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Failure 101: Colleges Teach Students How to Cope With Setbacks

Schools say students need help understanding that stumbles are inevitable, and even valuable, parts of growing up

Students walk through the Bentley University campus in Waltham, Mass.

By *Melissa Korn*

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Colleges nationwide are trying to instill in students a concept that seems contrary to encouraging excellence: It's OK to fail sometimes.

Vanderbilt University, Princeton University and other schools have workshops and post online vignettes with students and staff discussing their failures and moments of self-doubt, while University of Montana students post "Best Fail Ever" stories on bulletin boards around campus and Colorado State University has passed out thousands of stickers with inspirational quotes about resilience.

At the University of Central Arkansas, the two-year-old Fail Forward Week encourages faculty to talk about failure and show TED talks on the subject. Students write about their own failures, ranging from academic challenges to relationship woes, on large sheets of paper placed around campus.



Sheila Atiemo, 20, a junior at Bentley University, felt unmoored after realizing she didn't enjoy—and wasn't performing well in—an accounting class last year. 'I freaked out,' she said. PHOTO: KAYANA SZYMCZAK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

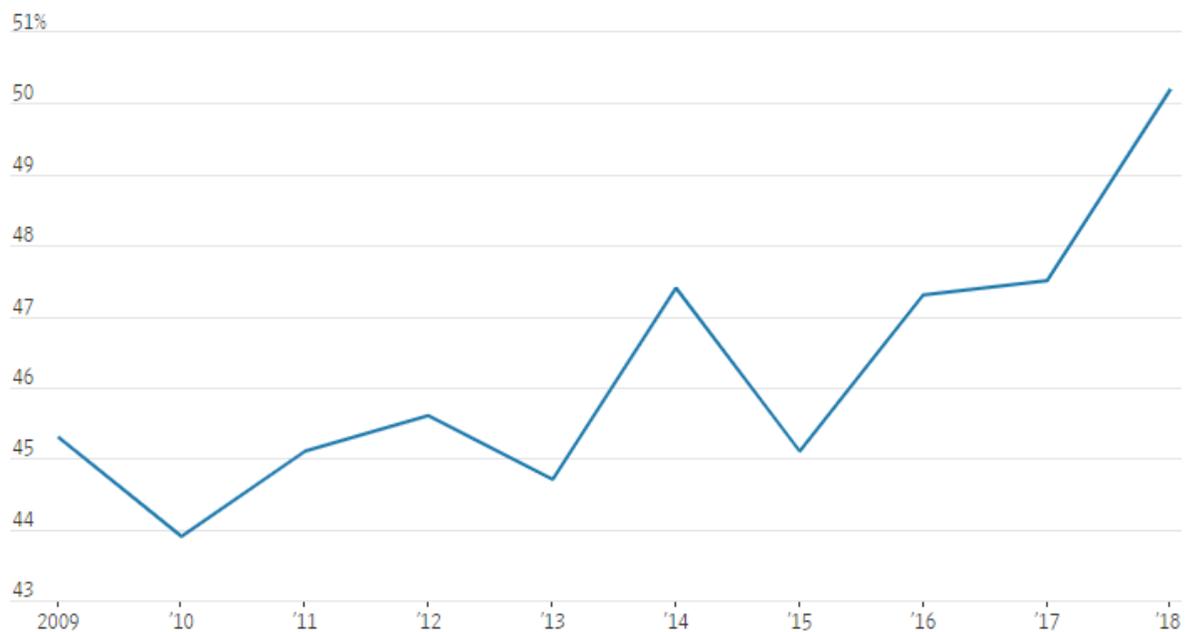
“We always painted failing a class or failing a test in a completely negative light, and we didn't give the space to say if this does happen, it's a moment in time, and here's the process by which you learn from it,” said Amy Baldwin, director of the department of student transitions.

The school's Office of Student Success [hands out certificates giving students and others permission](#) to screw up “and still be a totally worthy, utterly excellent human being,” according to the document.

Young adults face an onslaught of curated social-media feeds that show peers' seemingly perfect lives, school officials say, which can make them feel alone in their failures. Add to that the bubble of parental protection and the high stakes associated with attending a pricey college, and schools say students need help understanding that stumbles are inevitable, and even valuable, parts of growing up.

Academic Anxiety

Share of college graduates who said academics had been 'traumatic or very difficult for you to handle' in prior 12 months



Note: Responses are from spring survey each year

Source: American College Health Association National College Health Assessment

“Children do not become strong if they are protected from setbacks, teasing, exclusion and conflicts,” said Jonathan Haidt, a professor of ethical leadership at New York University’s Stern School of Business and author of “The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure.”

An American College Health Association survey last spring found that 52% of undergraduate respondents said academics had been “traumatic or very difficult to handle” within the prior 12 months, the highest rate since at least 2009.

Florida State University began requiring new students this year to complete an online program addressing stressors both big and small, ranging from witnessing violence as a child to roommate conflicts. Participants choose from an assortment of videos and audio clips, and narratives of students describing their own challenges and coping mechanisms are particularly popular.



University of Montana students post 'Best Fail Ever' stories on bulletin boards around campus. PHOTO: LAUREN NAYLOR

FSU sophomore Aaron Ostler says many classmates don't know how to digest and move on from moments of failure and can benefit from hearing about how classmates bounce back.

"They feel like if they do almost anything wrong, they've done everything wrong," said the 19-year-old biology major.

Mr. Ostler said he experienced "tunnel vision" about a bad grade in chemistry last year and briefly convinced himself he wouldn't get into medical school as a result.

Officials from many schools say they're trying to ease a resource crunch at their counseling centers, many of which have seen skyrocketing demand for services to help students with depression and anxiety.

Bentley University, in Waltham, Mass., is planning an event for next spring featuring staff and faculty discussing their own failures, and lessons learned.



Peter Forkner, director of the Bentley University counseling center, during a session with a student. PHOTO: KAYANA SZYMCZAK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Sheila Atiemo, a junior, says she felt unmoored after realizing she didn't enjoy—and wasn't performing well in—an accounting class last year. She previously got good grades and planned since high school to major in the field.

“I freaked out,” said Ms. Atiemo, 20. “The thing I feared most was not knowing what comes next.”

She also worried about what her peers would think. “Bentley is a very fast-paced, competitive school. People don't like to share their downfalls,” said Ms. Atiemo, who is now studying global management.

Peter Forkner, director of Bentley's counseling center, said the purpose of the spring event will be to help attendees accept and learn from failure.

"The truth is failure sucks," he said. "Failure feels bad. It's not something that we necessarily want to celebrate, it's just not something we need to feel so much shame over."