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Hitting the Wall

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Hitting the Wall

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Much has been written over the last several years about the increase in the number of students who come to our campuses with behavioral disorders and under medication. While honors students are certainly not immune to these conditions, the more frequent emotional trauma we see them suffer is their first encounter with failure. Luckily, we can address this trauma successfully if we are prepared to do so. As honors faculty, we encourage intellectual risk, knowing from our own experience that failure may very well result but confident in the fact that learning also happens despite other outcomes, good or bad. Armed with this knowledge, one of the most important lessons we can teach our students is how to fail.

Our high-achieving students, as they emerge from their pre-baccalaureate education and childhood experience, typically reach us ill-equipped to fail. They have always had cheerleaders, parachutes, ribbons, and rewards to the extent that they consider even good performance inadequate. The first “B” grade can send such students into a tailspin, leading them to question their abilities and their very identities, which are often wrapped up in their definitions of success. Along with teaching our disciplines, then, we need to teach students a few lessons on how and why to fail.

LESSON 1: FAILURE IS ALWAYS AN OPTION

Adam Savage, one of the stars of the popular Discovery Channel show *Mythbusters*, has coined several pop culture idioms: “Am I missing an eyebrow?”; “I reject your reality and substitute my own!”; “Failure is always an option.” All have resonance for honors students. The pursuit of excellence carries with it both risk and reward, and the discovery of new knowledge may lead to internal and external conflict as students struggle to develop into the productive scholars, socially responsible citizens, and lifelong learners our mission statements promise they will become. Demonstrating to our students that one can fail at even the simplest things but that failing once does not necessarily indicate a pattern will free our students to take on greater challenges. Success is valuable precisely because it is not guaranteed.

LESSON 2: FAILURE IS A GOOD THING

Jon Carroll, in his essay for the *This I Believe* project, tells the story of his five-year-old granddaughter leaving for her first day of school: “I wished her success. I was lying. What I actually wish for her is failure. I believe in the power of failure” (47). If we can explain to our students that repeated success signifies a lack of challenge rather than a level of talent we can both equip them to deal with inevitable failures and encourage a greater level of risk. As Carroll points out, “Success is boring.” Accomplishments, especially those that are repeated and that come easily, indicate that one is not really learning much. If our students are not learning, we are failing at the mission of our universities and programs. Repeated success earns diminishing returns.

Conversely, when students learn the true *value* of failure, they might learn to embrace it, welcome it, and appreciate true accomplishments. They also learn that, just as there are degrees of accomplishment, there are degrees of reward; failure teaches students that intrinsic rewards are more important than public recognition. Recognizing intrinsic rewards requires perspective and maturity; failure helps us acquire those values.

LESSON 3: “THE IMPOSSIBLE WILL TAKE A LITTLE WHILE” OR THE 10,000-HOUR RULE

Accomplished musicians, athletes, and scientists all know one thing about success: it takes time. When students first enter our labs and studios, they often become frustrated by the standard of excellence expected at the college level. In high school, our high-achieving honors students were the stars; that performance gained them admittance to our programs but does not guarantee that they will remain on top. The competition is stiffer, and the expectation is heightened. Along with all the skills we teach, we need to teach patience and perseverance. Gladwell’s study of successful people in many professions demonstrates that a threshold of practice is necessary for virtuosity. Indeed, practice trumps talent in the pursuit of excellence, as the old joke about Carnegie Hall so aptly reminds us. Knowing that success takes time empowers students to take on more ambitious projects and to work patiently through the obstacles they encounter along the way.

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LESSON 4: RECOGNIZE THE WALL BEFORE YOU HIT IT HEAD-ON

Distance runners have numerous metaphors to describe the complete and utter exhaustion that sets in upon reaching the limit of one's training and endurance. My favorite of these metaphors is "hitting the wall." Sharing our own stories of the challenges we have faced and failures we have experienced communicates to students that failure is a shared experience and that even the experts at the front of the classroom have failed and have lived to tell the tale. The signs of impending failure, whether a lab experiment going awry or an "F" on a test, can often be recognized and prepared for in advance, thereby lessening the blow. Once students realize that they *will* fail, they are far more likely to see failure coming and are far more ready to deal with its consequences.

Four simple and obvious lessons in failure can prevent much of the emotional trauma that our students experience in our honors programs and colleges. Some of them do not hit their walls while they are still with us, but preparing them for those hits is among the most valuable training we can provide. Such preparation is also a good reminder for honors faculty and administrators that we, too, have those inevitable bad days in the classroom or office and that failure is an experience that connects us to our students.

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