of college was likely the first time they experienced things like time management and financial responsibility on their own; while overseeing their academic, personal, and professional growth simultaneously. Ability to reflect on their first year of studies as a college student, including their high school experience was of vital importance to the overall goal and strategy of the semi-structured interviews.

#### **Participation Criteria and Exclusion Criteria**

To participate in this study, students had completed their first year of college studies (beginning in Fall 2024) and were over 18 years of age or older and were starting their second year of college in Fall 2025. It was also required for the participants to have a traditional path of graduating high school in summer before starting their first year of college in fall 2024. Students were identified as male, female, nonbinary, or prefer not to disclose their gender during the interview. The study was also open to commuter and resident students. Students had to be full time and obtained 12 or more credits during the Fall 2025 semester.

The following groups did not meet the specific criteria for this qualitative study: students currently in their first year, third-year students, and senior years of study or graduate students. To minimize any research bias, the study also excluded students who were employed as student ambassadors where the researcher was employed, and held an administrative role at the

university and was the supervisor for the student ambassador program. The researcher held an administrative role in the admissions department where the researcher recruited and formed relationships with prospective students. Any students who the researcher had recruited were also excluded from the study.

### **Instrument**

The primary data collection for this qualitative study was done through semi-structured interviews that only involved the researcher and student (one-on-one basis). Interviews lasted approximately thirty to forty-five minutes via Google Meet. The participants were asked ten questions relating to their experiences with life skills and self-esteem during the first year of their college studies. Semi-structured interviews offered flexibility, allowing time for follow-up questions and potentially deeper exploration of students' experiences with life skills and self-esteem. The questions also offered consistency, ensuring all research participants answer the same ten questions throughout the interview. Lastly, semi-structured interviews provided valuable data, enabling students to express their emotions about their experiences related to the topic.

Trustworthiness was used to ensure that the findings and results of this qualitative study were accurate and authentic. Multiple perspectives were analyzed and coded during the 15-20 virtual semi-structured interviews, which facilitated triangulation. After the interviews were transcribed through Google Meet's interview transcription option, the research participants were allowed to view these transcripts for accuracy. Allowing the participants to view these transcripts ensured the transcripts were accurate, and the researcher did not take anything out of context while analyzing the data. The questions remained the same for all research participants.

### **Ethical Consideration/Institutional Review Board**

All ethical considerations were addressed for this qualitative study about first-year students' lived experiences with life skills and self-esteem. The researcher ensured that participants' interviews, personal information, data, and other sensitive information remained private and with restricted access. This study received full approval from Marywood University's Exempt Review Committee ensuring full compliance with and consideration of ethical principles when dealing with human subjects. The ERC approval process reviewed a detailed research proposal, which included the study's research question, purpose statement, methodology, recruitment strategy, and measures to protect the confidentiality of research participants' interviews, data, and other sensitive information.

Before the interview began with the research participants, the researcher clearly stated that these participants were encouraged and supported to provide authentic answers about their lived experiences with life skills and self-esteem. The researcher stated that conducting and recording the virtual interviews did not influence the participants and that they could provide answers genuinely. The researcher reiterated that the interview is open-ended, so the research participant could take their time answering the questions. The researcher stated that there is no right or wrong answer; an authentic answer was best.

### **Procedures**

The researcher held an administrative job on campus and had many strong and established relationships with first-year students but they were excluded from this qualitative study. The researcher sent a blast email, with the approval of Marywood's Exempt Review Committee, to all second-year students over the age of 18 at the university who have started their freshmen year during the Fall 2024 semester. The researcher corresponded with the research participants through email to schedule a date and time for the interview. Participants were asked

if they had a stable internet connection and access to a private area/room to conduct the virtual interview. Once a convenient date for the researcher and research participant had been set, a Google Meet link invitation was sent.

At the start of the interview, the purpose statement, research question, and consent form were reviewed. The researcher asked permission from the participant to record the interview. At the end of each interview, the researcher asked the participant to refer anyone they know who had completed their first year of college (starting in the Fall 2024 semester) over the age of 18, to contribute to the study. Initially, a blast email was sent to all first-year students (who had completed their first year of college, starting in the Fall 2024 semester), over the age of 18, with approval from Marywood University's (ERC) Exempt Review Committee (See Appendix A for the Recruitment Email).

#### **Interview Format**

The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately thirty to forty-five minutes for an in-depth discussion. Conducting semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions enabled the research participant and researcher to delve into, recall, and revisit the meaningful lived experiences of the research participants. The interviews were conducted virtually on Google Meet.

The interview started with a brief introduction from the researcher, who then thanked the participant for taking part in the study. The purpose statement of the study and research question was read aloud to the participant. The consent form that the participant was asked to agree to was also reviewed with the participant. The researcher asked for verbal permission from the research participant to record the interview. The researcher reiterated the interviews would remain in strict confidence and would only be used for research purposes.

The researcher began each interview by asking questions about the research topic. A total of ten questions were asked of research participants, inquiring about their lived experiences with life skills and self-esteem, as they had completed their first year of college studies (See Appendix B: List of Interview Questions). The open-ended and semi-structured questions allowed students to share about their experiences with life skills and self-esteem. Follow-up questions were asked, allowing the research participant to delve deeper into their lived experiences related to the research topic.

Once all the primary and follow-up questions had been asked, the researcher asked the participant if they had anything else to add, needed to reevaluate, or needed any clarification before the interview ended. The researcher explained in detail the next steps after the interview, including how the data would be used for their dissertation. The researcher reiterated the importance of confidentiality to the research participant once again. The researcher would contact the research participant if any follow-up communication was needed. Finally, the researcher thanked the participant for their time and important contribution to the research.

