

Picking Yourself Up From Failure

Think back to the day you first got your acceptance letter to Berkeley. Many of you had a feeling of nervous excitement and disbelief. This feeling of optimism lasted through the first semester of your freshman year when you were meeting new friends and paving a new path for your future. For many, like myself, the happy go lucky feeling faded as you continued to take classes at Berkeley and realized that stress and worry accompanied the prestige of the university. After several semesters of slowly fading excitement, I eventually broke when I first faced my first Chemical Engineering course at Cal, Chemical Engineering 140, and received my first D. This was the first Chemical Engineering course that was meant to showcase my ability and to prove to myself that Cal and Chemical Engineering were a good fit for me, and I had failed and was unable to continue with the next part of the curriculum.

When I had first started taking the course during my sophomore year, I was like any other Chemical Engineering student, taking 4 technical classes: Physics 7B, Math 54, Chemistry 112A, and Chemical Engineering 140. Yes, for those of you who remember this dark time, these 17 units were a nightmare. I remember setting up my schedule so that I would be organized for the semester ahead. I finished SmartWorks, the online homework for Chem 112A, 2 days before it was due, and worked on the problem sets and reading ahead of time. Then, after the first few weeks, I started to get behind. I would start working on problem sets the day before they were due and would be scrambling to finish before 3 am, so I could wake up for Chemical Engineering 140 which was at 8 am the next day.

Going into my first midterm, I had done several practice problems, but boy did I not know what I was getting myself into. I started the midterm closed book section of the exam, and I felt pretty alright. Then, the open book section hit. I looked at the first problem and distinctly remember feeling powerless when I couldn't solve the 3 problems. I kept reading the problems over and over again and went into a state of panic. For twenty minutes I stared blankly at the clock unable to think or process the questions. I thought to myself, I am never going to become a chemical engineer. My brain had frozen. I was in a state of panic, and thought if I fail this midterm I will not graduate, I will not get a career, and I will not be independent. These thoughts fogged my brain and before I knew it I had 30 minutes left and a blank paper. Where did the time go? I pulled myself together and started writing down random equations and paragraphs of explanation in hopes of getting the right answer. My hands were cramping. And then it was time to turn in the exam. I rushed out of the room, hoping that no one else thought that the exam was easy. On my way out, I heard people mumbling about problems. Wait, did I do what they did? Uh oh, I didn't. My friends were smiling around me and for every smile I saw, I knew they had done well. This experience created a sense of anxiety and followed me as I continued with midterm two and eventually the final. After completing the final I knew I would

fail the course. When I received my first D, I remember being unable to process reality and having a feeling of fear that I couldn't shake.

The first step after failing a class is to just breathe and call your support system. I know for me, I just cried for several days, unable to process the fact that I would be graduating late, not with my friends and paying an increased tuition. I began to see a counselor and my self-confidence plummeted. I did not believe in myself and I felt like no one believed in me. When I attended career fairs, I was virtually scoffed at for my low grade point average. I talked to a Chevron recruiter at the Cal Career Fair who refused to even take my resume, despite my extensive extracurricular and internship experience. Some professors would tell me that I would never successfully graduate as a chemical engineer at this prestigious university. As a result, the self-doubt started to take control of all my classes. I became convinced that the university was not for me and looked to transfer to other schools. I felt stuck because my GPA was so low after failing a course, and I was not able to transfer to any other engineering major in the College of Engineering as well as any other 4 year university in my hometown.

At a prestigious University, like Cal, often, we feel intimidated to speak about these issues. As a result we feel alone and isolated. After I started opening up to people admitting to other students I failed a class, I got weird looks from my fellow chemical engineering friends and other students. However, I quickly discovered that many other students were quick to open up about their experiences as well. I found more than 10 other friends that had never told me that they had failed a class talk to me about their experiences, and I began to feel a little less alone. When I took the course again, I formed study groups with other students in a similar situation and made sure to thoroughly understand the material. I frequently attended office hours, and I going into the final, I know I am prepared to succeed in the course and the curriculum ahead.

Don't hesitate to reach out to me if you have any questions about how to continue with the curriculum, how to relay the news to family and friends, or if you just need some support. Understand that you are meant to be here and that students come in all shapes and sizes at Cal which is what makes it such an amazingly diverse university. I firmly believe we will all succeed in life and in our careers. Look around you and know that you are not alone.