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## Telling students it's o.k. To fail, but showing them it isn't: Dissonant paradigms of failure in higher education

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# Telling Students it's O.K. to Fail, but Showing Them it Isn't: Dissonant Paradigms of Failure in Higher Education

## ABSTRACT

Educators increasingly extol failure as a necessary component of learning and growth. However, students frequently experience failure as a source of fear and anxiety that impedes risk-taking and experimentation. This essay examines the dissonance between these *generative* and *stigmatized* paradigms of failure, and it offers ideas for better negotiating this dissonance. After conceptualizing the two paradigms, I examine various factors that reinforce failure's stigmatization. I emphasize *precarious meritocracy*, a neoliberal ethos driven by hypercompetitive individualism that makes success a zero-sum game, and that causes especially significant harms on students who are already socially stigmatized. Efforts to ameliorate paradigm dissonance tend to focus on changing student dispositions or lowering the stakes of failure. I instead propose *wise interventions* that include analyzing the systemic roots of stigmatized failure and making failure a more communal experience. I then briefly address the systemic transformations necessary to cultivate generative failure more broadly.

## KEYWORDS

generative failure, stigmatized failure, meritocracy, precarity, wise interventions

## INTRODUCTION

In his *Insider Higher Ed* piece “Teaching to Fail,” mathematician and (now) Southwestern University President Emeritus Edward Burger (2012) articulates what I have elsewhere (Feigenbaum forthcoming) referred to as a *generative* understanding of failure's role in learning:

*Every idea from every discipline is a human idea that comes from a natural, thoughtful, and (ideally) unending journey in which thinkers deeply understand the current state of knowledge, take a tiny step in a new direction, almost immediately hit a dead end, learn from that misstep, and, through iteration, inevitably move forward. That recipe for success is not just the secret formula for original scholarly discovery, but also for wise, everyday thinking for the entire population. Hence, it is important to explicitly highlight how essential those dead ends and mistakes are—that is, to teach students the power of failure and how to fail effectively.*

From this viewpoint, failure can be uncomfortable, even frustrating, but it also provides opportunities for crucial feedback and growth. In fact, the feedback obtained from failing at a task or project might be *more* useful in the long run than if the outcome were declared “successful” right away. Like Burger and other SoTL practitioners (e.g., Ferrandino 2016; Kapur 2015; Lang 2013), I too seek to cultivate in students a generative understanding of failure. However, I have consistently encountered a major constraint. That

is, instead of generative failure, institutions of higher education yield emotionally and cognitively debilitating experiences of failure, or what I call *stigmatized failure*. I imagine many readers have similarly observed widespread apprehensions about failure among students, which impedes their willingness to challenge themselves intellectually and creatively, to explore multiple domains of knowledge, and to experiment with different potential career paths. This essay emerges from my efforts to better understand this *dissonance* between generative and stigmatized failure, and to help students and teachers better negotiate it.

Drawing on the work of Barr and Tagg (1995), I conceptualize a heuristic device that I call the paradigms of generative failure and stigmatized failure. Generative failure is learner-centered and process-driven, framing failure as a natural and formative process of experimentation that produces beneficial feedback. By contrast, stigmatized failure is institution-centered and grades-driven, rendering failure a summative judgment that has harmful economic, cognitive, and health-related consequences for individuals deemed to have failed, or even to be at risk of failing. Paradigm dissonance is shaped by material and sociocultural factors in the ecosystem of formal education, and it is felt most acutely by students who are already stigmatized by ethnicity, gender, class, legal status, sexual orientation, ability, or other intersectional layers of identity. Because I teach at a university in the United States, I situate my analysis primarily within American contexts, concentrating on how a hypercompetitive, neoliberal system of *precarious meritocracy* reinforces the stigmatization of failure. However, paradigm dissonance is an international phenomenon; in fact, precarious meritocracy is often a significant factor in countries where the stigmatization of failure is most salient.

