**When systems fail: seeking resilience within**

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Exquisite Williams finds herself in the pages of fantasy novels.

A fan of the *Percy Jackson* book series since age ten, she imagined the book’s heroic characters as Black like herself when she read the stories.

She didn’t have to rely solely on fantasy novels to find wonder once she got to college. Her sophomore year at Louisiana State University started as a fairytale. The English and communication studies student watched her LSU Tigers beat Clemson to win the College Football Playoff National Championship. She had a close-knit group of friends who spent their nights studying outside together. She was preparing to head abroad for a spring break trip to Germany with one of her classes.

In March 2020, the 22-year-old first-generation honors student’s storyline took a turn. She and her six siblings were soon sharing beds and searching for rooms to study in in their small childhood home.

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Harriet Hunt, 22, an aerospace engineering graduate from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, faced an uphill battle prior to the pandemic. She finished her first semester in fall 2018 with a 2.33 GPA.

During her sophomore year, she dealt with an abusive relationship. She then changed her scenery and studied abroad in Madrid her spring semester. Her days were full of aerospace classes; her nights were spent sending evidence to Title IX case coordinators a continent and time zones away.

Instead of shutting down internally, Hunt turned to [social media](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/harriet-hunt_womeninstem-engineering-graduate-activity-6932839332273676288-0dM_/?utm_source=linkedin_share&utm_medium=ios_app) to share her struggles in case anyone else needed to hear they were not alone in their failures. “I think that’s the first feeling people get, especially if they fail a class, it's very easy to feel isolated, especially from your peers,” she said.

Soon, that isolation would be exacerbated. The pandemic hit, so Hunt left Madrid and came back home to Illinois. She met a host of difficulties in learning normally hands-on aerospace classes online over her junior year.

“That’s when I take my really heavy aerospace classes,” said Hunt. “I feel like I have a gap in my learning compared to the ones I took in person.”

But there was a drive in her.

Hunt is working at NASA as a flight controller this fall.

Williams is heading to Oklahoma State University for a graduate program in creative writing.

It’s resilience that got them there.

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The class of 2022’s pandemic college experience was sandwiched between periods of relative normality. Their freshman year, beginning in the fall of 2018, was fully in-person. College courses moved online in March 2020 during the second semester of their sophomore year. This spring, most have had in-person graduation ceremonies, unlike [previous classes](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/04/26/mega-graduations-celebrate-classes-thwarted-covid-19) affected by the pandemic.

However, Williams felt cheated that her class lost large swaths of those middle years to online classes.

“Losing your sophomore and junior year is probably the worst thing to happen to you,” she said. “That’s when your friendships really solidify.”

Missing out on this interpersonal connection due to isolation led college students to further value their social relationships, sociologists at Harvard noted in a [longitudinal study looking at college student attitudes before and during the pandemic](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953622001964?via%3Dihub#!). In July of 2020, 80% of their respondents expressed “an appreciation for empathy, cohesion, and common purpose.” College students were craving community heading into the fall semester of 2020.

Although many students returned to campus, it was not easy to find this connection. Normal systems students and society depend on, such as the health care system, supply chain system and university institutions were disrupted heavily by the pandemic. Students had to get creative to stay resilient.

“Resilience depends on many processes, and any individual's capacity for resilience comes from many other systems and people,” said Anne Masten, a professor of child development at the University of Minnesota, who researches the resilience of systems that support young people. “We kind of take for granted how many systems we depend on, but our capacity to manage stress and to get along in the world depends on many other systems we are connected to.”

There were times that Hunt and Williams reached out to systems for support during the pandemic – some were helpful, some not so much.

Williams had a dispute with a friend and tried to get an appointment at LSU’s counseling center. “I had a mental crisis and I signed up to get [an appointment] and they saw me like two months after it was over,” said Williams. She and the friend were able to pull on their own strength to make up before needing to see a counselor.

Hunt also sought mental health resources. While she says her school’s Title IX office was not especially helpful, she found community through the Women’s Resource Center. They connected her to group therapy for students suffering from PTSD.

“I actually ended up not sharing a whole lot myself, but just kind of being there in the presence of a support group was really helpful at the time,” Hunt said.

Williams said she felt isolated during her junior year especially. She lived on campus and with one of her closest friends as a roommate, but only saw other people at her three jobs she worked on top of school.

She needed to get lost in books again.

“I was like, I need to combat this isolation somehow, someway, so I started a book club on campus with the Black students in the honors college,” Williams said.

The book club with other Black students soon fostered a community for Williams that she had been missing not only in pandemic-initiated isolation, but at a predominantly white institution like LSU. She so loved discussing Black-centered fantasy stories, so she created [a podcast](https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/our-moment-a-literary-podcast/id1587788673) as an online version of the book club.

She plans to stay connected to the younger Black students leading initiatives she started. “A lot of the things we wanted to do properly couldn’t get done because of COVID restrictions,” Williams said. “I’m still going to be micromanaging from beyond.”