### **Data Analysis Section**

#### ***Coding Procedure***

The researcher familiarized themselves with the interviews conducted by reviewing the transcriptions of each interview. After conducting the semi-structured interviews and going through the transcription process, the researcher used various coding methods such as open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to find and develop themes. The researcher thoroughly reviewed each of the interviews to identify various themes, along with other important phrases and concepts. This enabled the researcher to identify multiple phrases, keywords, and emotions expressed by the participants. The first type of coding the researcher conducted was open coding.

"The data will be coded for its major categories of information" (Creswell and Path, 2018, p 85) and broken down into phrases that appeared multiple times. Each line of the interview, as viewed in each of the participant's transcripts, was analyzed for numerous themes related to life skills development, self-esteem, academic development, and personal growth.

Axial coding was also used which identifies one open coding category was focused on to go back to the data to create "categories around this core phenomenon" (Creswell and Path, 2018, p. 85). For example, codes such as forming relationships were put into a category called Social Belonging, codes such as gaining confidence and feeling more self-controlled were put in a category called Self-Esteem Growth, and time management and task prioritization were put in a category called Life Skills Development.

The final stage of coding was done through selective coding. Selective coding occurs when the researcher breaks down the interview data and identifies three to four major themes that address the research question. Some themes that can arise from the interviews can be categorized as follows: Academic Skills Development (time management, study habits), Emotional Growth (resilience, confidence boost, self-awareness), Personal Responsibility (financial independence, fiscally responsible), and Social Support/Belonging (peer-to-peer relationships, faculty connections, campus involvement). Direct quotes from interviews were also used as evidence to support each theme during the coding process.

#### ***Data Transcription, Storage, and Privacy Measures***

The virtual interviews, with the participants' consent, were recorded in their entirety. Since the interview was conducted through Google Meet, a transcription service through Google Meet was used. Each transcript was reviewed for accuracy, clarity, and freedom from errors. Research participants were notified at the end of each interview if they needed to see the

transcript for any reason to contact the researcher. Any important information from the research interview was coded or anonymized to protect their privacy and data.

All recordings and transcripts were stored in a secure external hard drive and server and cloud storage such as Google Drive. For the protection of identity and privacy of all parties, a coding system (aliases) was used to identify each of the research participants and access to the data was provided exclusively to the researcher. Once transcribing and coding were completed, the interview recordings were deleted.

### Chapter 4

#### Results

This phenomenological qualitative study aimed to understand and further explore the lived experiences of students in developing life skills among second-year students at a small, private Catholic university in Northeastern Pennsylvania. This study sought to provide an understanding of how life skills can foster a rich and positive environment in addressing the entire student experience during their first year of college.

Below is a summary of each of the emerging themes found during the interviews (Table 1: *Emergent Themes from Interviews*)

Emergent Themes from Student Interviews

Theme	Focus	Summary
<b><i>Theme 1: Foundations of Life Skills</i></b>	Family-based learning	Students developed early life skills through family expectations, observation, and informal practice, forming the foundation for independence before college.

<b><i>Theme 2: Pre-College Preparation and Skill Development</i></b>	High school exposure	Formal life skills instruction in high school was limited; students who had exposure felt better prepared, while others relied heavily on family support.
<b><i>Theme 3: Transition to College and Mental Health</i></b>	Adjustment to independence	The transition to college increased responsibility and stress, prompting life skills development through trial-and-error and influencing self-esteem and mental health.
<b><i>Theme 4: What Colleges Should Be Doing</i></b>	Institutional support	Students favored optional, practical, and visible life skills programming that normalizes help seeking without mandating participation.
<b><i>Theme 5: Life Skill Importance According to College Students</i></b>	Current priorities	Time management, financial responsibility, and self-advocacy were identified as the most critical life skills during students' second year.

### ***Theme 1: Foundations of Life Skills***

This theme captured how participants were introduced to life skills in their family environments before starting college. Some learned from their parents and some learned from other fellow extended family members. Students explained how they developed basic skills informally at home by observing others, facing expectations, and practicing, which shaped their early understanding of responsibility and independence.

Many participants were expected to learn various tasks around their households and start to become responsible young adults in society. Various tasks such as cleaning/tidying up and

cooking were mentioned by many participants. These tasks became part of their daily routine and their parent/guardian expected them to be done. These tasks were the start of their journey to independence.

**Sub-Theme: Learning Life Skills from Parents and Extended Family** Participants mentioned that parents or guardians were the main teachers of basic life skills, such as budgeting, household tasks, and problem-solving, usually through direct instruction or daily routine. Many participants noted that their first exposure to life skills was from a parent or guardian at a young age and especially during their high school years. Students learned life skills by observing responsible behaviors among family members, including work ethic, accountability, and time management. Since not everyone has the same nuclear family prototype, some students noted that older siblings or extended family members played important roles by demonstrating behaviors, offering advice, or setting expectations by helping with early skill development. Participants overwhelmingly identified family environments as the most influential context for learning life skills prior to college. Parents and guardians were described as modeling behaviors, establishing standards, and gradually increasing responsibility.

Several participants described learning life skills informally through observation instead of direct instruction. Andrea noted that she learned skills simply by “watching how things were done at home and then being expected to do them.” These responses indicate that family influence was often implicit rather than structured, shaping students’ readiness for independence.