Efforts to make failure generative usually focus on changing students' dispositions or on creating low-stakes experiences of failure in courses. However, I argue that these interventions do little to *de-stigmatize* failure, and they can potentially heighten dissonance among students who have been enculturated by stigmatization. Moreover, when such interventions are practiced without attention to broader socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional forces, they can be co-opted by the logics of precarious meritocracy and, in turn, reinforce neoliberal agendas. To be clear, I recognize the systemic obstacles to establishing learning spaces where failure is authentically generative for students; insofar as stigmatized failure reflects systemic problems, ameliorating it requires systemic solutions. Within the U.S., making failure less weighty for students on a mass scale would mean, among other transformations, establishing a secure social safety net so that students do not feel their potential to earn a living depends on each class they take. Nevertheless, because failure plays a key role in processes of teaching and learning—facilitating significant benefits in principle, but causing significant harm in practice—teachers must help students negotiate paradigm dissonance as it operates within their institutional contexts. After all, savvy students can see when the pedagogical values we as teachers espouse misalign with the institutional and cultural values students have confronted throughout their academic careers. While teachers have limited power to transform institutions, we can better align the messages we want to convey about failure with the messages students are likely to hear. Toward this end, I draw on Yeager, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, Apfel, Brzustoski, Master, Hessert, Williams, and Cohen's (2014) concept of *wise interventions* to suggest how educators can proactively reduce paradigm dissonance. In American contexts, this includes interrogating failure's de facto rootedness in an ethos of competitive individualism and envisioning an alternative ethos grounded in communalism. I conclude by briefly addressing the larger societal and cultural transformations necessary for establishing systemically generative failure.

## TWO PARADIGMS OF FAILURE

In juxtaposing two paradigms of failure, I draw on the gap that Barr and Tagg (1995) identified between higher education's espoused learning paradigm, according to which "college is an institution that exists *to produce learning*," and its in-use instruction paradigm, according to which "college is an institution that exists *to provide instruction*" (p. 13, emphasis in original). For Barr and Tagg, institutions of higher education—as an interrelated collective of teachers, administrators, departments, majors, courses, and so on—claim to uphold the learning paradigm, but in practice they operationalize the instruction paradigm. I argue that a similar gap, or what is essentially a microcosm of the gap emphasized by Barr and Tagg, has emerged regarding the pedagogical function of failure. That is, institutions of higher education espouse generative failure, which is ideologically aligned with the learning paradigm, but they operationalize stigmatized failure, which is ideologically aligned with the instruction paradigm. Following Barr and Tagg, I recognize that institutional paradigms are neither all-encompassing, nor are they dichotomous. For example, although the authors associate lectures with the instruction paradigm, they make clear that the learning paradigm "does not prohibit lecturing... Lecturing becomes one of many possible methods, all evaluated on the basis of their ability to promote appropriate learning" (15). Similarly, I suggest that the paradigms of generative and stigmatized failure represent a spectrum of practices and student responses to these practices. Even within environments where failure is heavily stigmatized, some students might sustain a generative orientation, and vice versa. Nevertheless, though painted with broad brushstrokes, the paradigms provide a useful heuristic for considering why efforts to cast failure as a positive learning experience can backfire, instead provoking fear and anxiety among students who have been conditioned to perceive failure in negative terms.

### **Generative failure: Embracing the struggle of learning**

By generative failure, I refer to processes where an individual's or group's efforts in a particular domain of assessment do not produce, at least initially, clearly defined metrics of success such as a desired grade, test score, or other recognition of achievement, but that do produce useful feedback associated with enhanced learning and, in most cases, continued engagement in that domain. Broadly understood, generative failure reflects an orientation in which mistakes, errors, and setbacks represent temporary, healthy, and integral components of any learning process. Generative failure thus projects three key principles:

1. Getting new things right means first getting them wrong, and the more complex the skill or task is, the more frequently one will get things wrong;
2. Processes of intellectual and creative innovation are iterative and messy; and
3. Embracing this messiness, and the feedback that emerges from it, is crucial to learning, growth, and to pursuing a productive and happy life.

Generative failure is consistent with *desirable difficulties*, the idea that cognitive exertion is key to how deeply students engage course material, how much they retain, and how effectively they transfer this learning to other contexts (Carey 2014; Lang 2013). According to this concept, students learn more profoundly in the long term when they struggle more in the short term. The links between desirable difficulties and failure are evident, for example, in mathematics professor Manu Kapur's (2015, 52) pedagogy of *productive failure*, which he describes as a "learning design that affords students opportunities to generate representations and solutions to a novel problem that targets a concept they

have not learned yet, followed by consolidation and knowledge assembly where they learn the targeted concept.” Although students are typically “unable to generate or discover the correct solution(s) by themselves,” the process “can be productive in preparing them to learn better from the subsequent instruction that follows” (52). Productive failure demonstrates that struggling to find an answer, even when the answer proves incorrect, can enhance learning.

