

The Power of Failure

By Russell J. Meyer, Ph.D.

This is a great day, and many people will tell you that this is your next step toward success. They're right, of course. Today you're celebrating your success at CCD, and you are ready to step forward into a great new phase of your life.

You'll leave here this evening to celebrate your achievements and prepare for even more successes that your education has made possible.

It's traditional for commencement speakers to talk to you about something in their area of expertise, something they're really good at. Who am I to depart from tradition? Tonight, I'm going to talk to you about something I've had some success at: failure. I'm not quite an expert at failure, but I'm past the apprentice phase.

As an expert, let me tell you a hard truth, one that we don't often discuss: if your education has been successful, it's also prepared you for failure.

Now I don't mean things like failing a math course. I did that my freshman year, and it was easy. All I had to do was avoid the work, skip a bunch of classes, and tell the instructor that I already knew more than he did (a hint: that's very rarely a successful argument.)

I learned three lessons from that failure, two of which are pretty obvious:

- You can't succeed if you don't show up and do the work. (Woody Allen says that 90 percent of success is simply showing up.)
- Arguing with your teacher (or your boss) is very rarely a good substitute for diligent work.

The third lesson isn't quite so obvious, but it's sure more valuable, or at least it was for me:

If you can learn from your failure, you'll be more apt to succeed in the future. Success is a good teacher, but failure, approached correctly, is that best mentor.

As I was writing this, I realized that the semester I failed math was (and here I gasp), almost exactly 60 years ago! And I still remember it, blush about it, and learn from it to this day.

And I'm still convinced that failure can help lead you to success.

Your education has prepared you to reason, to think, to choose among the options available to you. But sometimes, no matter how well-meaning you are, you'll make the wrong choice and fail. I speak from experience. If you try all the things you want to do, sometimes you'll fail.

But you always have to keep in mind that your education has also taught you to deal with failure, to learn from it and move on. Troubling though it may be, if you never fail, that just means that you've never tried to go beyond what you already know you can do. There's not much profit in that.

Do you know that there's a whole division of Google, called Department X, that is almost entirely devoted to failure? People get bonuses for figuring out what will make other people's (or their own) great ideas fail. Google believes that it's cheaper and more rewarding to pay people for failures than it is to bring a bad product to market.

And over at Microsoft, Bill Gates says that "It's fine to celebrate success but it is more important to heed the lessons of failure." He's right.

Simply put, if you never fail, you've never tried to do something really hard. "A man's reach should exceed his grasp," the Scots poet Robert Browning tells us. We should always be striving for something greater than we can quite reach at the moment. And if we do that, we will often fail. There's no shame in that. The shame would be in not learning from the failure. The best response to failure is not to keep doing the same thing, but to learn your lesson and move on. Robert Kennedy said that "Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly."

Success is never easy. But it's worth the struggle; it's worth the failures that inevitably precede it. You're proof of that today. I doubt that there's anyone sitting here today, among the graduates, among the audience, or on this stage who has never had to overcome some sort of failure.

The trick is never to give up.

Let me give you a few examples of successful people, drawn from a long list of the thousands of students who have succeeded at the Community College of Denver.

- Students like Katherine Acosta. Katherine had three kids under seven years old at home, but she went back to school to become a Surgical Technologist. She was able to fast track her program and complete the degree in one year. She finished her program in December of last year!
- Or like Migdalia Serrato. She applied for The Dream US scholarship, a road to college for people who were brought to the country as children. She wanted to be a great example for her kids. She earned her associate degree in business administration and is now at a 4-year university studying Business Management.
- Or like Matthew Hickson, sitting among you today. 15 years after leaving high school, Matt entered CCD with a GED. He is graduating today with an Associate of General Studies with an emphasis in

Graphic Design. He's been accepted into California College of the Arts, one of the most prestigious graphic design schools in the country.

Did they all face failure? I can't say for sure, but I'd be really surprised if they weren't trying to exceed their grasp when they found their success at CCD.

Your school, the Community College of Denver, is committed to success — but as any member of the faculty, the staff, or the administration can tell you, that success requires hard work, and it's never a sure thing. I doubt that any of them could say they've never had a failure, and I'm sure that every one of them after that failure followed the advice of an old song: "Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again."

If they hadn't done that, then CCD would not be a leader in higher education for Denver; it wouldn't be serving over 8,000 students every semester and giving more than half of its students the opportunity to be the first in their families to attend college.

If they hadn't done that, there would be no new advising pathways model with a one-student, one-advisor framework, giving students a single point of contact throughout their time at CCD.

If they hadn't done that, then nearly 200 donors wouldn't have given CCD over half a million dollars for scholarships in the past year. And the people who help raise the money that funds over 1300 student scholarships each year know full well what failure tastes like.

I don't know the statistics, but I have just enough experience in fund-raising to know that you have a least one failed ask for every one that succeeds. If they gave up after that failed ask, then there'd be no scholarships. But they persevered, and many of you got your scholarships thanks to that perseverance.

But enough of all that. Tonight is a time to celebrate, to bask in your success, and to look forward to the future and the new challenges ahead of you. You're prepared for those challenges thanks to your families, your teachers, and yourself. Face them head on. Enjoy them. But above all, don't be afraid to take a chance to make your life and the lives of those you love even better.

You're prepared to take those chances. You can do it. You know you can. Challenge yourself, accept failure as a lesson, not a punishment, and press on regardless. Remember that failing and being a failure are not the same thing. You can fail without being a failure. In fact, if you are actually really good at failing, you're well on the road to success.

Steven Wright, one of my favorite comics, says "If at first you don't succeed, destroy all evidence that you tried." Funny advice, but not the best.

If at first you don't succeed, don't just try again. Begin by carefully examining why you failed, learn from the failure, and go on to try your best at all you do. If you can do that, you'll be a real success.