

The Stanford Resilience Project

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Context: Out of class

Keywords: failure, setbacks

Student Activity Time: varied

Students reflect on their failures in service of learning and growing from them to develop their resilience.

Introducing the Reflection Activity

The Resilience Project at Stanford University is an effort to normalize setbacks and help students reflect on and learn from their failures. The underlying assumption of the resilience project is that learning through reflecting on setbacks is a key to student success. The Resilience Project's core ideas are: (1) learn about learning, (2) seek advice, (3) get perspective, and (4) connect with community. The purpose of this type of reflection is to develop resilience through learning and growing from failure.

The Resilience Project started with videos featuring educators reflecting on their failures and developing resilience. The purpose of these videos was to show students that even successful educators on their campus have had challenges and obstacles and have even failed at things in life. As the project gained traction on campus, the events expanded to include a range of activities:

- **Dorm programming:** The dorm programming has included resident fellows sharing their stories about failure, and student panels in which students share their stories of failure and resilience. Both are followed by discussion with students. The interval of time between the setback and the reflection can impact what students choose to share. Stories of failure tend to fall into three categories: (1) "stuff" happens, (2) tried and failed, and (3) made a bad decision. People tend to gravitate to the first type of setback as their role is less active. Students can be encouraged to explore the second two categories when a safe environment has been established.
- **Workshops and one-time events:** These programs have included a range of topics such as acclimating after returning from study abroad, to understanding failure and resilience in the arts industry.
- **Stanford, I Screwed Up:** "Stanford, I Screwed Up" was a large-scale campus-wide performance event commemorating and celebrating the 'epic failures' in our lives. At this event, students from across campus came together to share experiences through storytelling, comedy, poetry, song, video, and other creative means.

In terms of outcomes, encountering The Resilience Project through its online resources and/or the live programs, there are opportunities for students to tease out what they learned from a failure and then using that learning to move forward and make a change—develop resilience. Additionally, students who participate in the project may understand that being at Stanford doesn't mean being perfect. The project may help change students' conception of what it means to be a student at Stanford. This shift may contribute to a culture change of using language of resilience and the underpinnings that one must fail and face failure to become resilient.

Recreating the Reflection Activity

	Description
1	Gather a group of students and describe the purpose for reflecting on failure. Show one of the videos available at http://resilience.stanford.edu . (optional)
2	Invite students to share reactions to the video or the topic.
3	Invite students to pair up and share a story of failure.
4	Invite students to share with the group what they learned from the exercise.
5	Help students understand how the interval of time between experience and reflection impacts resilience; invite them to share a “messier” experience that expresses less-well resolved feelings – either because it's more recent, or because the experience was a result of their own actions (i.e. made a bad decision, tried and failed at something).

In the words of the Educator: Tips and Inspiration

Gain institutional support. I believe it is important for students to see that the institution supports the efforts of The Resilience Project – it makes a statement that this is something the institution believes in. This support can come in a variety of ways. One approach we have used was to have the President of the university reflect on his failures in one of our videos.

Be aware that funding and resources can be an issue. While The Resilience Project has great potential outcomes, it can be challenging to garner funding and resources. Being able to show positive outcomes is essential.

Be aware that producing videos is challenging. The first eleven videos I produced were homemade, and I received a lot of comments about the non-professional look. Over time I have placed more emphasis on producing higher-quality videos.

What was the inspiration for the reflection activity? Abigail Lipson, Director of Harvard's Bureau of Study Counsel, shared her publication "Reflections on Rejections" with Stanford's Center for Teaching and Learning. Our shared experience with “failure-deprived” high-achieving students inspired me to create a resource on campus to help us respond productively to academic setbacks.