Generative failure is also consistent with *growth mindset*, psychologist Carol Dweck’s (2006) term for the belief that intelligence and talent are highly malleable over a lifetime, and with *mastery-oriented achievement*, where the goal of learning is to push beyond the boundaries of one’s current knowledge and skills (Lang 2013). A growth mindset increases the likelihood that students who experience setbacks will seek alternative strategies or redouble their efforts rather than becoming discouraged or giving up entirely. As Brown, Roediger III, and McDaniel (2014, 91) put it, students “who are taught that learning is a struggle that often involves making errors will go on to exhibit a greater propensity to tackle tough challenges.” Growth mindset- and mastery-oriented pedagogies include offering multiple opportunities to demonstrate understanding and competence when engaging challenging material. Statistics professor Joseph Ferrandino (2016), for instance, employs a game-like approach to assessment, enabling students to take quizzes as many times as necessary to achieve a passing grade. Geography professor John Boyer (Lang 2013, 97) uses a similar method, assuring students that “quizzes are open-notes, open-book, open-website and can be taken as many times as you like.” And in my own field of rhetoric and composition, many writing teachers employ iterative, portfolio-based assignments where students recursively research, write, and revise their work as they progress from initial idea conception to final portfolio submission.

Looking beyond the academy, one might say that generative failure is “trending” on an international scale. Design thinkers, for instance, tout “failing fast” (Burnett and Evans 2016) to spur innovation; organizational behaviorists encourage businesses to experiment on the margins of new markets through “intelligent failures” (Edmondson 2011); engineers seek a “Return-on-Failure” (Al-Atabi 2014); entrepreneurs urge “failing upward” (Losse 2016) in the pursuit of venture capital; and commencement speakers cite failure as key to building a successful career (Klosowski 2017). Indeed, an International Day of Failure has been celebrated in Finland since 2010 (Wood 2017); a Museum of Failure was established in Sweden in 2017 (Purtill 2019); and an annual Fail Expo has taken place in Seoul, South Korea since 2018 (Steger and Lee 2019). However, as I examine now, these widespread proclamations about the benefits of failure do not reflect the lived experiences of students, especially those from socioeconomically, culturally, and politically marginalized backgrounds (Carr 2013; Cox 2009; Hyung-jung 2012; Inman 2018; Inoue 2014; Marano 2016; Simmons 2018). Even as educators and pundits extol the generative benefits of failure, students face the crushing burdens of failure’s de facto stigmatization.

### **Stigmatized failure: Transforming generative discomfort into debilitating fear**

Where the paradigm of generative failure touts growth, resilience, and a healthy orientation toward struggle and experimentation, the paradigm of stigmatized failure represents a set of ideologies and material conditions that cultivate fear and anxiety. It also discourages students from stepping outside their intellectual comfort zones or persevering through setbacks. Per Brown, Roediger III, and McDaniel (2014, 91), “A fear of failure can poison learning by creating aversions to the kinds of

experimentation and risk taking that characterize striving, or by diminishing performance under pressure.” I suggest that stigmatized failure projects multiple interrelated ideas:

1. Failure is shameful;
2. Failure is a sign of inherent inferiority, rather than the contingent and remediable result of a situated performance; and
3. Rather than perceiving mistakes and setbacks as natural, normal, and inevitable parts of any learning process, students should pursue near perfection—i.e., failure is simply not an option.

These ideas have significant cognitive and affective consequences on students' dispositions toward learning. For instance, stigmatized failure is associated with *fixed* mindset, or the belief that talent and intelligence are largely determined at birth (Dweck 2006), and *performance*-oriented achievement, where one is motivated less by learning for its own sake than by demonstrating to others that one is achieving at high levels (Lang 2013). Furthermore, because stigmatized failure is experienced as a holistic judgment of one's character, intelligence, and potential, it can weaken students' sense of self-worth (Covington 1984) and their self-efficacy to succeed at challenging learning tasks (Bandura 1997). Seifert (2004, 141) explains that for many students, working hard is an indicator that one lacks ability because “Smart people do not have to try hard and people who try hard are not smart.” By extension, “given the choice between feeling guilty by not working and feeling shamed by working hard and failing, students would rather feel guilty than feel shamed” (141). In other words, performance-oriented students with low self-worth and self-efficacy are reluctant to take intellectual and creative risks because there is a high likelihood of embarrassing themselves before peers, teachers, and family members (Dweck 2006). These students are also much more likely to cheat than are mastery-oriented students (Murdock and Anderman 2006).

