

Failure is part of the redemptive method of teaching God uses to mature us into his people.

BY SHARON MINGO

ABSTRACT: *Everyone experiences failure. This reality contrasts with human desire and societal culture to succeed. Students experiencing academic failure can struggle to learn from failure, find hope, build resilience, and create self-efficacy. Insights and strategies of learning and applying Scripture and practicing positive affirmations in a mentoring atmosphere with Christian faculty can lead students to understand and accept God's orchestration of failure for good.*

KEY WORDS: *academic failure, academic success, education, failure, mentor, nursing, nursing students, resilience*

CULTIVATING Student **Success** AFTER **Repeated Failure**

Everyone experiences failure. Failure is a common occurrence often not discussed because of its negative stigma. Laksov and McGrath (2020) note that “acknowledging failure in academia as an unavoidable part of learning” (p. 3). However, failure within academia is not always negative. Mattera (2017) shared that “in the complexities of life, we are meant to fail at times so we can have epiphanies and learn the greater lessons we would have never learned had we been ‘successful’ in our initial course of action” (para. 6).

Contemporary society measures success by receiving honor and being admired for financial attainments, excellence, power, prestige, fame, and professional or academic achievements (Loscalzo, 2014). Conversely, failure can be viewed as hopeless, demoralizing, fearful, and anxiety provoking. Such attributes do not portray the character of God or conform to the

teaching of Scripture. The biblical perspective of success can be interpreted as submitting faithfully to God’s plan with the ultimate purpose of pleasing him and serving others through the gifts, talents, experiences, and opportunities he has graciously provided. Mattera (2017), in his biblical teaching on failure, explained that failure is a reality for each of us in light of God’s holiness. God also uses failure to deepen our growth. Mattera explained, “Failure is part of the redemptive method of teaching God uses to mature us into his people with purposeful assignments to enlarge Kingdom influence” (para. 10).

The purpose of this article is to supply faculty, students, and graduates with encouragement and strategies as interventions toward academic success and to enable the continued fulfillment of God’s calling on students’ lives. Biblical Scripture and positive affirmations in preparation for course or licensure exams are offered.

REAPPRAISING FAILURE

Academic failure is a significant occurrence in the lives of students. The ways students or graduates view experiences of failure can influence their persistence and future success (Ajjawi et al., 2019). This is especially true for students who experience repeated examination failures. Kuh et al. (2006) defined student success as “academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance” (p. 7).



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*Name changed for privacy.

