

The danger of fetishizing failure in the academy

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ADVENTURES IN ACADEME

Normalizing failure without taking a hard look at the system within which it happens may do more harm than good.

By JESSICA RIDDELL | AUG 08 2018

In the past few years, the business world has increasingly embraced failure. Entrepreneurs, once coy about past losses and missteps, now flaunt their failures like badges of honour. The idea of “failing upward” has become a recurring motif in [blog posts](#), [TED Talks](#), business conferences and [self-help books](#) – and this fetishization of failure has started to infiltrate the world of higher education.

Stanford University hosts an annual event called [Stanford, I Screwed Up!](#) that celebrates “the epic failures in our lives.” The [Success-Failure Project](#) at Harvard University is a forum for “discussion, reflection, understanding, and creative engagement regarding issues of success and failure.” The [Princeton Perspective Project](#) is designed to make students “more resilient by understanding that failure is a natural part of the path to success.”



Photo by Estée Janssens on Unsplash.

Failure is a key component of the learning experience. However, if we normalize failure without taking a hard look at the system within which failure happens, we may be doing more harm than good.

My own failure pendulum has swung quite dramatically in the past two decades. Recently, I have started to acknowledge that my first foray into university was a spectacular failure. My first transcript was littered with Ds and Fs and a whole host of incompletes. After two years of wandering aimlessly, partying prodigiously and “angsting” as only a 19-year-old can do, I quit school. When I returned to university, I tackled coursework with a singular focus and my second transcript yielded straight As.

Fast-forward 20 years and students, during academic advising sessions, often exclaim, “Please don’t judge me by my transcript!” In fact, it was happening with such frequency that I had both of my undergraduate transcripts framed to hang, side by side, in my office. I hoped students would look at these two transcripts and recognize that you can be the same person in two very different contexts but equally worthy of care and support.

Smith College, in their year-long [Failing Well program](#), emphasizes this point with a certificate of failure that states:

“You are hereby authorized to screw up, bomb or fail at one or more relationships, hookups, friendships, texts, exams, extracurriculars or any other choices associated with college herein, wherefore, and evermore ... and still be a totally worthy, utterly excellent human.”

My initial premise was that we can’t ask students to embrace failure when we aren’t willing to do so ourselves. However – and here is where it gets messy – my attempt to model failure has the potential to backfire if it isn’t carefully framed (pun intended). What I was inadvertently telling students with my cheeky art installation was that their failures don’t matter as long as they eventually succeed – and that success is narrowly defined as excellent grades. As a stand-alone, the dual transcripts erase the personal cost of failure, downplay the professional risks, ignore the material consequences and promote a triumphal narrative that does everyone a disservice.

Furthermore, not all people have the luxury to fail equally. Research into teaching evaluations (itself a complicated area of investigation) reveals that age, gender, race and sexual orientation might play a significant role on instructors’ scores. As a young female academic, I wouldn’t have dreamed of undermining my credibility – and for many within the professoriate, especially marginalized and under-represented members of our communities, the “failing upward” motif is downright dangerous.

Finally, if we ask individuals to embrace failure without overhauling the institutional systems that do not recognize or value messy journeys, we are being deeply irresponsible. When we tell students to embrace failure without finding other ways to evaluate learning, we are being disingenuous. When we tell students to celebrate “epic failures” without rethinking pathways to graduate school or employment opportunities, we are risking their futures. When we tell professors to model failure without revising the processes for tenure, review and promotion,

we are punishing innovators and outliers.

In my own work I now use the dual transcripts as a starting point into a series of conversations with students and faculty about how we define success beyond grades, how we build in reflective practices that value the messiness connected with transformation, how we create ecosystems of support for students and faculty, and how we can invite failure into the conversations without fetishizing it. We can all fare better by failing better.

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