In sum, stigmatization makes experiences such as a failing grade on a paper or exam seem like a profound judgment on one's talent and ability rather than a temporary and contingent evaluation from which one might obtain valuable feedback and improve one's future performance. And beyond concrete metrics associated with grades and test scores, stigmatization is equally a matter of students' subjective perceptions that they have failed or that they might fail. This perception is clearly evident, for instance, in South Korea, where “many young Koreans are made to feel that ‘failing once means that your whole life is a failure’” (Steger and Lee 2019). In the following sections, I unpack key contributing factors to the stigmatization of failure. I focus my attention on *precarious meritocracy*, my term for the combination of a pervasive feeling of socioeconomic anxiety with an ethos of hypercompetitive individualism, which I associate with the neoliberal dismantling of the social safety net. Precarious meritocracy stigmatizes failure by making it seem personal and permanent. I then examine why it is reasonable for students, especially those most impacted by the intersectional consequences of precarious meritocracy, to experience paradigm dissonance when they encounter contradictory messages about failure being *good* for them.

## MAKING FAILURE PERSONAL, PERMANENT, AND INTERSECTIONAL: THE NEOLIBERAL HYBRIDIZATION OF MERITOCRACY AND PRECARIETY

Educational systems that embody *meritocracy*, while distinguished by situated historical, cultural, and economic factors, share the basic ideological premise that “those who work hard enough, or are prepared to shoulder the most pressure, will eventually succeed, whilst those who seemingly lack

resilience will not” (Webster and Rivers 2019, 526). Within the United States, meritocracy emerged in the early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century as an ostensibly progressive method for maximizing the potential of the best and brightest students regardless of their socioeconomic background. James Bryant Conant, who as Harvard president took a lead role in engineering the country’s standardized test-driven modality of meritocracy, envisioned a classless society where no one would remain at the top or bottom socioeconomic strata for more than a generation or two (Lemann 1999). If the system had worked as envisioned, it would no longer “be enough merely to come from an affluent family, or to have acquired an education at one of the elite private schools in the nation. Some great students might come from well-endowed families and elite private schools, but then, some might come from very poor families and public schools with few resources” (Sternberg 2012, 7). Conant did not envision the government redistributing wealth from the top down, but rather society redistributing wealth from the bottom up by finding its meritorious elite among each new generation. At the core of American meritocracy, then, was a systematic effort to ensure equal opportunity with minimal government intervention.

But from the beginning, meritocracy in the U.S. was imbued with a competitive, individualist ethos that portrayed success as a zero-sum game. That is, if everyone is situated on a ladder of merit, then one person’s rise must be accompanied by another person’s fall. Fitzpatrick (2019, 27) observes that “competitive individualism contradicts—and in fact undermines—all of the most important communal aspects of life within our institutions of higher education.” Furthermore, meritocracy in practice has never decoupled wealth from opportunity, in part because more advantaged students have access to many resources that enhance their human, cultural, and social capital—e.g., tutoring, networking, extracurricular activities, and internships—which are far less accessible to lower-income students (Lebron 2018; Soares 2007; Tough 2019). Littler (2017, 50) thus argues that meritocracy “tends to endorse a competitive, linear system of social mobility and to function as an ideological myth to obscure inequalities, including the role this discourse of meritocracy itself plays in actually curtailing social mobility. Its myth of mobility is used to create the idea of a level playing field that does not exist.” While meritocracy has certainly created new opportunities for some, it has overall reinforced a feedback loop between inequality of opportunity and inequality of outcome.

In recent decades, meritocracy’s competitive, individualist ethos has been further intensified by the global rise of *precarity*, a state of chronic material jeopardy and psychosocial anxiety characterized by the belief that no matter how hard one works, one will never reach a place of professional and financial security. Precarious meritocracy emerged from policies associated with neoliberalism, an ideological, political, and economic agenda that champions deregulated economies and that perceives private capital and highly flexible labor markets as the most efficient mechanisms for advancing human flourishing (Standing 2017; Webster and Rivers 2019). Within the U.S., where neoliberalism became politically ascendant following the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980, neoliberal policies have over the past several decades produced: corporate deregulation and the subsequent re-monopolization of much of the corporate sector (Stoller 2017); widened inequality and narrowed social mobility (Kiernan 2018); global outsourcing and the near demise of private-sector labor unions (McAlevey 2016); federal and state austerity measures, including a broad public divestment from higher education (Davidson 2017); sharply reduced access to unemployment benefits (Stewart 2020); and exploding student debt (Fain 2018). Collectively, these measures have decimated the nation’s social safety net.

