

Teaching Failure as Opportunity

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Colleges can not only help students past their immediate crises, writes Joseph Holtgreive, but also encourage them to unlock capacity that they didn't know existed and ways of tapping into it.

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By

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A few years ago I received a call from a concerned father of one of our first-year engineering students. His daughter was failing chemistry and, for the first time in her life, she wasn't able to work her way out of the problem. He said, "My daughter can't see a path that leads to success. As a father, if I can't help her find a path, her only opportunity is to fail."

Unfortunately, at places like engineering schools, where new students tend to be extremely bright and analytical, this problem is all too familiar. As adults, we know that surviving failure can be a valuable lesson in resilience and that the path to success isn't always clear or straightforward. We also know that in such moments of intense uncertainty, we have an opportunity to discover previously untapped reservoirs of performance.

Many college freshmen, however, have not been inoculated to the experience of failure. They are often the brightest and the best in their high schools. Through talent or hard work, they have never failed at anything. Frequently, we see that a factor in their success -- and their fear of failure -- is that they have "snowplow" parents who have been diligent about clearing every obstacle from their path.

The snowplow strategy, as well-meaning as it is, takes a toll on the very children these parents are trying to help. Instead of learning resilience and to trust in their capacity to respond in the face of uncertainty, students are trained to fixate on outcomes like grades. They often confuse quality with quantity and maximize the volume of their activities. They are conditioned to avoid situations where the outcome is unpredictable. Add to that the ever-growing demands for their attention and the newly acquired independence of college life, and it isn't difficult to see why a significant number of students who are used to mastering their lives feel overwhelmed -- even though they have the capacity to succeed in college.

How do we help today's college students learn that uncertainty is just another word for opportunity? How can we teach resilience and show our students how to choose the best path for themselves when failure is a possible outcome? The answer certainly doesn't lie in simply doing more of what worked in high school. If we do a good job of supporting these very intelligent young people at this critical juncture, we will not only help them past their immediate crises. We will also help them unlock capacity that they didn't know existed and ways of tapping into it.

At Northwestern University, we have developed a curriculum that includes a special emphasis on teaching engineering students how to deal with stress and cope with their fear of failure through mindfulness and

emotional intelligence. We do this in a number of different ways. For example, we work with colleagues across the campus to offer courses in areas like improvisation and swing dancing to teach students how to connect with themselves and others as they engage in and negotiate the challenges of collaborative problem solving.

We provide special counseling for undergraduates, like the distraught chemistry student I previously mentioned, designed to teach them how to be intentional with the questions they ask about their situation and how to live in the present moment nonjudgmentally instead of falling into self-criticism. One of the most troubling things I see revealed through students' uncertain moments, is the self-brutalizing nature of the stories they tell themselves. When I ask students who their most critical voice is, their answer is almost always "myself." Helping students understand there is no one correct path and that other people share their uncertainty enables them to let go of the judgment that fuels their fear of taking action.

These are just a few examples of how we teach emotional intelligence and the practice of mindfulness to help students develop a richer awareness of what they are experiencing in the present moment. Leveraging the channels of sensations, emotions and thoughts allows them to see more clearly just how judgment, in the form of unproductive stories and self-criticism, interferes with their ability to show up fully and strategically. We want to help our students master these channels of connection to enable them to be mindful engineers with accurate self-awareness and trained attention.

One particularly successful approach that we use to help our students develop a mindfulness-based way of responding to uncertainty is called PATH Advising. PATH (Personal Academic Tactical Help) is a structured way of encouraging students to tune in to their fictions, feelings and facts to allow them to see more clearly the reality of their situation. They can then begin crafting a strategy to reach their desired outcomes by managing constraints, leveraging resources and prioritizing other competing interests. Understanding that focusing their attention can enable them to use both their considerable intelligence and their intuition when it matters most gives them the confidence to redefine success for themselves.

The other day a young woman came to my office worried about her performance in a class. As we spoke it became clear that much of her anxiety centered on the impact that dropping or failing this class would have on her family. She told herself that not completing this class would add a year to her studies, which was an impossible outcome. We were able to reality test her assumptions, allowing her to realize she was much closer to graduating than she thought. Redirecting her attention from her fiction of failure to her desired outcome within the legitimate constraints she was facing allowed her to see multiple paths leading to success.

We teach them how to transform their fear of failure into opportunities. The metaphor I use is that of driving a stick shift. In high school, students drove around town just fine using first, second and third gear. But once they got to college, they needed to go faster. When they did this, they either redlined their engine or found a higher gear. Just as a clutch is needed to shift from one gear to the next, students transitioning from high school to college need to disengage from obsolete strategies in order to make room for new, more powerful ones.

Only through responding to a stressful situation can they find that next gear and a new level of performance and understanding. Once that new level is found, it's a tool that's always available to them going forward.

The first-year chemistry student who was overwhelmed by her fear of failure found a way to reach out and accept help in her new environment, transforming a sense of hopelessness into a C plus. Like so many students, she wasn't afraid of hard work; she was afraid that her efforts were futile. Needing help was a foreign experience for her, because she was always the one her peers sought out for help. Acknowledging her fear and learning that seeking and accepting help is not weakness but rather a sign of strength and a

skill to be developed allowed us to connect her with a tutor. It wasn't the A she wanted, but more important, she found the right move at the right time. Proving to herself that she had the capacity to respond in the face of uncertainty allowed her to find a path for lasting success.

Bio

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