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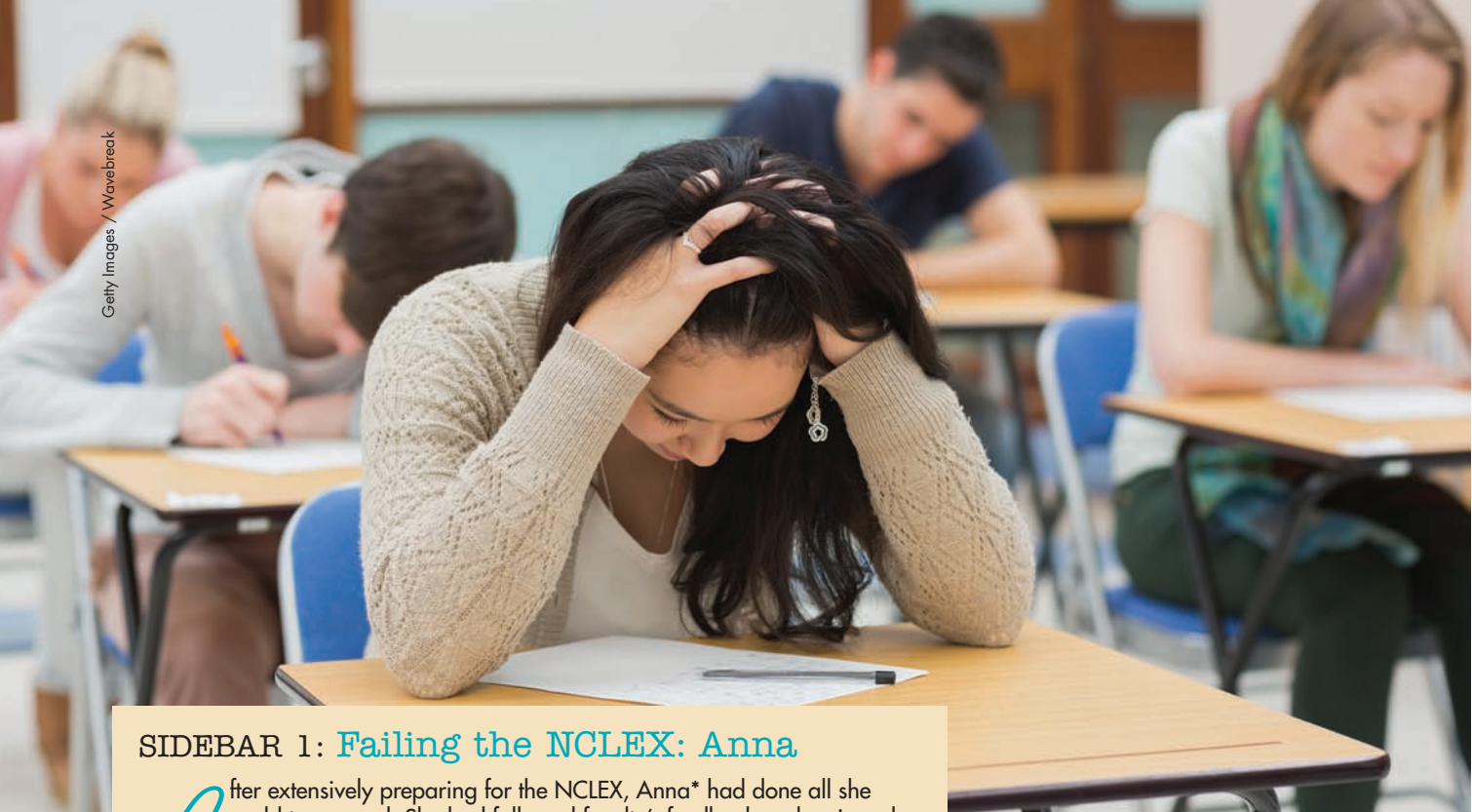
As humans, we innately desire to succeed; no one wants to fail, and no one plans to fail. Literature supports the notion that we fear failure. Sagar and Jowett (2015) referred to the fear of failure as “the motive to avoid failure in achievement contexts where one’s performance is evaluated” (p. 4). The Bible’s narrative of Job’s life provides many insights regarding success and failure. Job’s success was measured societally by his prospering family of 10 children and numerous possessions and servants. Job was “blameless and upright,” a man who “feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1–3, NKJV). Nevertheless, his friends and family deemed him unsuccessful when he experienced a cascade of intense losses, suffering, and failure which, interestingly, God allowed. First, Sabeen marauders attacked and stole Job’s oxen and donkeys and killed many of his servants (Job 1:14–15). Fire fell from the sky “and burned up the sheep” and more servants (Job 1:16, NKJV). Then, Chaldean invaders attacked and

Everyone experiences failure.

robbed Job of his camels, killing even more servants (Job 1:17). Then, “A great wind came from across the wilderness” (Job 1:18–19, NKJV) to destroy the house where all of Job’s children were gathered for a feast, killing them. Finally, Satan inflicted Job with painful boils from the bottoms of his feet to the top of his head (Job 2:7).

Job’s story demonstrates God’s sovereignty, power, love, and grace toward those who trust in him. Job’s response to his calamities revealed humility and wisdom:

I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You. You asked, ‘Who is this who hides counsel without knowl-



SIDEBAR 1: **Failing the NCLEX: Anna**

After extensively preparing for the NCLEX, Anna* had done all she could to succeed. She had followed faculty's feedback and reviewed content, practiced numerous NCLEX test questions, studied with her peers, and monitored her self-care so that she was rested and ready. Anna had asked for prayer support and was excited for the future.

Unfortunately, Anna did not pass her NCLEX the first time. Nor did she pass the second, third, or fourth time she sat for the exam. After each failure, Anna was overwhelmed with negative emotions. Confusion, fear, anger, depression, shame, and doubt colored her thought process. She began to lose confidence. She asked God why he would have placed this desire to be a nurse so deeply in her heart only for her to fail again and again.

I met Anna after she failed to pass the NCLEX on her fourth attempt. As we talked, we agreed to remediation and preparatory support for her fifth attempt. We spent 3 months focusing on nursing content review, test-taking strategies, time management, and study skills. Anna also worked with a therapist to better manage her anxieties. Our sessions together incorporated prayer. We acknowledged God's will, sovereignty, and plans for Anna. We verbalized our trust in God and shared Scripture together. One of our favorite verses became, "For with God nothing will be impossible" (Luke 1:37, NKJV).