**Sub-Theme: Early Expectations of Independence** This subtheme captured participants’ experiences of being expected to manage responsibilities independently, such as chores, schedules, and personal commitments before going to college. Isabella similarly explained that life skills meant “being able to take care of yourself without having to ask someone else how to

do everything.” Marcus described life skills as “what makes you feel like an adult instead of still relying on your parents.” This earlier exposure to life skills and having some form of independence helped shape these students into the young men and women they are today. While parents or guardians were away at work, some participants were expected to be independent and essentially do certain tasks such as cleaning, cooking for themselves, doing laundry, etc. without the supervision of their parent or guardian. Miranda shared that her parents “made me do things on my own, like laundry, cooking, and keeping track of my schedule,” while Priya explained that independence was expected at home, stating, “they didn’t really do things for me, I had to figure it out.”

### ***Theme 2: Pre-College Preparation and Skill Development***

This theme represented how participants viewed both formal and informal preparation for life skills before college, especially through high school courses, programs, and structured learning experiences designed to support their readiness for adulthood. Not many participants had prior learning experience from a structured class in high school that taught them life skills. Those that did felt more prepared and readier to tackle the next chapter of their lives: going to college.

For those that did not have prior experience, they felt school was just school and they were there to learn primarily academics. Learning various subjects such as math, history, writing, etc. was more important than learning essential life skills. Most participants felt they came secondary to academics. Many participants who did not have prior experience in high school were thankful that their family members took the time to teach them life skills.

**Sub-Theme: Life Skills Exposure in High School** Participants emphasized the importance of high school courses that focused on life skills, seeing them as essential for preparing students for

independent living. Students discussed learning about budgeting, saving, and managing money through school classes, noting its relevance to life after high school. Some participants pointed out coursework or programs that covered practical household skills, which they later used in college. This subtheme reflects experiences in the planned programs helped ease the transition to college by addressing educational and personal readiness. Participants discussed being exposed to planning, scheduling, and organizational strategies before college, which are often associated with academic success. Emma felt her life skills class was “productive but not life-changing. I had it in my junior year, but nothing in my senior year.”

**Sub-Theme: Mixed Perceptions of Preparedness** While some students felt well-prepared by their pre-college experiences, others mentioned gaps in instruction or uneven exposure to life skills. Participants consistently described high school as academically focused, with limited opportunities for explicit instruction in life skills. Caroline stated that high school “really prepared us for tests and college applications, not real life,” while Jamie explained that “we weren’t taught things like budgeting or managing stress.” Even when life skills were referenced, participants felt they were secondary to academic outcomes. This theme reflects participants’ perception that official schooling prioritized academic achievement over preparation for independent living. Not many participants had the opportunity to take a life skills class during their time in high school. This reaffirms why initially learning life skills from parents and/or guardians/extended family can be vital to a student’s success and overall independence.

### ***Theme 3: Transition to College and Mental Health***

This theme highlighted the challenges students faced in their first year of college as they adjusted to greater independence and responsibility, often revealing gaps between their prior preparation and the daily demands of college life. Participants expressed feeling overwhelmed by

the sudden responsibility of managing daily life without consistent external guidance. Students reported struggling to balance academic demands, personal responsibilities, and financial obligations during their transition. Feelings of stress, anxiety, and self-doubt as students navigated new expectations and environments.

**Sub-Theme: Transition Shock and Increased Responsibility** Participants consistently described the transition to college as abrupt, with a rapid increase in personal responsibility. Riley explained that upon arriving at college, “everything was on me all at once,” including managing coursework, schedules, meals, and individual well-being. Several participants noted that this abrupt change left little time for gradual adjustment. Many of the participants were living away from home for the very first time. That sudden cycle of dependency turning into independence was very startling and shocking to say the least.

Despite the difficulties, participants reported that increased independence led to rapid development of life skills. Jordan stated that skills developed quickly because “you had no choice, you had to figure it out.” Similarly, Amy explained that being responsible for her own schedule forced her to learn time management more efficiently than before. There are many “firsts” that happen during the first year of college, like having a roommate, navigating a new campus, learning where everything is, what resources are available, and who your academic advisor is. Participants described experiencing stress, anxiety, and feelings of being overwhelmed during the initial adjustment period. Priya noted that the first semester felt “overwhelming at first,” while Evangeline described feeling unsure of her capacity to handle competing responsibilities. These feelings expressed were frequently connected to gaps in prior life skills preparation.

**Sub-Theme: Learning Through Trial-And-Error** Participants frequently described mastering life skills through experience rather than instruction. Many participants described learning life skills through experiences, mistakes, and gradual adjustments instead of formal instruction. Ava explained that time management “didn’t really click until I messed up a few times,” while Jiya shared that “mistakes were necessary to understand responsibility.” These responses highlight experiential learning as central to the acquisition of life skills. Participants did not expect to master one certain life skill or multiple skills overnight. Participants often identified friends and roommates as key sources of guidance, encouragement, and shared learning. Many first-year students are going through the same trials and tribulations and knowing that these students aren’t in it alone, can be reassuring to those students feeling stressed.

**Sub-Theme: Self-Esteem and Self-Improvement** Life skills development affected participants’ self-esteem, illustrating how improved competence and independence contributed to personal growth during their first year of college. As students managed responsibilities well, they felt more confident in their abilities. Participants reported a growing belief in their ability to face challenges and make effective decisions. Successfully overcoming difficulties led to feelings of achievement and self-worth. Students recognized their personal growth in making informed decisions over time.

When life skills “clicked,” participants reported strong emotional reactions. Emily described feeling “proud of myself,” while Isabelle explained that mastering budgeting made her feel “less stressed and more in control.” Several participants described relief when skills turned manageable, reducing anxiety. Mastery of life skills led to greater self-efficacy. Katie explained that learning to manage responsibilities independently made her feel “like I could actually handle things on my own.” Participants linked these instances to growing autonomy and confidence as

they navigated adulthood. Participants' mastery of life skills was closely tied to experiential learning, resulting in greater confidence, emotional relief, and self-efficacy.

