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Character building through failure

Communication Values: proximity, human interest

Responding to failure in the academic world

Your stomach drops to the floor as every inch of your abdomen tightens with a million knots, almost distracting you from the large lump in the back of your throat and eyes welled with tears: this must be how it feels to fail.

There is no magic technique to cope with failure. Overcoming rejection, denial or simply a poor outcome surfaces a plethora of emotions from frustration to sadness.

In the academic world, students regularly face feedback that may be interpreted as failure. However, it is the response to poor outcomes that builds character and leads to long term happiness.

Every person wants to find success in their personal, academic or professional life. But often, failure comes before success. In fact, failure is nearly inevitable.

Alan Sorensen, an economics professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison often interacts with students facing failure, at both the undergraduate and doctoral levels. He believes that in certain scenarios, failure can be informative about a student's talents and interests.

While Sorensen has never failed an undergraduate student in an entire course, some of his doctoral students choose to leave the program in response to failing grades.

“Part of me feels bad when [leaving the program] is the outcome,” Sorensen said. “But in the long run, they’re going to be happier because they’re going to find something that is a better fit for their talents.”

Maggie Bartig, a data science undergraduate student at UW, faced a similar situation after denial from the business program. Bartig agreed that her inability to study business ultimately led to the discovery of her data-oriented skill set and the data science program.

“[My rejection from the business program] is what put me in the data science program,” Bartig said. “This is what I want to do.”

Sorensen also strongly advocates that students, specifically those studying toward their undergraduate degree, should not use a single failure as the ultimate indicator of what they’re capable of. Rather, failure can also be an indication of perseverance.

Joe Donovan, the founder and CEO of nation-wide communication firm The Donovan Group, refers to this perseverance through difficult instances as grittiness.

As a student, Donovan was not academically-oriented and struggled through high school and his first two years of undergraduate studies at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

Today, Donovan credits the completion of his education, including a master's in educational policy from UW-Madison, to his philosophy of grittiness.

“Over time, when I would experience setbacks, I convinced myself that nope, this is where I need to be gritty,” Donovan said.

Similar to Donovan, Sorensen believes that failure can also be used as a motivator for students. In an academic setting, failure motivates studying, preparation and learning.

While Sorensen has experience teaching at other universities like the University of California San Diego and the Stanford Business School, he is especially impressed by the work ethic of undergraduate students at UW.

“I’m really impressed actually by Wisconsin undergraduates how they take responsibility for their own performance,” Sorensen said. “At some schools when [students] fail an exam, they blame the teacher, teaching assistants or say something was wrong with the exam.”

[UW-Madison's course policies](#) allow instructors to fail students in a class, providing learners with a sense of motivation to continue working hard. Yet, a student still has the option to retake a course if they receive an unfavorable grade.

Teacher John Wesley Days Jr. instructed a class at the University of California Los Angeles using an Afro-Brazilian style of martial art, dance and philosophy [to reframe reality for students](#).

His lesson ultimately taught learners to be disciplined and avoid shortcuts when striving to achieve their goals by keeping life in perspective.

As Economics 101 is a prerequisite for application to the School of Business at UW, Professor Sorensen occasionally discusses admission with concerned students.

“Life is big and broad and long and there’s so many opportunities,” Sorensen says to those worried. “If this door closes, there will be 100 more that open.”

Sorensen observes that in comparison to his doctoral students, undergraduate students are much more focused, which in some instances is good. But oftentimes, these same people struggle to keep failure in perspective, and realize that life is long.

“There are going to be ups and downs and it’s all going to be fine,” said Sorensen. “Your college experience is just one small part of what is going to be a big, broad, interesting life.”

In his [commencement speech](#) to the graduating class of 2019 at Meharry Medical College, CEO of Henry Schein Inc, Stanley Bergman advised graduates to enjoy the journey of life, even the painful moments of failure.

“The process of overcoming our individual challenges is what made us what we are today,” Bergman said.

In a similar manner, Donovan believes that failure can be beneficial when it is approached in a constructive way.

“Failure is a state of mind,” says Donovan.

Nobody has truly failed solely because of an error, mistake, rejection or poor outcome. One has failed when the outcome is interpreted as only failure and nothing more.