

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

How Students Experience Failing a Course

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Existing research explains academic course failure with two contrasting narratives; one narrative is negative, and the other is more hopeful. To reconcile these contrasting narratives, this study explored students' perspectives on failing a course. The findings offer practical implications for higher education policy, student-faculty/staff relationships, and institutional efforts.

According to much of the existing research on academic course failure, there are two narratives. In one narrative, academic course failure is a problem to be avoided, and it generally has negative outcomes for students such as dropping out of college, loss of financial aid, decreased self-esteem, procrastination, and avoiding others (Ajjawi, *et al.* 2020; Mabel and Britton 2018; Marade and Brinthaupt 2018; Santor, *et al.* 2020; Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner 2014). In contrast, another more hopeful narrative suggests that students who have failed courses learn valuable lessons from the experience; these students go on to learn skills that help them tutor and teach other students, develop more positive help-seeking behaviors, and acquire a growth perspective on competence and ability (Carr, *et al.* 2021; Dibbs 2019; Jones 2019).

Researchers have also outlined a consistent set of factors that contribute to course failure, including ineffective study habits, physical and mental health challenges, lack of motivation, lack of academic pre-

paredness, competing family and work responsibilities, weak curriculum design, and uncaring faculty (Ajjawi, *et al.* 2020; Cherif, *et al.* 2013; Crosta 2013; Dibbs 2019; Jones 2019). However, these factors do not explain why two opposing narratives exist.

These two narratives of academic course failure introduce questions about the true nature of academic course failure and about the dynamics of the factors that contribute to it. Why is it that some students fail while others do not in seemingly similar circumstances? Understanding the phenomenon of course failure from the student perspective offers an opportunity to reconcile these narratives.

The purpose of this study was to illuminate the phenomenon of failing a class from the perspective of undergraduates at a public, regional university. The participants in this study had failed a course but were in good academic standing. Through participant interviews, the author described the phenomenon of academic course failure and uncovered the “underlying

structures” of the experience of course failure (Moustakas 1994, 13). The result of this study can support researchers and practitioners in their approaches to addressing academic course failure and identify a more precise starting point for approaching course failure in higher education.

The question that guided this research was, “How do undergraduates in good academic standing experience failing a course?”

Theoretical Framework

The philosophy of phenomenology is the study of the structure of experience (Moran 2000). Transcendental phenomenology is the theoretical framework that guided this study. Transcendental phenomenology is concerned with describing and constructing the patterns and frameworks for how individuals experience phenomena, or things.

Consider the experience of sitting in a chair. No matter the appearance of a chair, where it is built, or who crafts it, one essential aspect of the experience of sitting in a chair is having support. Without this elemental constituent, one will not have the experience of sitting in a chair. Transcendental phenomenology offers a way to uncover the essential constituents of a range of human experiences. The intent of phenomenology is to expose the “pure essence” of a phenomenon. The essence of any phenomenon is that which makes it what it is (Peoples 2021, 30).

According to Husserl, individuals typically experience the world through the “natural attitude,” that is “taken-for-granted experiences as we live through them without any reflective awareness” (Beck 2021, 11). Husserl believed that phenomenology, not the natural attitude, should be the first step in any inquiry because phenomenology begins with “the things themselves,” and not assumptions about those things (Husserl 1900/2001, 168). To ensure that the natural attitude did not inform this research, this study was not guided by any assumptions about what it is like to experience academic course failure; it also did not employ any theories that might deductively explain the phenomenon of academic course failure.

Literature Review

This conceptual literature review presents four themes for how researchers and practitioners approach academic course failure. First, researchers often establish the value of studying academic course failure as a way to contribute to a larger conversation about retention and related concepts of dropout and degree completion (Ajjawi 2020; Van Duser, *et al.* 2021). Additionally, they posit that addressing low retention rates can decrease the institutional, national, and personal funds that are wasted and the earnings that are forgone when students are not retained to graduation (Koch 2017; Jones 2019).

Second, researchers conceptualize failure as a phenomenon that needs to be reframed. Many researchers first acknowledge the adverse effects of failure: failure’s emotional toll (Ajjawi, *et al.* 2021), professional impact (Carr, *et al.* 2021), psychosocially stigmatizing effect (Feigenbaum 2021), and influence on mental health (Santor, *et al.* 2020). These effects have been found to be more prevalent among Students of Color, low-income students, and first-generation college students (Koch 2017; Feigenbaum 2021). Researchers then conceptualize a reframing of failure by highlighting the successes some students achieve after failure (Ajjawi, *et al.* 2021; Carr, *et al.* 2021; Dibbs 2019; Jones 2019) and by destigmatizing failure (Feigenbaum 2021).

Third, the results of this body of research establish academic course failure as a multidimensional phenomenon. The four dimensions are dispositional factors, like motivation and confidence; situational factors, like work and family responsibilities; institutional factors, like timing and content of feedback on assignments; and academic skills and behaviors, like study habits and completing homework (Ajjawi, *et al.* 2020; Cherif, *et al.* 2013; Crosta 2013; Dibbs 2019; Van Duser, *et al.* 2021).