Over time, participants reported increased confidence as they adapted to independence. Rebecca explained that after the first semester, she began to feel "more capable and less stressed," signaling an increasing sense of autonomy. Participants described this confidence as emerging gradually through repeated practice and success. Other ways that helped students adjust to their first year were getting out of their shells and getting involved. Many participants said the involvement fair at the beginning of the semester helped them see what all this small, private Catholic University has to offer. Attending various club meetings was another opportunity to meet more people with interests similar to their own. Increased independence initially caused stress but ultimately accelerated the development of life skills and contributed to growing confidence and autonomy.

Participants frequently described increased self-esteem as they successfully managed responsibilities independently. Marcus stated that "doing things on my own made me feel more confident," while Lisa described pride in handling daily tasks without assistance. Academic success and challenges both played significant roles in molding self-esteem. Melanie explained that struggling academically caused her confidence to drop, while positive feedback reinforced others' self-belief. Academic outcomes were closely tied to perceptions of competence.

Participants reported that comparing themselves to peers influenced their self-esteem. Bella shared that seeing others appear more organized sometimes led to self-doubt. Social comparison was often heightened during the first semester of college. Several participants described changes in self-esteem as evolving over the first year. As students adapted and gained experience, confidence increased. Evelyn noted that "things got better as I learned how to

manage everything.” Self-esteem fluctuated throughout the first year of college and was influenced by independence, academic experiences, peer comparison, and modification over time.

Participants described managing academic responsibilities and individual well-being as an ongoing and evolving process. Grace stated that she was “still figuring out how to balance everything,” while Marcus explained that priorities frequently shifted depending on workload. Balance was viewed as dynamic rather than fixed. Participants consistently identified stress management as essential to success. Shelby explained that “learning how to manage stress is just as important as learning how to manage time.” Several participants described building coping strategies such as planning ahead or splitting tasks into smaller steps.

Participants described engaging in intentional wellness activities, including taking breaks, exercising, and seeking social support. Robin noted that taking a break from work helped her “reset and come back focused.” These practices were viewed as acquired habits rather than automatic habits. Penelope also stated, “It’s ok to take a break and focus on yourself, then get back to the task at hand”.

Participants clearly linked life skills to mental health outcomes. Amy explained that “when my time management was poor, my mental health definitely suffered,” while others described improved psychological well-being when balance was maintained. Participants viewed life skills as essential to juggling academic demands and maintaining positive mental health.

***Theme 4: What Colleges Should Be Doing***

This theme represented the opinions of the participants on what colleges should be doing when it comes to the learning and improvement of life skills. Across the board, participants revealed that if colleges were to do anything, it should be totally up to the student to decide. The programs and programming should be optional for the student and not mandatory, not a class, or even part of a class. The participants expressed very strong opinions during this part of the interview.

The participants also expressed the stigma of asking for help especially during the first year. Having resources more utilized and more visible on campus is what students prefer. Many participants had a preconceived notion that asking for help was a more negative thing than a positive thing. Additionally, being nervous to ask for help usually resulted in students figuring it out themselves, not utilizing student services and also learning to become aware what colleges offered to students outside the classroom.

**Sub-Theme: Optional and Flexible Programming** Participants emphasized that life skills programming should be available without being mandatory. Marcus stated that students should be able to “choose what they need,” while others expressed concern that required programming might feel punitive or unnecessary. Flexibility was viewed as essential to learner involvement. While participants acknowledged that colleges should provide support, they generally did not expect colleges to serve as primary instructors of life skills. Robin stated that colleges “should help if students need it,” yet stressed that students should already have basic skills. Participants favored optional resources rather than required programming. Emma stated that “there should be opportunities available for students, but they shouldn’t be mandatory”. Participants described life skills education as a shared responsibility, with families laying the foundation, schools bridging

shortcomings, and colleges providing optional support. Participants also stated that, since the development of life skills is ongoing, colleges should certainly offer classes, workshops, or seminars to students.

**Sub-Theme: Practical and Relevant Content** Participants expressed strong interest in programming focused on everyday use, including budgeting, time management, stress management, and self-care. Isabelle noted that workshops should focus on “things you actually deal with right now,” rather than abstract concepts. Some participants agreed with offering these workshops at orientation before the semester starts and throughout the first year.

**Sub-Theme: Asking for Help is Normal** Several participants emphasized that colleges should work to normalize seeking help for life skills. Amy explained that students might avoid resources because they feel “like they’re supposed to already know how to do this.” Normalizing support was seen as critical to reducing stigma. Participants consistently reported that existing resources were underutilized due to a lack of awareness. Shari stated that “the school probably has stuff, but no one really talks about it.” Strengthened communication and outreach were suggested as solutions. Participants supported optional, practical, and visible life skills programming that normalizes help-seeking and meets students where they are.

#### ***Theme 5: Life Skill Importance According To College Students***

This theme represented what life skills mattered most to students. Time management was overwhelmingly the life that was the most popular among the participants. Many participants agreed without time management, they would not succeed inside and outside the classroom. In between assignments and other extracurricular activities, time management is key to success. Other important themes which are explained below that students mentioned were financial

responsibility and self-advocacy. These three life skills were the most important to students currently in their second year.

**Sub- Theme: Time Management, Financial Responsibility, and Self-Advocacy** Time management was consistently identified as the most important life skill at this stage. Carrie stated that “time management affects everything,” while others stressed its role in lowering stress and preserving balance. Participants highlighted the crucial role of managing emotions amid academic and personal pressures. Jiya explained that emotional self-management helped her “stay focused instead of shutting down.” These skills were viewed as critical to toughness. Financial skills, including budgeting and managing expenses, were described as increasingly important. Priya shared that financial responsibility mattered more now because “you’re paying for things yourself.” Participants viewed financial literacy as essential to long-term independence.

