

It Shouldn't End With an F

by David Gooblar

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It is a truism that every failure contains a great opportunity to learn. This week's *Vitae* feature on failure contains a number of stories in which reckoning with failure is a crucial step on the path to success. So why is it that when students fail our courses, they're left, pedagogically speaking, on their own?

Most of the time, when we fail a student, it is the final act in the teacher-student relationship: We file the grades; the students deal with them (or don't). Why do we suddenly abandon these students at the moment of their greatest need?

It's pretty hard to fail one of my classes. I'm no pushover, but I do everything in my power throughout the term to reach out to struggling students, give extensions when warranted, and try to understand how to help. When I have to give out an F at the end of the semester (or even a D) it is often with deep regret and even antipathy. It can feel like a personal affront: After all I've done for you, you still couldn't do even the bare minimum?

That emotional reaction feels justified, doesn't it? The failing students have neglected their work, avoided multiple chances to right the ship, clearly did not satisfy the basic performance requirements. They've broken the implicit contract between teacher and student. Why should we go out of our way to try to reach kids who clearly don't care?

That's a perfectly valid response, and I don't begrudge anyone who wants to file the offending grade and walk away like an action star calmly ignoring an explosion. But something about the circumstance of aggrieved teacher and cast-out student bothers me — even though I've done the casting out on a number of occasions. I end up feeling like those students failed me, let me down, when in fact they only failed themselves (or, worse, it's I who has failed them). But hurt feelings are not a good basis for pedagogy, and their failure turns into a missed opportunity.

Last month, I wrote about why — instead of just pointing out the problems in student performance — we should look for the exceptions, and emphasize the moments when they are succeeding at something. That strategy is especially effective in dealing with our worst students. Behind my proposal in that column was a reminder that, if we are serious about teaching, we have just as much of a responsibility to our worst students as we do to the best ones.

What I want to suggest today is nothing radical, but flows from that responsibility: Reach out to students who failed your course, and invite them to sit down for a postmortem conference.

Faculty and students often have differing explanations as to why students fail. According to a series of studies reported in a recent paper, “Why Do Students Fail? Faculty’s Perspective,” students are most likely to blame their failures on a lack of motivation, whereas instructors most often see a lack of academic preparedness as the main culprit. What that disconnect should tell us is that it’s not always obvious why a student failed, and what he or she should learn from that failure.

When we discard these students, filing their grades and closing the book on the semester, we in effect tear up a semester’s worth of work. Students may turn to academic advisers or other mentors to reckon with a failed class, but it’s the instructors who are best placed to impart whatever lessons can be learned from that experience.

So reach out to these students one more time. Ask them to come for a meeting to discuss the semester. If a face-to-face meeting is impossible, have a conversation over email. Be explicit about your intentions — explain that you want to figure out what happened, and what the student can do in the future to prevent it from happening again. Resist the urge to expend a lot of energy justifying the grade, and instead focus on tangible steps the student can take going forward. It’s a simple step to try — one more time — to teach.

I know the summer break — if you get one — is calling to you. I know the last thing you want to do (besides plan for next semester) is deal with another “problem student.” But this period just after a course ends is the last chance you’ll get to make something of what otherwise might be a lost

semester. Don't turn your back on your worst students just yet. Otherwise, you'll end up failing them in more ways than one.

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