Finally, we agreed on a date and time for Anna to retake the licensure exam. I prayed earnestly for her, knowing that she had done her best and that God was in control. When my cell phone rang the following day, I saw Anna was calling. I held my breath as I answered the phone. She had passed! We laughed and cried together. We also prayed, thanking God for her success and for being with her in each step of this difficult journey. The process had taken Anna 2 years from the date of her graduation.

Two months later, Anna was employed as an oncology registered nurse (RN). She continues to work as an oncology RN, sharing her testimony about God's timing and accepting God's will despite her experiences of failure. Anna is a source of light and encouragement for her patients. The lessons she learned could have never been taught from a book. Anna's relationship with God deepened and she learned how to trust in all situations, knowing that God's timing is perfect.

Anna shared that through her 2-year journey of taking the NCLEX, she began to look at Jeremiah 29:11 (NKJV) in a new way: "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope." God's goodness toward his children is plentiful and satisfying.

edge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. (Job 42:2-3, NKJV)

God saw Job's heart. Ultimately, God doubled Job's wealth and blessed him with children and grandchildren whom Job enjoyed for four generations (Job 42:10-17).

Clearly, God's view of success is starkly different than that of North American society. "For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7, NKJV). Even in failure, students need to recognize that God has a good plan. God's thoughts toward us are "of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11, NKJV). The Bible also reminds us that "all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28, NKJV). In the will of God, there is good in events and experiences that academia and contemporary society deem as failures. Failure can be seen as a catalyst as students develop resilience and learn from failure (Laksov & McGrath, 2020).

The successful student is not necessarily the one entrusted with the most academic successes or passage of licensure or certification on the first attempt. A successful student may be one who is faithful with the resources, talent, and gifts God has entrusted to him or her despite delays, disruptions, or failure of an examination or examinations (Matthew 25:21). Even after academic or licensure failure, students can be encouraged not to give up but to continue pursuing their passion and cultivate strategies to succeed. Students need faculty support and encouragement to learn how to view themselves as overcomers through events involving failure.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM PERSPECTIVE

Educators, educational programs, students, and society measure the performance excellence of academic institutions through the work of its graduates who are ready to enter the workforce, equipped with critical knowledge and skills (Orlanda-Ventayen, 2020). State boards of nursing evaluate the success of an institution on its nursing graduates' first-time pass rate of licensure examinations. The National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) evaluates a graduate nurse's ability to practice safely and competently at the entry level of nursing practice (National Council of State Boards of Nursing [NCSBN], 2023a). Passing standards are reevaluated every 3 years; the Next Generation NCLEX (NGN) took effect in April 2023, incorporating case studies to better evaluate nurses' clinical judgment (NCSBN, 2023b).

Nursing institutions dedicate time, energy, and resources to develop curricula and standards around successful course and clinical completion. Many programs seek additional accreditation through organizations such as the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) or the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN; Pearson, 2023). Academic success is defined and measured by course grades

and grade point average (GPA).

Programs also may require students to successfully pass high stakes testing in order to graduate.

Student attrition rates are a concern for all universities and colleges. One study of Australian nursing students found "academic failure contributes to attrition and increases the likelihood of course attrition by 4.2 times" (Ajjawi et al., 2019, p. 185). In the United States, attrition rates of up to 50% have been reported among nursing programs (Harris et al., 2014; Henderson et al., 2019). Recognizing and supporting students with the stresses they face and reframing experiences that involve perceived failure can develop more successful graduates and nurses who are better equipped to handle the complexities of the nursing profession.

EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVE

As educators, we share the responsibility to help students develop resilience, curiosity, courage, endurance, and self-efficacy after unexpected failures. These situations provide opportunities to teach students the importance of failure and life lessons they can learn from failure (Loscalzo, 2014). Freeman and All (2017) found that mentoring and/or coaching is a common aspect of programs supporting student success. One South African program experienced increases in their students' self-confidence and a reduction in stress and anxiety related to clinical and academic performance when academic monitoring and support were added (Mudaly & Mtshali, 2018). In addition, attrition rates decreased while pass rates improved.

Test anxiety, impacting between 30% and 44% of all nursing students, limits one's ability to properly prepare or recall information during an exam and represents another area where faculty can provide support (Quinn & Peters, 2017; Warshawski et al., 2019). "Depression, poor study skills, competing demands, emotional instability, perceived chronic stress, and the student's self-concept of academic

ability are all antecedents to test anxiety among nursing students" (Quinn & Peters, 2017, p. 145).