Several participants identified self-advocacy as an important life skill. Alyssa explained that knowing when and how to ask for help was essential to success. This theme reflects participants’ growing awareness of personal needs and available support. Participants prioritized life skills that support independence, psychological well-being, monetary steadiness, and effective self-advocacy.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings of lived experiences in life skills development from second year-students at a small, private Catholic university in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Chapter 5 compares the findings to existing literature and the theoretical frameworks of self-determination theory and social cognitive theory. This chapter will also

discuss real-world implications of practice in a college/university setting. Other things that will be discussed will be limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and concludes with a summary of the significance of the study in relation to higher education and student development.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

The findings of this study overwhelmingly revealed that life skills development did play a crucial role in the lives of first-year college students. Although many participants expressed having limited exposure to life skills curriculums in high school before entering college, and relied heavily on their family, simple trial-and-error, or support from fellow peers when developing life skills competency, they identified time management, financial literacy, communication, stress management, and communication as some of the most important life skills necessary to succeed inside and outside the classroom.

When participants first transitioned from high school into the first few weeks of their first semester in college, uncertainty and anxiety were present. Many noted they were living on their own for the first time and truly being independent-without the help or support from their family, however, after becoming more comfortable in their new routine, they noted an increase in self-esteem and self-efficacy. When participants were successful in balancing academic rigor along with personal and social responsibilities, a positive shift in self-esteem occurred as well.

The influence of social environments also led to an increase in life skills development. Interacting with new peers (e.g., roommates, classmates, and friends) eased their anxiety and stress and helped them realize they were not the only ones going through these changes and developments. Getting them to break out of their shells and engaging in new experiences led to an increase in their self-esteem. Additionally, when asked what colleges should be doing to assist

in first-year student life skill development, the participants overwhelmingly agreed they would go to workshops, seminars, etc. but only on a strictly voluntary basis, and did not want to be forced into taking a mandatory class or workshop. Collectively, these findings emphasized the importance of providing first-year students with accessible, relevant, and student-centered approaches to life skills development within higher education.

### **Relevance to Literature Review**

This qualitative study has shown many positive strengths and highlights consistent with themes found in the literature review, reiterating the importance of life skills development in a young adult's life. In chapter two provided discussion on the debate of the difficulty of teaching life skills. Lippman et al. (2015) found that despite widespread agreement on the importance of life skills like communication and decision-making, U.S. schools often lack the time and resources to implement these effectively due to competing academic priorities. More specifically, a school year is only 180 days out of the year, and every teacher had a set curriculum goals and expectations they must meet for themselves and for their respective departments. During the interviews, many of the participants agreed that there really wasn't time to teach life skills and most schools just taught the standard academic curriculum, while expecting students to learn life skills on their own.

Throughout the semi-structured interviews, various opinions of what students thought overall about the subject of life skills were shared both positively and negatively. Similar to Panorama Education's (2023) findings that 68% of recent graduates believed that courses with a focus beyond academics would better prepare them for adulthood, this sentiment was also found amongst many of the participants. Those who were not provided a life skills class in high school felt less prepared as well as uneasy and unsure about how exactly to tackle the next chapter in

their lives; going to college. Those that did have a life skills class felt somewhat more prepared to tackle the challenges of going to college and being independent. While the participants still relied on their parents/guardians or other resources when outside the classroom, the overall opinion about the benefits of learning life skills was consistent throughout the data. Even students who had prior classroom knowledge dedicated to life skills learning still felt it was secondary to the learning of primary academics. Since many school districts do not offer a life skills class or workshop, the responsibility for who should teach life skills to students is up for debate.

One of the earlier questions in the interviews asked that exact question. Students said it should be equally taught by parents/guardians and also teachers. The students felt both parties were responsible for teaching life skills, inside and outside the classroom. As Steinberg (2014), stated, adolescence is a critical period for acquiring life skills, and while family environments play a role, schools must act intentionally during this developmental window to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students. The other tough notion is that not all schools and school districts are equitable, same with family lifestyles. Students who may not come from the best family situation outside the classroom may heavily rely on their teachers to provide some type of life skills education inside the classroom. Without adequate time to learn and process information in and out of the classroom, students may potentially struggle to thrive in the next chapter of their lives. This was another topic brought up during the interviews with the research participants.

What colleges should be doing and offering was a very interesting topic to discuss with the research participants. Overwhelmingly, the opinion was to offer workshops, seminars, etc. but on a strictly volunteer basis. Students emphasized their participation in these events would

be totally up to them. If they were mandated to go to these events, they felt less students would attend and not likely be interested. Something very similar as shown in the literature review can be brought to reality. Texas Tech University has developed an "Adulting 101" workshop to teach students practical competencies, including budgeting, communication, conflict resolution, and healthy living. The course is rooted in a science-based approach and includes instruction in health, employability, and family management (Houey et al., 2020).

Offering these workshops not only benefits the student, but benefits the entire university. It shows the university has taken a proactive approach in the development of their students and cares not only what they learn inside the classroom, but outside the classroom equally. The research participants overwhelmingly agreed that workshops on financial management/literacy and time management/study management were essential to becoming a successful college student, but they thought balancing mental health was extremely important as well.

Another important point the research participants brought up was having these workshops be relevant to them. Bowers et al. (2015) found that digital tools can be especially effective in promoting communication, problem-solving, and goal-setting in adolescents. Instead of offering lecture-based workshops, colleges and universities can become very creative and offer a more interactive and hands-on approach with these offered workshops and seminars.