As an ideology infused by neoliberal principles, precarious meritocracy portrays academic and professional success as a matter of personal accountability rather than an outcome engendered by

systemic forces (Standing 2017; Webster and Rivers 2019). This ideology, combined with the material factors of an anemic social safety net, drives the stigmatization of failure in countries such as the United States and South Korea. In the latter nation, “immense pressure” to succeed at the highest levels begins in childhood and “can come in many forms, including economic, academic, familial, and cosmetic” (Steger and Lee 2019). Within South Korea’s financially austere system, the burden of passing university entrance exams is particularly intense; those who fail become mired in precarious employment and, in many cases, come to see themselves as lifelong “losers” (Hyung-jung 2012). Similarly, in the U.S., Thompson (2019) writes that because they came of age in the aftermath of the Great Recession, the Millennial generation (roughly those born between 1981 and 1996) “passed through a childhood of extracurricular overachievement and checked every box of the success sequence, only to have the economy blow up their dreams.” Precarious meritocracy has been equally impactful for the succeeding iGen cohort (Twenge 2017). Because a bachelor’s degree now provides little guarantee of financial stability (Davidson 2017), many students in the U.S. perceive college as simply another hoop to jump through on the way to an advanced degree that will itself create more debt. As Tough (2019, 257, emphasis in original) puts it, “A generation ago, earning a four-year college degree was rightly seen as a way for individuals to move up in the world. Today, for many young Americans, a BA is simply an insurance policy against moving *down*.”

The consequences of precarious meritocracy are exacerbated along intersectional lines. Aside from the material implications of precarity, there are significant cognitive costs for students who face poverty and social stigmatization. For these students, Verschelden (2017, 5) explains, “persistent worry about money, including lack of regular access to adequate food, health care, safety, and so on, takes up parts of the brain that are then not available for thinking, learning, and making good choices.” Verschelden (5) adds that “on their worst days,” minority students in the U.S. “exist within a dusty cloud of fear, worry, isolation, and frustration that robs them of available cognitive resources.” At my own university, the largest four-year, Hispanic-serving institution in the United States, most students come from working-class backgrounds and must juggle their academic demands with holding down one or more jobs, and (often) supporting family members. Many are also immigrants, or the children of immigrants, whose drive for success is fueled by the sense that their parents sacrificed much so their families could pursue more prosperous lives in the U.S. Some students endure the added cognitive burdens of lacking (or having family members who lack) legal status, which means they face the threat of being arrested and sent to detention facilities or being put through deportation proceedings. To be sure, millions of undocumented immigrants were deported under previous administrations (Chishti, Pierce, and Bolter 2017), but the election of Donald Trump—both in terms of his nativist rhetoric and his administration’s deeply race-infused immigration policies (Ibe 2020)—intensified existing anxieties around detention and deportation. Amid these chronic concerns and fears, it is easy to imagine students struggling to concentrate on academics, even as they might perceive staying in college as a matter of life and death.

These factors contributing to the stigmatization of failure in higher education were all in place *before* the emergence of the COVID-19 global pandemic in early 2020. But just as the health and economic impacts of the pandemic have disproportionately impacted low-income and minority populations, especially African Americans (Coleman 2020), COVID-19 will almost certainly magnify the intersectional consequences of precarious meritocracy in the short run and possibly far longer. Students who must pay their way through college will face an economic landscape characterized by



higher unemployment levels, which will in turn increase the likelihood of experiencing poverty, homelessness, and food insecurity—not to mention the specter of getting sick without access to affordable health care. As a result, many students may have to drop out of college all together, and of those who remain, even greater numbers will endure the cognitive costs of narrowed mental bandwidth. And with the increasing move toward remote instruction, students who lack affordances to resources such as reliable and highspeed internet will be further disadvantaged relative to more well-resourced peers.