Addressing these needs early through caring, mentoring, and equipping students to reframe their perceptions of success and failure can contribute to growth and positive coping skills.

Understanding the difference in students' definitions and priorities for success provides an important framework for future conversations (York et al., 2015). For example, a student with a 3.2 GPA can feel successful as a result of achieving academic goals and becoming a valued workforce member; the student experiences peace and self-actualization in his or her personal and professional life. Likewise, students and graduates who have a deep appreciation for success and excellence in their spiritual lives can use a failure experience to allow them to commit, accept, and allow God to choreograph his ultimate plan for their lives.

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

Failure can cause students to view themselves as imperfect, thwart their hope of accomplishment, and disrupt and delay their educational and professional efforts. Students with repeated academic failures often experience regret, inadequacy, hopelessness, and a lack of a sense of belonging. These experiences frequently are complicated with increased anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, anger, denial, and guilt. Students who experience fear of failure may tend to feel shame and self-doubt compared to students with less aptitude to fear failure. Bartels and Herman (2011) pointed out, "Individuals who fear failure tend to underutilize cognitive strategies that would enhance academic performance and over-utilize cognitive strategies that increase the odds of failure" (p. 3). After an episode with failure, students often experience emotional distress. Incorporating spiritual care "as a coping mechanism can serve as a protective factor" (Wynn, 2017, p. 234).

As followers of Jesus, we are prompted to "not grow weary while

SIDEBAR 2. Sharing My Own “Failure” Story

The process of reading and editing this article by Sharon Mingo got me thinking. How do I look at failure in my own life? How has failure played a role in my professional practice? Am I learning the lessons God is wanting to teach me?

When I look at my own failures and opportunities, I typically sound like my 2-year-old granddaughter. My thinking starts off with, *I can do this. I can do this, too!* Setting limits only causes me to dig my heels in deeper. Of course, this happens right before the work, projects, and grand ideas start to tumble out of my hands, only to land around my feet.

Two examples from my practice stand out to me. The first was working on a medical/surgical floor at a U.S. Army community hospital where our patients were active duty or retired military. Most of our staff were participating in required training and we had a limited team working the floor. I think every one of my patients was in excruciating pain.

Addressing the pain needs of my patients always has been a high priority for me. And in my mind, I can almost hear myself thinking, *I can do this. I can do this, too!* I was hurrying to get everything done. And I did, but at a cost. On that day, I would become the only nurse on the floor who stuck herself with not one, but two dirty needles in one shift.

I knew better! My self-talk as I completed incident reports, reported to the lab for bloodwork, and had a follow-up conversation with my manager wasn't the best. Sometimes we say things to ourselves that we'd never say to someone else.

The second situation that stands out has similar themes. Let's say I'm just a very slow learner. I was working in higher education at a small Christian college in my first role in academia. There was a lot to learn as I prepared lessons, exams, and graded care plans and assignments. And there were

numerous student needs. These students were investing so much into their education. I wanted to support them any way I could so they could succeed.

It wasn't at all uncommon for me to put in a 55- to 60-hour work week. Keeping up this pace over the course of a semester was exhausting. I began to increase my caffeine intake. At first it was for the extra energy boost, and then, so I could stay awake during my hour-long drive home. Coming home from a faculty-staff Christmas party, I began to fall asleep at the wheel. Not just nodding off: this was falling asleep and waking up in another lane of traffic. Fortunately, I was not traveling on a busy road. What if I had hurt someone else? I knew that if I didn't make a change, someone would be pulling me out of a ditch.

Months later, after transitioning into a new position, I began my doctoral studies. My project focused on self-care strategies to reduce compassion fatigue among nurses. Did my life reflect that self-care? Not completely. I was no longer consuming caffeine or falling asleep while driving. But God kept bringing me back to my need to care for myself. I began to finally put the pieces together for the reasons behind my tendencies to meet the needs of others. God would remind me in my quiet time that I couldn't give from a cup that was empty.

Is my story unique? In some ways, yes. But in other ways, not so much. I've spoken with numerous nursing students, nurses, and educators who have shared similar stories. The pandemic only heightened the struggles and weariness many are feeling.

