

How to be an academic failure: an introduction for beginners

Carl Elliott

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How to be an academic failure? Let me count the ways. You can become a disgruntled graduate student. You can become a burned-out administrator, perhaps an associate dean. You can become an aging, solitary hermit, isolated in your own department, or you can become a media pundit, sought out by reporters but laughed at by your peers. You can exploit your graduate students and make them hate you; you can alienate your colleagues and have them whisper about you behind your back; you can pick fights with university officials and blow your chances at promotion. You can become an idealistic failure at age 25, a cynical failure at 45, or an eccentric failure at 65. If failure is what you're looking for, then you can hardly do better than the academic life. The opportunities are practically limitless.

Call me arrogant, but I like to think I have a knack for failure. Having started and abandoned one abortive career, participated in the dissolution of a major bioethics center, published dozens of articles nobody has read and given public lectures so dull that audience members were actually snoring, I think I have earned my stripes. It is true that I am not an alcoholic yet. I do not have a substance abuse problem, and no university disciplinary proceedings have been brought against me so far. I am still a novice at failure. Many other people in my own field have succeeded at failing in a far more spectacular fashion than I have, some of whom are rumored to be living in South America. But I am learning. And I think I have something to contribute.

As a director of graduate studies, I'm always getting e-mails and phone calls. "The careers office at my college has suggested that I think about becoming an embittered academic flop," these students say. "How do I do it?" It takes years and years of practice, of course. Nobody learns how to fail just like that. I know some of us make it look easy. But what looks like easy failure is often carefully constructed artifice. We *want* it to look easy. Do you think Michael Jordan's jump shot is really as easy as he makes it look? There is no such thing as effortless failure. You've got to work at it. And there are secrets to be learned. This is where I think I can help.

Picking a graduate school: this is where it all starts. Where should you go to get a headstart on disillusionment? Well, it depends on what kind of failure you want to be. If you want to flame out early, the choices are easy. One way is to pick out a third-rate university department staffed by bitter faculty members with Ivy League degrees. These people have spent years resenting the fact that their degree from Harvard or Princeton has landed them in a dismal backwater in Illinois, and they will take it out on you with a vengeance. Another way is to go straight to a high-powered department where the pressure is so intense that you pop a blood vessel after year one. When you get out of the hospital, you will find you are so intimidated that you cannot bring yourself to put a single word on paper, for fear that you will not be able to defend it properly. A third way is to pick a university department where the topic you want to work on is scoffed at and marginalized. You will then develop a defensiveness and sense of inferiority about your career that will stay with you for the rest of your life. It is an ideal way to get started.

What about interdisciplinary degrees, you ask? Aren't they supposed to be a sure-fire waste of time and money? Well, there are two schools of thought about interdisciplinary degrees, both of which have merit, depending on the kind of failed career to which you aspire. If what you are looking for is difficulty finding a job, then yes, an interdisciplinary degree can be very

useful. A degree in “social thought” or “medical humanities” or “bioethics” will limit your job opportunities drastically. When you apply for jobs in mainstream departments, the chair of the search committee will roll his eyes, laugh, and toss your CV straight into the rubbish bin. It sounds appealing, I know. Yet on the other hand, these sorts of programs are often much happier places than traditional departments, and you probably will not be expected to write narrow, technical articles uninterpretable by all but 7 other people in the world. So it is a trade-off. How much happiness are you willing to undergo for the pay-off of being unemployed later? It is a difficult choice.

Another option is to go overseas to do your degree. Some people think this is an easy path to early failure, especially if you want to work in America. Americans don't know anything about universities outside their boundaries. They don't read foreign journals and have never heard of the scholars you'll be studying with. An overseas degree will be such a handicap that you'll never find a job. “Perfect!” you think. Well, not so fast. I can't actually recommend this option, because it is what I did, and failure-wise, it was not a success. I actually had a good time, and it didn't even prevent me from getting a job. If you want to be miserable, my theory is that you're far more likely to do it successfully at home. Take the path most traveled. Travel down it so far and so often that you can do it blindfolded. Travel it with the same people, again and again, in a car pool, or a commuter train from the suburbs. You may not fail immediately, but by the time you hit mid-career you will be so bored that you start fantasizing about changing careers. Even the dean's office will start to look inviting to you, and when that happens, you will know that real misery is within your reach.

