

7-2009

Our University – The Right to Fail

Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc

Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our University – The Right to Fail" (2009). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 26.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/26

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Architecture at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Higher Education Policy Commentary by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

Our University – The Right to Fail

Clarion-calls for rights of every stripe fill the air on our university campuses across the nation. This is as it should be. There are those demanding the rights for the pregnant mother, and rights for the unborn, rights for the international student, and rights for the home folks, rights for people of various sexual persuasions and orientations, rights for the short, the fat, and the ugly, the tall, the skinny and the beautiful. Every kind of right you can imagine.

Everyone must have rights.

Maybe the only right that has gone out of fashion in the past few decades is the right to fail.

I have exercised this cherished right on a number of occasions, I will spare you the details save two. I once failed calculus and, in the exercise of that right, experienced a kind of liberty coupled with embarrassment and humility, that many are denied. Once I was judged to have failed at my job and relieved of my responsibilities; this too was an experience of varied dimensions but in the end, a growth opportunity of rare potential.

The other day while talking with a family and a prospective student I was told with obvious chagrin by the mom, when I inquired as to the class standing of the prospective student that, “the school no longer ranked students.” She wanted to discuss this idea with me and after a few minutes suggested that possibly his high school wanted all of its graduates to be “in the top half of the class”.

I quietly concurred with her assessment. Grade inflation, open admissions, and the diminution of performance on various measures subjective and/or objective, drive away the right to fail. On many university campuses the average grade is B.

It is a lie.

We open the barn door, and as that nag escapes, the stallion of success bolts too.

We want to live in a Ray Stevens world - you remember, “Everything is Beautiful”. A fine song maybe, but a crippling way to live because sometimes, in some settings, under some circumstances, everything is not beautiful. Sometimes everything goes to dust right before your eyes and no one, under any condition should ever be denied the exercise of this basic right.

It's just not fair.

Of course there is a way to turn any failure into success, but I will not discuss that in this venue, rather I would like you to reflect on the possibilities.

For an institution to remove the possibility of failure, i.e. being in the bottom half, is to deny someone access to a motivating force of performance, the removal of a fundamental right and the potential to be a “victim” of failure. You see, there is the problem.

The victim of failure.

I know more people who have succumbed to the perceived benefits of success. I see too many empty eyes in those deemed successful by some standard that has relieved the individual of the possibility of failure.

Sheer emptiness.

That is a long way from calculus, but a short drive from the idea that students should not be ranked, or should not be told, “Sorry, you did not score high enough, you missed the mark.” Where is the crime in this, and at what cost do we deny that right?

A school or a university where everyone succeeds is not a place of learning and is of very low value.