### **Paradigm dissonance amid precarious meritocracy**

Insofar as dispositions toward creative and intellectual exploration are concerned, precarious meritocracy establishes a psychosocial reality for students fundamentally at odds with generative failure. In the U.S., where college tuition rates have far outpaced inflation in recent decades, students who accrue debt are often unwilling to pursue electives or to embrace the interdisciplinary array of subjects traditionally affiliated with a liberal arts education. “Burdened by debt,” Davidson (2017, 166) explains, “students narrow their choices. They do not explore and test options for a productive potential career that intersects with their passions and interests.” Amid these conditions, many students perceive behaviors associated with generative failure, such as learning for its own sake or pursuing multiple career options, as indulgences of the affluent. In an essay entitled “When Failure is O.K. is Not O.K.,” for example, Hallmark (2018) argues that efforts to encourage failure often “ignore the fact that failure affects people differently, and that privilege plays an important role in who is allowed to fail—and who isn’t.” Hallmark recounts a talk where an entrepreneur described borrowing \$50,000 from his parents to launch a startup, only to go bankrupt after one year. The intended lesson was, “Take a risk; it’s OK to fail.” In Hallmark’s case, \$50,000 was more money than his “single mother could make in three years at her near-minimum-wage job.” Hence, the message he *heard* was, “if I didn’t have money to risk losing, I shouldn’t be in business.” Hallmark adds that professors routinely encouraged students to pursue challenging courses in unfamiliar subjects and chided them for worrying “too much about their GPA.” However, low-income students often depend on scholarships to stay in college, and Hallmark himself lost an academic scholarship after his first year when his GPA did not meet the minimum standard. These students cannot afford *not* to worry about their GPA, so many shy away from courses where the odds of getting a low grade are relatively high.

As with precarious meritocracy, paradigm dissonance is intensified across intersectional lines of identity. For example, many African American students believe that in order to succeed within institutions that systemically disadvantage them, they must work significantly harder and exercise greater self-discipline than their white peers while manifesting few or no physical or mental signs of their prodigious efforts (Jack 2019). This phenomenon is called *John Henryism* (James 1994), an homage to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century folk hero who, according to legend, singlehandedly defeated a steam-driven drill in a railroad spike competition and then promptly died. As Verschelden (2017, 18) explains, “The outward success of these young people makes it look like they have transformed their lives in a positive way and may mask underlying health problems.” In fact, two recent memoirs by African American men, Kiese Laymon’s *Heavy* (2018) and Casey Gerald’s *There Will Be No Miracles Here* (2018), vividly expose the “damage done to America, especially its black population,” by the nation’s own collective “failure to confront the myths, half-truths, and lies at the foundation of the success stories that the nation worships” (Lebron 2018). Having each grown up in poverty, Laymon (2018) and Gerald (2018) obtained

advanced degrees at prestigious universities and became, in the former case, a professor at the University of Mississippi, and in the latter, a businessman and public speaker. The authors collectively detail the enormous labor and mental anguish of maintaining an exterior of resolute determination and indefatigability in a white-dominant, neoliberal society that provides structural advantages to some while hypocritically demanding that those who are disadvantaged discover on their own how to ascend the ladder of meritocracy. Because the system sets them up for failure and then socially and materially stigmatizes them for failing, many African American students, like Laymon and Gerald, strive for success at any physical and mental cost. Consequently, they draw considerable pride from their achievements in the face of structural marginalization (Jack 2019); these students have particular reason to question the legitimacy of pronouncements that failure is O.K.

### IMPLEMENTING WISE INTERVENTIONS TO REDUCE PARADIGM DISSONANCE

If educational environments authentically cultivated generative failure, students would understand failure *implicitly* as a natural and inevitable part of the learning process, and thus it would be unnecessary to actively encourage failure. By contrast, in contexts where events like Fail Expos as well as bromides about failing upward circulate widely, the very fact that failure is so *overtly* advocated is a leading indicator that stigmatized failure is the dominant paradigm. Teachers and administrators intervening against stigmatization are thus advised to tread gingerly on this discursive and ideological terrain. Amid a hypercompetitive, individualist ideology, academic and professional failures are stigmatized as deficits of personal responsibility. Challenging this default bias requires recognizing that students are unlikely to embrace a paradigm shift without experiencing cognitive and affective dissonance. Within the U.S., students are conditioned to think about success and failure in terms of high-stakes performances tied to zero-sum ranking systems. While no individual course likely determines a student's professional fate, it can often feel this way, meaning that every perceived failure—even an unsatisfactory grade on an exam or paper—can contribute to a sense of precarity. The resultant anxiety impedes students from engaging curricula with the intellectual and creative zest teachers desire. Indeed, this fear will accompany many students into their careers, where the “fear of losing work can dissuade workers from taking risks, experimenting, or speaking up as they identify items that could improve a taken approach—all actions that foster innovation” (Bee 2018, 49). Similarly, the prospects of losing a stable salary and health insurance can dissuade one from quitting a job one hates in order to pursue a lifelong artistic dream, to start a business, or to fight for social change. So long as students associate failure with precarious meritocracy, they will struggle to benefit from its generative potential.