The place to get a running start on failure is when you pick your dissertation advisor. It helps to mix and match: if you're a woman, try an aging man going through a mid-life crisis; if you're a Republican, try a feminist or a Marxist. If you tend to be the fragile type, what you need is an advisor whose eyes roll back in ecstasy at the prospect of humiliating a student in class. I like to think there are three different kinds of choices here. Door number one? Professional jealousy. Door number two? Intellectual property disputes. Door number three? Sexual harassment! You win! In fact, play your cards right and you may even get all three: an advisor who hits on you, steals your ideas, then torches your career out of envy.

What about professional mentors? you ask. Shouldn't I just apprentice myself to a more senior failure who can guide my career? Good question. One strategy is to find a senior or mid-career scholar whose own career is stalled. If you're lucky, she'll be desperate to hang onto some shred of credibility and will still have a couple of hefty research grants. She'll hire you on as a research assistant, have you write up some papers for her, then add on her name as a co-author. I know what you are thinking. You are thinking: isn't this a recipe for success? Publications with a well-known co-author? Maybe so, but that's only in the short term. Soon you will find yourself angry and embittered at sharing the credit for your paper with someone else simply because they pay your salary. You will confront them, quarrel, and before you know it: Presto! You've gotten the sack! Out you go, without even a proper letter of recommendation. Your career is effectively finished.

This brings up the tricky topic of academic publishing. If you are intent on failure, I would recommend not writing any scholarly articles at all. If you insist on writing, then make sure you write well. The paradox of writing academic articles is this: the worse the writing, the more likely the paper is to be published. Most academic journals have an unwritten rule to this effect. If you send them well-written articles, they will keep rejecting them until you rewrite the articles using the passive voice, arcane jargon and pages of irrelevant footnotes. So if you want your tenure bid to be turned down, or hundreds of rejection letters when you apply for jobs, you

had better forget about bad writing. Bad writing results in publication, and publication results in jobs, promotion, and tenure.

Don't get me wrong. Bad writing does not inevitably lead to success. Done properly, it can lead to failure too. When that happens, you know you've really found something special. In the failure business, bad writing is its own punishment. Experienced writers will tell you, there is nothing quite like that sinking feeling you get when you see one of your badly written articles in print. Especially when the argument is wrong, or patently stupid, or you have made a lame joke that isn't funny. Of course, most academic articles are never read by anyone apart from the journal editor and a couple of anonymous reviewers. But occasionally some of your professional colleagues take notice, or even start quoting sentences from your bad articles in their own articles, and then things can really take off. Some people call this professional humiliation rather than failure, but I say take what you can get. Humiliation counts for something too, doesn't it?

What if you succeed despite all this and find yourself working at a major university, maybe even with tenure? Does this mean it's all over? It might seem so, unless you count boredom, alienation and general professional crankiness. Of course there are the inevitable departmental quarrels. You can whine about office space, hiring decisions, and graduate students. You can pitch the occasional fit about your parking space. You can work up a good head of resentment about your meager salary. But these are generally classified under the heading of "self-inflicted professional misery" rather than "professional failure." Let's be honest here. Despite your best efforts, you may actually find yourself enjoying the academic life. Students look up to you; you can hang around with professional colleagues as odd as you are; and you get to spend a lot of time sending e-mail messages to your friends. You even get a sabbatical every seventh year. You might start to look around at your friends practicing dentistry or proctology or punching a clock in an accounting office and start to think, "Hey, this isn't that bad. What can I do to ruin it?"

Here is where bioethics has something unique to offer. What other academic field requires you to issue strident moral challenges to the very people who pay your salary and sit on your tenure committee? If you are feeling a little too comfortable with success, it doesn't usually take much work to dig up some sort of ethical problem to expose. Conflict of interest, research scandals, malpractice lawsuits in waiting -- any of these will do. Go to a dean or a hospital administrator, kick up a fuss with your Institutional Review Board, or if you're really feeling lucky, go straight to the media. Bang, you're dead! Professional suicide! This is the beauty part. In bioethics, there is always somebody for you to alienate. Take a step in one direction and you piss off the activists. Take a step back and you anger the doctors. Step to the right and the dean wants your head. Step to the left and the media will crucify you. Pretty soon you'll find yourself hopping around like a hyperactive five-year-old who has forgotten his Ritalin. One day you will come into work and find the locks changed on your office door. When that happens, sit back, have a cigar, and start looking through the want ads. Congratulate yourself on a job well done.