

Failing Well: Campus Series Helps Students Rethink Setbacks



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At first, Traci Williams AC '18 was hesitant about the invitation to write a “failure resume.”

“I thought it was going to be a drawn out exercise, like doing a job resume,” said Williams, who is majoring in Africana studies with a concentration in poetry. “But it was simple—a little bit of positive therapy to start off the semester.”

The exercise, hosted in late January by the Wurtele Center for Work and Life, gave participants a chance to write about a personal setback and a lesson learned from the experience, then share those “resumes” with fellow campus community members.

As inspiration, a Powerpoint slideshow of similar resumes from Smith faculty and staff—including President Kathleen McCartney—played on a screen nearby. Those stories described how college leaders bounced back from “failures” such as graduate school rejections and mistakes on the job.

For her resume, Williams—who, in addition to being a student, is a wife, mother and grandmother—wrote about getting a B during her final semester of community college after having previously maintained a 4.0 grade average.

“I didn’t take it well,” said Williams. “I was freaked and crying. But I talked to my husband and my adviser. And I learned not to cry over a B. That B was my best at the time, so it was A-OK!”

Helping Smithies develop such resilience is the aim of a year-long “[Failing Well](#)” [program](#) sponsored by the Wurtele Center and Lazarus Center for Career Development.

“Students need to feel that taking wrong turns and making bad choices is part of a healthy path to success, not a deviation,” said author Rachel Simmons, a leadership development specialist for the Wurtele Center.

A sample “Failure Resume” written by Rachel Simmons, a leadership development specialist for Smith’s Wurtele Center for Work and Life.

Studies show women are particularly vulnerable to



In Memoriam



The community is invited to a memorial service for President Emerita Jill Ker Conway at 4 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 18, in Helen Hills Hills Chapel.

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Featured Events

Jessica Bacal (left), director of the Wurtele Center for Work and Life, helps Stephanie Pinedo '18 write a “Failure Resume” during a lunchtime program in the Campus Center.

viewing academic and career setbacks as personal failures, Simmons said. Through programs such as the resume exercise, a “Stress Olympics,” house teas and self-reflection workshops, the Failing Well series gives students tools for rethinking failures and managing achievement-related pressures.

Simmons will host another “Failure Resume” exercise Wednesday, Feb. 1, at noon in the Campus Center. On Thursday, Feb. 2, Simmons and Donna Lisker, dean of the college and vice president for campus life, will lead a free lunchtime workshop on “Effortless Perfection” from noon to 1 p.m. in Campus Center 103/104. And on Friday, Feb. 3, Simmons will give an update on the Failing Well initiative from noon to 1 p.m. in Campus Center 204.

Jessica Bacal, director of the Wurtele Center, said the failure resume exercise was inspired by a [Princeton University professor](#) who posted his own “CV of Failure” as a way of helping students think differently about facing challenges.

At the Campus Center last week, Smithies wrote about surmounting obstacles such as abusive relationships and being rejected for competitive academic programs. Participants received “certificates of failure” and the first 10 to complete resumes got prizes of winter hats and copies of Bacal’s 2014 book *Mistakes I Made at Work*.

Stephanie Pinedo '18 said she found the resume exercise “a good way to reflect on the past semester, and think about how to improve on what you’ve accomplished.”

Pinedo, who is majoring in education and child study, wrote about not being accepted to a women’s leadership program she’d applied to last semester. Instead, she used that time to take Interterm courses and visit family in Washington, D.C.

Her takeaway lesson about how to fail well?

“I learned that when one door closes, another opens,” Pinedo said.

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