Consequently, practices meant to cultivate generative failure, insofar as they are contradicted by practices within the broader educational ecosystem, can unintentionally contribute to paradigm dissonance. They can also be co-opted by the ethos of competitive individualism. This concern is particularly germane for interventions that seek to modify students' dispositions toward failure. Dweck's (2006) *mindset*, for example, has achieved widespread notoriety in American educational circles, but its emphasis on persuading students to change their theories of intelligence from fixed to growth mindset is also consistent with neoliberal principles of personal responsibility. As Kohn (2015) writes, “Dweck's work nestles comfortably in a long self-help tradition, the American can-do, just-adopt-a-positive-attitude spirit.” For Kohn, the more we emphasize that students should “attribute outcomes to their own effort, the more we communicate that the conditions they face are, well, fixed.” Similarly, disposition-focused interventions such as enhancing students' self-efficacy (Bandura 1997) or increasing their

motivation (Seifert 2004) do little to challenge the paradigm of stigmatized failure. In general, interventions drawn from education psychology more often exhort student adaptation to, rather than critique of, structural conditions (Webster and Rivers 2019).

To be sure, many educators recognize that high-stakes performances, such as exams or papers that comprise the bulk of a final grade, reinforce stigmatization (Lang 2013). These educators seek to lower the stakes of failure by, for instance, employing formative assessment tools that provide provisional feedback untethered to a static grade. Various practices described earlier, such as allowing students to take quizzes multiple times (Ferrandino 2016; Lang 2013) or encouraging students to develop provisional answers to challenging math questions (Kapur 2015) are replicable models for lowering the stakes of failure. In my own writing courses, I often feature journal assignments via which I offer copious feedback on students' ideas without providing a letter grade each time. I make clear that if students meet page requirements and engage both the weekly materials and my feedback conscientiously—which is almost always the case—they can expect an A for the journals. None of these practices *erase* grades, of course, but they modestly alleviate the pressures associated with seeing a grade on every assignment. Such interventions can at least partially detach the experience of failure from its weightier psychosocial implications.

Like practices designed to shift students' dispositions, however, these efforts do not challenge the ideology of hypercompetitive individualism; in other words, lowering the stakes of failure is not the same as *de-stigmatizing* failure. Furthermore, as noted above, interventions that do not address the systemic roots of stigmatization can themselves be incorporated into the logics of precarious meritocracy. Therefore, in order to alleviate paradigm dissonance more strategically, I exhort educators to develop and implement *wise interventions*, a term I am adapting from Yeager, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, Apfel, Brzustoski, Master, Hessert, Williams, and Cohen (2014), who themselves adapted the term from Goffman (1963). Yeager, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, Apfel, Brzustoski, Master, Hessert, Williams, and Cohen (2014, 86) explain that interventions are "wise" when they support "stigmatized individuals in their full humanity" and when they establish trust between teachers and students. Trusting teachers' pedagogical motives is especially key for marginalized students, who might question whether their teachers are biased—even if implicitly (Banaji and Greenwald 2013)—against them. As Yeager, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, Apfel, Brzustoski, Master, Hessert, Williams, and Cohen (2014, 805) explain, "Trust permits people to disambiguate feedback and to see criticism as information that can help them improve rather than as possible evidence of bias." Trust also increases students' sense of belonging, which can enhance their cognitive bandwidth (Verschelden 2017) and increase the likelihood that they will persist in the face of academic hardship (Field 2018). One such trust-building intervention is *wise feedback* (Cohen, Steele, and Ross 1999), whereby teachers actively establish high expectations for all students, they explicitly convey the message that everyone can achieve these expectations, and they provide critical feedback for students to do so.