### **Relevance to Theoretical Perspective**

Seeing the many themes in the interviews with the research participants brings us back to the theoretical framework found in chapter 1. The two theories, self-determination theory and social cognitive theory are extremely relevant based on the findings in the interviews. We can start first with self-determination theory.

"Self-determination theory seeks to explain how being self-determined impacts motivation, that people feel more motivated to take action when they think that what they do will have an effect on the outcome" (Cherry, 2024). Students felt a sense of pride and hope in themselves when they were asked how they felt when they mastered a certain life skill. Whether that may be time management, financial management, or communication, across the board students felt a sense of pride in themselves. Students felt motivated when they were able to successfully manage academics and their social lifestyle. Checking everything off of their own checklist may seem miniscule, but this menial task meant the world to some students interviewed. This meant that they were able to successfully complete a set number of tasks in a given day and felt motivated and positive within themselves.

Other important aspects of self-determination theory are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When students had a sense of being in control of their actions (autonomy) and felt they could actually complete a skill (competence), and also understood that they weren't the only ones going through this and others were (relatedness), this can lead to an increase in overall self-esteem. When students were asked if there was a difference in their self-esteem compared to the beginning of the first year versus the end of the year, a major shift was seen but in a positive direction. Many students stated they felt shy and insecure during the first few weeks of the semester. When they got comfortable with themselves and with others (like joining a club, getting to know roommates, classmates), that is when this positive shift in self-esteem took place.

The other theory that was mentioned in the theoretical framework, social cognitive theory also had extremely high relevance to the students dealing with life skills development. Social cognitive theory, developed by Albert Bandura, provides a foundational framework for

addressing the research question. The theory suggests that people are not passive recipients of knowledge but actively shape their learning by interpreting their experiences and adjusting behaviors accordingly (APA, 2025). Social Cognitive theory emphasizes the acquisition of new skills and behaviors through social interactions and the various role models in one's life.

Many students mentioned that acquiring these new skills were first observed by their family members at home. This great starting point as a foundation of learning skills eventually led to more skills growth by observing their fellow peers on campus. Learning and education is a continuous process and having students mold these experiences into the young men and women they become is a fruitful experience. These social interactions, such as getting to know a group of new students both inside and outside the classroom, can include attending a campus involvement fair, participating in social events on campus, or building relationships with classmates in major-specific courses.

Self-efficacy is a key component of social determinism theory (APA, 2025). Self-efficacy, or the belief in one's capacity to complete tasks, were shown time and time again during the interviews. When students talked about learning or mastering a life skill, an increase in their self-esteem and self-efficacy was demonstrated through an inflection in their voices and body language. Students were proud to talk about these experiences and it showed how much they had grown during this extremely important stage in their life. Observing and interacting with other students throughout the first year of college helped alleviate some of the concerning behaviors that many first-year students exhibit.

*Figure 3: Study Participant Actions and Experienced Emotions Related to the Intersection of Social Cognitive and Self Determination Theories*



The above graphic displays proactive actions and experienced emotions from study participants related to the intersection of Social Cognitive and Self Determination theories when reflecting on their first-year experience. As seen in the literature, as a student begins their first year, many emotions and “firsts” may arise like being the first time away from home. Homesickness and the yearning for family comes naturally to students.

Frequently asking parents/guardians or other family members for help may be expected. When students start to become confident in themselves and experience new things, self-efficacy and self-esteem may begin to improve. As mentioned before, for most of the participants’ interviews, the first few weeks of the semester, participants were trying to get used to this new chapter in their lives. Navigating campus, experiencing living in a dorm, forming new friendships inside and outside the classroom are just some of the things these students experience within the first few weeks of the first semester during college.

As students started to get in a “new routine” and feel confident and comfortable with themselves, a shift in self-esteem and self-efficacy happened. By participating in various events

on campus, getting to meet their new professors/academic advisors, getting to know their new classmates in their major, etc. are just some of the ways self-esteem was improved and confidence boosted within students.

For first-year college students, involvement is particularly significant as it can significantly speed up the transition process from dependence to independence. If students are not actively involved, they may find it difficult to acquire the motivation (Social Determination Theory) and the confidence (Social Cognitive Theory) they need to cope with the challenges of college life. On the other hand, students who are actively involved can enjoy a symbiotic process whereby the environment provides the psychological needs and the motivation they need to get more involved, and the more they get involved, the more they can boost their self-efficacy. This synergy can ultimately contribute to the internalization of life skills and can therefore endure long after the first year of college is over. Thus, the synergy between social cognitive theory and social determination theory, which can be enhanced with student involvement, provides a strong theoretical model of the potential of the institution to promote the long-term development of first-year college students.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

This qualitative study has several implications of practice, especially at the higher education level. Students feel they need life skills in their lives, so colleges and universities can make it accessible on their campus. Having seminars, workshops, and other events open to students at their own discretion, rather than making them mandatory, as described in the findings is the preferred option for students.

Colleges and universities can host events that deal with time management, study habits/skills, leadership skills, communication skills, etc. Various departments across campuses

such as student affairs, residence life, student success, and career services can benefit by combining forces and hosting these events together.

Another possible implication of practice is combining these workshops that deal with life skills but also combining peer mentoring. Hearing from students who have gone through the same experiences can be encouraging to those very new to the campus community. For example, getting to know upperclassmen in their own major or having conversations with the students' own resident assistant can potentially foster new relationships. Having these events can hopefully bolster and improve students' self-esteem.