Fourth, researchers have identified several agents who are responsible for course failure, including students, faculty, and institutional structures (Ajjawi, *et al.* 2020; Cherif, *et al.* 2013; Dibbs 2019; Hanley, *et al.* 2015). Some researchers, like Van Duser, *et al.* (2021), have problematized positions that suggest students are the only agent of responsibility, and some have highlighted institutional forces that contribute to student

TABLE 1 ► Description of Participants

Participant	Classification	Description of Academic Course Failure	Self-Reported Sex	Self-Reported Race/Ethnic Status
P1	Senior	► Withdrew from a developmental math course	Female	White/Hispanic
P2	Senior	► Received a C in an entry-level major course ► Dropped a business analytics course several times	Male	Latino
P4	Junior	► Received multiple Fs in a semester	Male	White
P5	Junior	► Received an F in anatomy and physiology course ► Failed a math course twice, including one D	Female	African American
P7	Junior	► Placed on academic probation due to low GPA	Female	Asian
P9	Junior	► Received an F in a math course	Female	Hispanic

failure experiences (Dibbs 2019; Cox 2009; Crosta 2013; Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner 2014).

This review of the limited literature on course failure demonstrated how the phenomenon of failing a course is valued, conceptualized, constituted, and enacted. It also revealed some contradictions in who is responsible for course failure and whose perspectives are valid for studying the phenomenon, contradictions that can be reconciled through a phenomenological approach to studying academic course failure.

Methodology

Phenomenology offered the best methodology to answer the research question because the method of descriptive phenomenology strips a phenomenon down to all its essential components and because it allows the researcher to see into the experience of others.

This study also employed qualitative secondary analysis or QSA: "...the re-analysis of data for the purpose of answering the original research question with better statistical techniques or answering new questions with old data" (Glaser 1976, 3). Heaton's (2008) classification of acceptable methods of obtaining data sets and types of analysis within QSA was used to evaluate the suitability of the data for QSA. Additionally, Sherif's (2018) assessment rubric was used to evaluate data quality and sufficiency for using QSA.

Research Design

The data for this project came from a study on course failure rates at Opportunity State University (OSU), a large, residential, regional, public institution located in the Southwest.

The original case study involved interviews with students and two surveys. Six of the 24 interview transcripts from that case study were the data sources for this phenomenology. Most student interview participants were involved in academic support programs with a concentration of Students of Color, low-income students, and first-generation college students. All participants had received a D in a course, received an F in a course, or withdrawn from a course, and they later passed the course and/or were in good academic standing.

Table 1 describes the classification, description of academic course failure, self-reported sex, and self-reported race or ethnicity for each participant. Each participant is identified with a number (P1 stands for Participant 1) since participants were not given the opportunity to select a pseudonym in the original study and assigning pseudonyms can introduce or impose bias (Lahman, *et al.* 2015).

Data Analysis

The primary method of data analysis, Giorgi's (1985) descriptive phenomenological method, was supplemented with the methods of Colaizzi (1978) and Hycner (1985)

where appropriate. Data analysis was comprised of six steps:

1. Read to gain a sense of the whole.
2. Extract significant statements.
3. Discriminate meaning units with a focus on the phenomena of study and the research question.
4. Transform meaning units from “everyday expressions” to phenomenological expressions by uncovering their formulated meanings.
5. Cluster the meaning units into themes.
6. Synthesize meaning units to form the structure of the phenomenon.

Four strategies were used to ensure the rigor of this study.

- The tenets of phenomenology were used to guide the sampling criteria. The entirety of the research approach and design were theoretically driven as well.
- Descriptive phenomenology has a laborious data analysis procedure, but all of it was documented through a careful document trail.
- Because the author used secondary data and could not confirm the findings with the participants, it was imperative to employ negative case analysis: the author used the participants’ thoughts and words to refine the results by seeking out findings that contradicted or disconfirmed other findings.
- Verbatim transcription ensured that the starting point for the data analysis was exactly transcribed interview transcripts. No liberties were taken in recording the participants’ responses.

Descriptive phenomenological analysis produces constituents. The constituents make up the pattern that is present when one experiences academic course failure. The constituents are equal and essential components of the experience; they are interdependent, and they must be understood in the contexts in which they were experienced. Constituents form the structure that is necessary for the experience of failing a course to exist.

Findings

The pattern of the experience of academic course failure is comprised of twelve constituents. In other words, any time academic course failure is experienced by an undergraduate who is subsequently in good academic standing, twelve constituents make up that student’s experience. Table 2 (on page 15) outlines each constituent and a brief description.

An Exhaustive Description of the Constituents

The interview transcripts provided extensive descriptions of each constituent. This paper will highlight three of the twelve constituents¹: three realms through which failure is experienced, a multi-realm problem to be solved, a resolution to the problem, and being or feeling alone across realms.