In adapting the term *wise interventions*, I similarly argue that cultivating generative failure amid the dissonant material and psychosocial consequences of stigmatized failure requires building trust with students, which includes teachers being transparent and precise about their limited capacity to transform the conditions of failure. Communicating targeted messages such as, "failure is okay *in this course* because of *these specific course policies*" makes clear that failure as a low-stakes experimental process is distinct from failure as a high-stakes performance outcome. Such messages offer a modestly generative way to approach failure that acknowledges students' lived experiences. Even more importantly, I suggest

that teachers should find ways to make the sociopolitical context of failure a subject of inquiry and analysis. Students might consider questions such as: For whom is failure okay and for whom is it not okay, and under what circumstances? Teachers might also introduce and ask students to reflect on the paradigms of failure themselves. To the extent that students have experienced paradigm dissonance, they might consider strategies for how to negotiate it moving forward. Students and teachers might even spend time imagining together what an education system designed around generative failure might look like. Indeed, various justice-oriented educators (Freire 1994; hooks 2003) have emphasized the pedagogical benefits of hope that a more equitable and just world is possible.

Beyond helping students situate paradigm dissonance amid their lived experiences, I also encourage designing opportunities for communal failure—which can take curricular or cocurricular forms—that might incrementally subvert the ideology of competitive individualism. That is, when everyone fails at a task *together*, the experience of failure might feel less isolating and zero-sum. For example, the Honors College at SUNY Buffalo features an annual, cocurricular “Impossible Project” (Muller 2019, 6) where a team of students takes on an ambitious, semester-long endeavor—such as unearthing the university’s history “as a hotbed of student activism during the 1960s-70s”—that they cannot feasibly complete in the time allotted. With failure technically a given, students feel less pressure to achieve a specific milestone connoting success. Instead, teams make as much progress as possible given the available resources, which reflects more a mastery orientation toward learning than a performance orientation. Like interventions described earlier, then, the Impossible Project both lowers the stakes of failure and seeks to change students’ dispositions, but it also much more explicitly situates failure as a community-building exercise.

I myself (Feigenbaum, forthcoming) have experimented with an analogous project called Failure Club, which I adapted from an extracurricular practice that began in New York City in 2004 (Kiracofe 2012). In the original version of Failure Club, members of a group of friends each spent one year making as much progress as possible toward a lifelong ambition—one they previously avoided out of fear of failing—and convened regularly to share status updates. In my course, I asked students to take on a personally meaningful, highly aspirational goal and to define for themselves what progress looked like. Students submitted regular status reports, but I did not grade them on how much progress they actually made. Although each student chose an individual project, they knew from the outset that failure would be a shared experience. Clubmates became mutual cheerleaders, offering gracious feedback and moral support as each attempted to make concrete headway on their goals. Admittedly, models such as the Impossible Project and Failure Club are insufficient to help students realize their collective capacity to subvert the paradigm of stigmatized failure. I thus urge readers to develop their own interventions. We also need better assessment tools to determine just how wise such interventions are in practice. To what extent, for example, do they enable students to experience failure in less psychosocially harmful ways? To what extent do they empower students’ critique of the conditions of failure? Alternatively, to what extent might they unintentionally further contribute to stigmatization?

## CONCLUSION: IMAGINING WISE TRANSFORMATIONS

As I have argued, institutional paradigms are shaped by systemic forces, and thus beyond wise interventions, we need wise societal and institutional transformations. Within U.S. contexts, such transformations must include reconsidering how the education system incentivizes learning through grades and establishing a much stronger social safety net. There must also be massive reinvestment in

public education, including wider distribution of the costs of attending college, so that young people can be freed from the material and psychological burdens of taking on so much debt. Such a far-reaching societal makeover is, of course, well beyond the power of individual teachers. However, although they lack power to systematically transform their institutions, teachers can help students become more cognizant of how the dissonance between generative and stigmatized failure operates within their sociopolitical contexts, and they can devise wise interventions for helping students manage and critique this dissonance. In doing so, teachers can help build a culture where students are less concerned with how their performance stacks up against externally imposed standards and the relative performance of their peers. In turn, students can invest themselves more fully in the process of learning itself—both as individuals and as members of a community. As more teachers prioritize this goal, perhaps they can build a collective base against the most deleterious repercussions of stigmatized failure and toward the wise transformation of higher education.

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