Currently during the Spring 2026 semester, this small, Catholic private university is taking a bold initiative in helping students succeed and achieve outside the classroom. A series of workshops and seminars are being hosted by various members of the university community. Topics ranging from stress management, time management, mental health, and self-esteem are being addressed at these workshops. The Office of Student Engagement is the department that is spearheading these workshops across campus. The workshop is called: *Foundations for Success: A Workshop and Seminar Series*. This workshop and seminar series will focus on practical, transferable skills that help students become more effective learners, communicators, and emerging professionals. "Topics may include areas such as writing for the workplace, communicating with faculty, academic self-management, professional expectations, and other skills that support persistence, confidence, and engagement. This idea has come about based on cross-departmental conversations" (Farrell, personal communication, 2026).

Other initiatives being done on this campus also include the School of Global and Business Innovation. Dr. Amy Washo, an accounting professor is spearheading this initiative during the spring 2026 semester. "The Accounting and Finance Club will present *Launch*:

*Financial Foundations for the Future* which replaces our former name, *Adulting 101*. Our club decided on a name change to better align with our audience which includes not only traditional students preparing to graduate, but also students at any level of study, graduate students, international students, faculty, and staff. The idea behind *Launch* is that everyone, regardless of their level of financial knowledge, can benefit from attending the programs” (Washo, personal communication, 2026). Topics that will be covered during these sessions are: Debt: Loans and Credit Scores, Tax Planning and Tricks, Budgeting strategies, Income Tax 101, etc. These sessions are taught by experts in the accounting and finance fields.

Offering these wide arrays of workshops and seminars brings real world relevancy and the option for students to choose to attend these sessions instead of making these mandatory. Having these sessions open to the entire student community shows the importance and relevance of these topics to college students. They are extremely beneficial to all who participate and it shows that the university is taking an extra step at offering these various sessions outside the classroom.

### **Limitations of Study**

This study primarily focused on the life experiences of second-year students in relation to life skills and their self-esteem and self-efficacy. Students who have been in college for longer than one year may provide more depth and insight into their experiences than those who have completed only their first year of college. This study heavily relied on interviews of second-year students, and their answers may not be genuine. Students may think the interviewer wants to hear a specific answer and have a bias or recall bias, which can make it difficult for them to remember a time when they used life skills.

A qualitative design may provide some subjectivity bias when analyzing and coding results from the student interviews. The various themes and coding the researcher compiled may be subjective, based solely on their thoughts but supported with accepted data analysis procedures. Different researchers may interpret the results differently, leading to inconsistencies in the findings. This study focused exclusively on one school within a specific region of the United States. Focusing solely on one small university in Northeastern Pennsylvania may not yield results that can be generalized for all college students. College students at a much larger institution may have different experiences with life skills. The findings of this qualitative study cannot be generalized to the larger population.

#### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study can continue the importance of life skills well beyond just the first year of college. Further researching students in their second, third, fourth, and even graduate levels of study can be beneficial. An example can be comparing students' self-esteem to their first year in college compared to their last. Another possible study can be comparing students' self-esteem in high school compared to their last year in college. There are many variations researchers can conduct while investigating students and self-esteem.

A quantitative study seeing what specific life skills changes students' perceptions and increased or decreased self-esteem can possibly be another future study. Researching the relationship between self-esteem outcomes and specific life skills can be up for discussion and another topic for future research. Other topics taken can be studied in the future can be looking at specific student populations when it comes to self-esteem and self-efficacy. The various student populations that can be studied can be populations such as, student ambassadors, student athletes, resident-assistants, active students in various clubs and organizations, and even students in

fraternities and sororities. Other specific populations that can be studied can be race, gender, commuter students, resident students, first generation students as well.

### **Conclusion**

The results underscored students' experiences of being able to live and understand life skills development and adjustment to college life as being deeply intertwined. Students spoke to their experiences of entering college with different degrees of readiness, often exemplified by a lack of certainty and a sense of anxious self-doubt. Students also highlighted their relative lack of exposure to life skills instruction or training prior to attending college and learned many fundamental life skills, like managing their schedules wisely, being financially prudent, effective communicators, and managing stress at times through trial and error during their freshman year.

All participants expressed awareness of a positive relationship that existed between the development of life skills and their self-esteem and self-efficacy levels. As the life skills emerged within the aspects of their time management, the use of campus resources, communication skills, as well as how to handle stress on campus, the respondents tended to gain greater self-confidence that enabled them to function independently. This helped the respondents to develop a sense of self-efficacy as they felt positive about themselves, impacting their self-esteem.

Further, it was revealed that self-esteem and self-efficacy were not permanent personality characteristics, but they developed in relation to the development of life skills in students. Through the experiences of successful outcomes, such as juggling university and social life, or overcoming personal struggles, participants agreed that these moments were turning points in their self-confidence and self-efficacy. The experiences of the participants offer direct support

for the importance of life skills development in influencing self-perceptions among first-year college students, and thus fully answer the research question.

The theoretical approaches of self-determination theory and social cognitive theory also helped to achieve additional clarification in connection with the results obtained. The experiences and aspects presented by the students indicated a significant connection in relation to the three main elements of self-determination theory, involving aspects of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Through having the autonomy and freedom to conduct various responsibilities, and also by experiencing feelings of competence with reference to the possession and application of life skills, the students were able to exhibit a high sense of self-worth. Social cognitive theory was also clearly exhibited by the students, who discussed the acquisition of life skills mainly by means of observing and mimicking others.