I'd like to tell you I'm the model of self-care. I'm not. But I'm learning. The lessons aren't always easy, but God is always faithful. I'm learning how to set better boundaries

*Even in failure, students need to understand
God has a good plan.*

doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart” (Galatians 6:9, NKJV). As an educator who has been a part of the journey of graduates who failed their professional licensure exams after multiple attempts, I have witnessed how the unique interventions of meditating on Scripture and internalizing positive affirmations can instill hope. Table 1, *Scripture Portions and Positive Affirmation*, lists samples of Scripture and affirmations (See Table 1 as supplemental digital content [SDC] at <http://links.lww.com/NCF-JCN/A106>). Graduates I have supported have cultivated a mindset of resilience and perseverance, allowing them to

find success (Sidebar 1). The Bible affirms that we who follow Jesus can successfully navigate hardships and troubles we face; nothing in this life can alter the truth that God in Christ has given us eternal life—so deep is his love for us (Romans 8:37).

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

In failure, it is integral that we believe and act on the truth that God is sovereign, “for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13, NKJV). As Job stated after his long, traumatic ordeal, “I know that you can do everything, and that no purpose of

yours can be withheld from you” (Job 42:2, NKJV). Could failure be God's intention, holding a plan and a purpose greater than our minds could comprehend or our human eyes could see?

God can use failure to orchestrate circumstances according to his will and for his ultimate glory. He created us to glorify himself (Isaiah 43:7), even in events that seem to be failures.

The illustration of Peter's denial of Jesus shows that failure does not disqualify us from God's ultimate plan. When Jesus predicted that Peter, one of his 12 disciples, would deny knowing him, Peter declared, “Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny you!” (Matthew 26:35, NKJV). The night Jesus was arrested, Peter, when confronted about being a follower of Jesus, failed to keep his promise; he denied knowing Jesus three times.

for myself. I take time to do the little things that fill my cup: enjoying the beauty of God's creation, playing with my grandchildren, or stopping by the local thrift store to see what small treasures may be hiding there.

I'm letting others know "I need help" or "I need to talk." I've found tremendous support in the nurses who are a part of NCF's Sunday night prayer group and the women who are a part of my Alzheimer's support group. Yes, my husband has dementia—multiple forms of dementia. God knew many, many years ago that self-care would be a *have to* for me if I'm to be able to support and care for my husband as his needs progress.

The mistakes and failures I've made along the way have brought me into deeper relationship and intimacy with God. I am surrounded by his provision and blessing. It's been the greatest treasure of all for me. I pray you experience and seek the treasure of knowing God in the chaos, challenges, mistakes, and failures that are a part of your story.

—Christy Secor, DNP, RN, CDWF
NCF Professional Ministries Director,
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When he realized what he had done, he sobbed in anguish; Peter had failed Jesus (Mark 14:66–72). After Jesus' resurrection, Peter's relationship with Jesus was restored (John 21:15–17). Furthermore, Peter became the leader of the disciples and preached the first public message about Jesus' life, death, and his purpose for salvation. Acts 2:14–41 records that more than 3,000 people believed in Jesus at that gathering. Peter's failure did not disqualify him from what God intended to do.

God allows and uses failure to work good in our lives. If students were successful on every course or licensure exam, it would be easy to take all the credit for the success. Ultimately, the praise and glory in any success of a Christian is a credit to God. Amidst failure, students

should ask themselves, what can I learn from this experience? How can God use this failure in my future? (Sidebar 2).

CONCLUSION

Strategies utilizing mentoring, meditating on specific Bible portions, and positive affirmations to reframe failure have been useful to help students and graduates find success. Faculty who have implemented these strategies have enabled students to see how they could learn from and overcome failure—their failures do not define them. As students begin to work through their negative emotions, assisted by faculty, and accept a failure experience, Scripture and positive affirmations, along with mentoring and monitoring, can be incorporated into their examination preparation plans. This strategy can create a foundation of faith in the trustworthiness of God and equip students to handle situations of failure from a place of openness for what is still possible. 🙏

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Web Resources

- **Bringing God into Failure: A JCN Collection**
<https://journals.lww.com/journalofchristiannursing/pages/collectedetails.aspx?TopicalCollectionId=23>
- **What You Need to Know to Prepare for the NCLEX**
<https://www.nclex.com/prepare.page>
- **Understanding Test Anxiety and Anxiety Reduction Strategies**
https://www.unco.edu/tutoring/pdf/study-skills-resources/Understanding_Anxiety.pdf
- **Everyone Fails. Here's How to Pick Yourself Back Up**
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