



## Succeed Through Our Failures: Learning to Fail Productively

### Activity 1: Tony's First Semester of Grad School

Tony had been feeling excited about starting grad school, because he did well as an undergrad. He completed his bachelor's degree in three and a half years, had multiple research experiences in industry and academia, and earned a co-authorship on a publication. But in his first semester in grad school, he failed a critical class and was deeply disappointed. *Carefully read about Tony, who is based upon a real student, to analyze his situation and consider how he can improve.*

Tony had always done well as a student. During high school, he completed many Advanced Placement courses and received college credit for them. This allowed him to skip many first-year courses as an undergrad, and start with second-year courses. His start to college was a little rocky because he was taking classes with sophomores, but he earned A's in his major. He later took two grad-level courses and earned A's in both of them. He completed his bachelor's degree in 3.5 years with a GPA of 3.2.

Because of his early start, he also started doing research early. He worked for two different labs at his college, and one project led to a co-authored publications. He also completed three internships in industry to expand his experiences.

Tony knew that this undergrad institution was not ranked the highest in his field, but he still felt confident because of his past successes. His new grad school was ranked in the top ten nationally, and so he expected an increase in the rigor and standards among the grad students. He was a little uncertain of how he might do in the coursework, but his application for grad school went through smoothly, and so he felt confident.

As he began grad school, he continued similar extracurricular activities. He played on the school's ultimate frisbee team and biked with the local cycling club regularly. He took his sports seriously, and so worked out daily. This didn't allow time for studying with friends, but Tony preferred to work and study alone.

For Tony's first semester, he had to juggle coursework, looking for a research group to join, and TA-ing. The coursework and research felt similar, but he had never TA-ed before. He was afraid to embarrass himself in front of his

students, but he devoted a lot of time and energy in his preparations to help him feel more confident and comfortable.

His grad school was also significantly bigger than his undergrad institution, so he felt more like a number among all the other grad students. He didn't really connect with his classmates, but he preferred to hang out with his roommate, who was a friend from his undergrad institution.

As Tony studied for his courses, he was unaccustomed to the teaching styles. The faculty didn't closely follow the textbook, and instead used lots of journal articles.

Overwhelmed with all the reading, he was uncertain about what to focus on. After the first exam, he realized that he was having trouble because his score was below the average. But he wasn't exactly sure what his score meant. He heard that faculty generally gave out mostly A's and B's, but C's were also given to those students at the bottom. The faculty didn't clearly correlate scores with letter grades, but Tony didn't feel comfortable approaching the faculty and asking if he was in the C range.

For the final exam, Tony realized that he needed to improve. So he started working out less, and studying more. But juggling all of his activities had been difficult, so he arrived at the final exam late. He had a hard time focusing on the final, but did his best.

A few days after the final exam, his PI called him into his office and closed the door. He told Tony that he had actually the lowest score on the final, and gotten a C in the course. Tony didn't know what was worse: his poor performance, or the fact that his PI now knew of his failure. He felt ashamed also when he had to tell his parents about the failing grade.

During the Christmas break, it was hard to feel motivated to do much. He was deeply discouraged, ashamed, and tired. Tony had never gotten an F, or even a D before. So he didn't quite understand what he was feeling and what to do. In his program, he would need to repeat the same course and earn an A. But he felt embarrassed that he would be taking the course as a 2<sup>nd</sup> year student among 1<sup>st</sup> years.

- Analyze Tony's transition. What were some similarities and differences for Tony between his undergrad and grad school? What are some important differences in general for most students, and for you?
- Analyze Tony's self-assessment and metacognitive skills. Do you think he had a good assessment of himself, his peers, and his new situation in grad school? What are some simple things he can do to improve his self-assessment?
- As Tony prepares to repeat this course, what do you think he needs to do differently to improve?