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FALL
2022



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LET THEM FAIL

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In a *NY Times* survey of school counselors earlier this year, the following statements were made about today's students:

"They have less stamina; more frustration; less flexibility; less effort; less perseverance; more escape and avoidance behaviors."

"If what they are asked to do requires critical thinking or more than 10 minutes of effort, many students struggle, become frustrated and refuse to do the work."

I won't get into a discussion about the myriad of reasons as to how we got here. More importantly, what can we do to create space and opportunity to help build back skills of perseverance, resilience, and hope?

Let them fail. That's right, fail. But make it fun.

Here's how. As student activities organizers, you're in a unique position to offer learning opportunities outside the classroom. Things students want to learn for the fun of it. A chance for students to try new things, fail, and try again. From choosing what programs to offer to how it's marketed to the way it's run, you can create a space for them to experience messy struggle. And come out knowing that it's not only okay, but sometimes a necessary step.

Setting the Tone:

What kinds of programs am I talking about? Ask your students for ideas. Questions like, "what's something you've always wanted to learn, but didn't have time for in school because of your academic classes?" We had a photography class in my high school that I never had time to take because of AP classes filling my schedule! Or you could ask, "What always looks fun or interesting, but seems too hard to learn?"

Generate a list of these skills and you have a starting place for a workshop series. Skills they want to learn that feel just out of reach.

As you begin seeking out instructors for the workshops, ask questions to find out where their focus lies. You want people who embrace failure as part of the process. If they are promising perfect finished masterpieces or performers by the end of the session, you should have red flags going off in your head.

In one of our workshops, we teach juggling and never promise that everyone in the group will be juggling by the end of our workshop. They will know the steps and if they keep practicing, they will eventually get there. Being



able to embrace the drops is more important than keeping 3 balls in the air.

When you market the workshop, we recommend emphasizing the skill they're going to be learning, but not on the mastery of it. You want them to come to have fun trying - so highlight the process of learning the skill. And the fact that they'll meet other people interested and probably equally uncoordinated in it. This sets the tone for the playful space you want to create and will be more welcoming to students that need it.

Creating Space:

If you're running the workshop yourself and even when you are running regular meetings of student leaders, here are a few ways that we've found to be effective in creating a more inviting space for dropping the ball (literally and figuratively).

Model It: As someone who has struggled with perfectionism myself, this one has been tough for me. When demonstrating in front of a group, I would typically only want to do things that I knew I could perform well. But at some point, I realized the power of demonstrating dropping. It gives permission to others in a really visible way. I also show the tricks that I'm working on to indicate that there's always an edge to push - more room to grow, learn, and be messy.

With our line of work, the drops are really visible. What could that mean for you? Maybe it's acknowledging when you don't have the answer to a question and have to ask for help. Or maybe you share a story of a past mistake, how you struggled, and what it taught you.

Shift Focus: In a juggling workshop, the students want to focus on three ball juggling because that's the goal (and it looks cool). But we actually spend most of the time mastering good throws and catches with one and two balls. The result you want will eventually come when you focus on the steps needed to get there. Stressing out about obtaining a "perfect" result distracts a learner from doing the messy work needed. In other words, focus on progress not perfection.

So if your group is planning a big event, break it down. What are all of the small parts that you can celebrate as you complete them? Or isolate from the rest if it goes temporarily off track?

Get Curious: Speaking of going off track - as things inevitably do. So what then? Instead of pointing fingers and blaming each other, get curious. When a new juggler drops, the first instinct is to pick it up quickly hoping no one saw it. And usually the inner voice kicks in with, "I'm so uncoordinated - I'll never be able to do this." With so much judgment, a learner doesn't have a way to make it better. No wonder they don't want to persevere!



Getting curious means looking at the drop and asking, what hand threw it? How far away from my body is it? What does that tell me about adjustments I can make next time? That gives actionable information. Let's say your students plan a program and no one shows up. They can say that was "a failure" or "a dumb idea" and you never offer it again. Or you can ask questions like what else was being offered at that time? When are our best attended programs? Should we do a survey of student interests? From there you can make adjustments to the program and offer it again.

Having Fun:

You've planned the program, you've created the space, now it's time to have fun failing. When students feel comfortable allowing themselves to be messy, they get to show up authentically. They don't have to perform, they just get to play. We've seen transformations happen in a range of settings, but corporate workshops really stand out in my mind. People come in buttoned up in suits. Within a short time, not only are the jackets off and ties loosened, but the interactions are freer and formal personas gone.

It allows individuals to drop what Dr. Brown calls armor - the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors we use to protect ourselves when we don't want to be vulnerable. She writes, "we must be guardians of a space that allows students to breathe and be curious and explore the world

and be who they are without suffocation. They deserve one place where they can rumble with vulnerability and their hearts can exhale."

In the last few years, we've started using Flop Balls in workshops - yes we put "flop" right in the name! A little more accessible than juggling, but still the same learning of skills and dropping along the way. We recently heard from a student at Hanover College:

"I love the connection that comes along with playing Flop Ball. I've never felt so connected to my fellow RAs than when we played into the late hours of the night, talking and laughing."

This playful kind of skill building eventually leads to learning the skill (even if that's not the focus) and that makes a powerful impression. A person never forgets when/where they learned how to juggle or play guitar. And don't you want those meaningful moments to happen in your campus community?



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