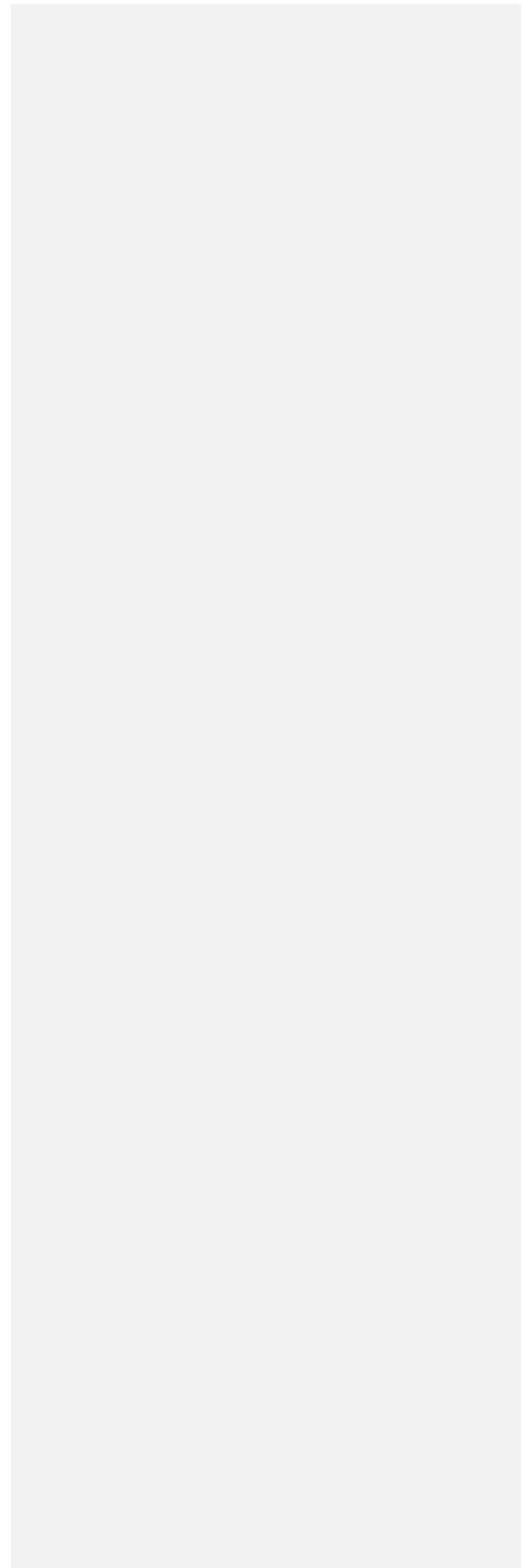
As a result of the connection between the student stories and the literature, the present study adds to the existing literature on the significance of the development of life skills as one of the crucial factors in the student success model while providing a new aspect as a qualitative research design. The research results also contribute to the existing literature in that those students who have less developed life skills upon entry into college face more difficulties in the beginning. Still, these results show that there are many chances for improvement as students advance through their college education.

In conclusion, this study provided a comprehensive answer to the question it poses by showing that second-year college students have a gradual and experiential process of life skills development that is intertwined with their self-esteem and self-efficacy. The importance of providing a life skills program in college life cannot be overstated. By providing a life skills program for college students, colleges and universities can help students become confident and

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self-directed individuals who are better equipped to deal with the challenges of college and adulthood.



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## Appendix A

### *Appendix A- Approved Recruitment Email*

This message is being sent on behalf of Edward Perry ([edperry@marywood.edu](mailto:edperry@marywood.edu)):

Dear Student,

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Edward Perry, and I am a student in the PhD program at Marywood University. The title of my dissertation topic is, "Navigating the First

Year: Exploring College Students' Lived Experiences with Life Skills Development." I am looking for second-year students, who are over the age of 18 to participate in a qualitative study on my dissertation topic. You may participate in the study if your freshman year started in Fall 2024 and as of the Fall 2025, you are currently a sophomore.

This study aims to understand better second-year students' experiences with life skills (such as financial literacy, time management, communication, problem solving etc.) and how they relate to students'; self-esteem and self-efficacy. I will be conducting interviews virtually via Google Meet. Each interview will last approximately thirty to forty-five minutes and will ask ten open- ended questions. Why Participate?

- Being able to self-reflect on yourself during a critical transition period in your life being the first year of college
- Share your personal experiences about the subject at hand
- All responses will remain confidential

Participation Requirements

- Students currently in their sophomore year (Fall 2025) and their first year of college studies started in Fall 2024 (freshman year).

Exclusion Requirements

- Student Ambassador employees in the admissions office

If you are interested in participating, please contact Edward Perry at [edperry@maryu.marywood.edu](mailto:edperry@maryu.marywood.edu). Feel free to reach out if you have any questions or would like further information.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to contribute to my research! Edward Perry [edperry@marywood.edu](mailto:edperry@marywood.edu), 570-348-6234 ex 2498

Assistant Director of Undergraduate Admissions- Marywood University

**Appendix B***Appendix B: List of Interview Questions*

1. When you hear the word life skills, what pops into your head? Can you please explain in detail in your own words?
2. Can you please describe any experiences you had in high school, maybe through classes, clubs, or even at home, that helped you start learning life skills?
3. Thinking about your own experience, please describe when you think life skills should start being taught and why do you feel this is the best time?
4. Can you please describe in detail who you think is responsible for teaching life skills?
5. Please explain in detail when you learned or mastered a life skill, like managing your time or handling money, and it really clicked for you. How did that make you feel?
6. Please describe in detail what you think colleges should be doing when it comes to helping students learn life skills. Have you seen anything helpful, or is there something you wished they offered?
7. Starting college using comes with a lot more independence. Can you please describe in detail how that shift affected you when it comes to learning life skills and managing things on your own?
8. Please explain further how you balance your schoolwork with learning things like managing stress, staying organized, or taking care of yourself. Also, can you please explain If you think there's a connection between that balance and your mental health?
9. Looking back at your first year of college, and the possible changes in your self-esteem, can you please explain what you think might have influenced that (your self-esteem)?

10. Can you please explain what life skill or skills you feel are most important to you and can you also further explain why you think those matter the most at this point in your life?

