

Want to Get Into College? Learn to Fail

Commentary

By Angel B. Pérez

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- 1 I ask every student I interview for admission to my institution, Pitzer College, the same question, “What do you look forward to the most in college?” I was stunned and delighted recently when a student sat across from me at a Starbucks in New York City and replied, “I look forward to the possibility of failure.” Of course, this is not how most students respond to the question when sitting before the person who can make decisions about their academic futures, but this young man took a risk.
- 2 “You see, my parents have never let me fail,” he said. “When I want to take a chance at something, they remind me it’s not a safe route to take. Taking a more rigorous course or trying an activity I may not succeed in, they tell me, will ruin my chances at college admission. Even the sacrifice of staying up late to do something unrelated to school, they see as a risk to my academic work and college success.”
- 3 I wish I could tell you this is an uncommon story, but kids all over the world admit they are under tremendous pressure to be perfect. When I was traveling in China last fall and asked a student what she did for fun, she replied: “I thought I wasn’t supposed to tell you that? I wouldn’t want you to think I am not serious about my work!”
- 4 Students are usually in shock when I chuckle and tell them I never expect perfection. In fact, I prefer they not project it in their college applications. Of course, this goes against everything they’ve been told and makes young people uncomfortable. How could a dean of admission at one of America’s most selective institutions not want the best and the brightest? The reality is, perfection doesn’t exist, and we don’t expect to see it in a college application. In fact, admission officers tend to be skeptical of students who present themselves as individuals without flaws.
- 5 These days, finding imperfections in a college application is like looking for a needle in a haystack. Students try their best to hide factors they perceive to be negative and only tell us things they believe we will find impressive. This is supported by a secondary school culture where teachers are under pressure to give students nothing less than an A, and counselors are told not to report disciplinary infractions to colleges. Education agents in other countries are known to falsify student transcripts, assuming that an outstanding GPA is the ticket to admission.
- 6 Colleges respond to culture shifts, and admission officers are digging deeper to find out who students really are outside of their trophies, medals, and test scores. We get the most excited when we read an application that seems real. It’s so rare to hear stories of defeat and triumph that when we do, we cheer. If their perspectives are of lessons learned or challenges overcome, these applicants tend to jump to the top of the heap at highly selective colleges. We believe an error in high school should not define the rest of your life, but how you respond could shape you forever.

- 7 I've spent enough time in high schools to know teenagers will never be perfect. They do silly things, mess up, fall down, and lack confidence. The ability to bounce back is a fundamental life skill students have to learn on their own. The lessons of failure can't be taught in a classroom; they are experienced and reflected upon. During my weekend of interviews, another student told me, "I'm ashamed to admit I failed precalculus, but I decided to take it again and got a B-plus. I'm now taking calculus, and even though I don't love it, I'm glad I pushed through!" I asked him what he learned from the experience. "I learned to let go of shame," he said. "I realized that I can't let a grade define my success. I also learned that if you want anything bad enough, you can achieve it."
- 8 I smiled as I wrote his words down on the application-review form. This kid will thrive on my campus. Not only will the faculty love him, but he has the coping skills he needs to adjust to the rigors of life in a residential college setting. Failure is about growth, learning, overcoming, and moving on. Let's allow young people to fail. Not only will they learn something, it might even get them into college.

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