Three Realms Through Which the Phenomenon Is Experienced

The participants experienced the phenomenon in three realms: the outside-of-class realm, the institutional realm, and the course realm. For some participants, the outside-of-class realm included the experience of a new environment. P9 stated, “I was a freshman, first gen, um, I didn’t really know like what resources I had, what I could do, who I could talk to and whatnot.” Being a newcomer at the beginning of entry into a new environment impacted how these participants experienced the courses they failed. However, their newcomer-in-a-new-environment status was not created or situated within the courses they failed; they brought that status into the course.

In the institutional realm, participants interacted with institutional representatives like faculty and staff and with institutional processes. For example, P5 began her narrative with her perception of the department of one of the courses she failed multiple times:

I don’t know if it’s just me, but more than half of my class failed when I took that class, because I’ve taken it twice

¹ To ensure that this paper maintained a manageable length, only three constituents have been highlighted. However, the author is happy to respond to reader requests for exhaustive descriptions of the other constituents.

TABLE 2 ► Description of the 12 Constituents of the Phenomenon of Failing a Course

Constituent	Description
Naming the phenomenon	Participants used varied language to describe the phenomenon that they equated with academic course failure: making a C in a course, making a D in a course, making an F in a course, and withdrawing from a course. Across these descriptions, the one constant was that each participant's experience involved some type of insufficiency in the course.
Three realms through which the phenomenon is experienced: the outside-of-class realm, institutional realm, and course realm	Participants experienced failing a course in three realms. These realms had fluid boundaries and did not occur in a specific order. The outside-of-class realm included aspects of participants' identity; the institutional realm included interactions between participants and faculty and staff and between participants and institutional processes; and the course realm involved signals participants received about their course performance.
Identified agents of responsibility, always including self	Participants expressed active agency for their course failure experiences. They discussed their responsibility when they shared actions, consequences, and emotional states. However, other agents who contributed positively and negatively to participants' course failure experiences were the institution and family members.
A multi-realm problem to be solved	Participants experienced course failure as a fundamental problem that occurred in more than one of the three realms (outside-of-class, institutional, and course). They experienced the problem in the course realm because it contained a course that needed to be passed, but participants often situated the problem in other realms.
A resolution to the problem that is often institutionally influenced	Participants always attempted to solve the fundamental problems of their failure experience, but their options for resolution were influenced by institutional requirements like retaking required courses or maintaining a certain GPA.
Seeking relief	All participants sought relief from the fundamental problem involved in their failure experience; most participants sought and experienced relief by dropping a course. However, participants who were not able to "fix" significant aspects of their fundamental problems, like sub-par teaching, or who did not fully understand why they failed did not experience relief from the emotional burdens of their failure experiences until they were interviewed.
A self- or co-authored rationale for the immediate resolution	The rationale that led to each participant's resolution was either self-authored or co-authored with the help of parents. While these rationales led to similar actions across participants, like dropping a class, the rationales were unique to each participant. Participant rationales included providing oneself flexibility and compassion in challenging courses, commitment to a degree plan and career, and working hard to receive deserved benefits.
A multi-realm rationale that contributes to an overarching personal framework for processing the experience	Each participant's rationale contributed to an overarching framework through which participants processed the experience of failing a course and other aspects of life. This framework demonstrates the connection of the experience of the phenomenon of academic course failure to other aspects of the participants' lives, particularly their persistence through and valuation of college.
Being or feeling alone across realms	Throughout their experiences of the phenomenon, participants expressed that they were or felt alone. Some participants were or felt a no-one-understands aloneness, expressing that there was no one who understood the circumstances they were experiencing. Other participants described a dimension of aloneness that was connected to care. They expressed a lack of individuals who cared about them during their failure experience.
Experiencing strong emotions across realms	Participants felt the experience of failing a course through strong, adverse emotions. Often, these emotions were crippling. These strong emotions were caused by circumstances in all three realms.
Unawareness while experiencing the phenomenon	While participants experienced the phenomenon of academic course failure, they demonstrated an unawareness that was only retrospectively evident. This unawareness was related to personal performance, institutional processes, and institutional support.
The action of shoving something out of the participant's life	The push-pull action of shoving something out of each participant's life and holding onto something in each participant's life encompasses the components of learning, making mistakes, and learning from mistakes.

with the two different teachers, and both times, my experience wasn't good.

P5 situated her experience of the phenomenon in the institutional realm from the outset of her narrative and suggested that interactions with institutional representatives contributed to failure.

In the course realm, participants received signals about their course performance and comprehension of course material and they responded to those signals. Participants always responded to the signals, though in a variety of ways. One student responded to the course she failed by avoiding it; another sought help through an online resource.

A Problem that Occurred in Multiple Realms

The participants experienced academic course failure as a multi-realm problem. The problem always included the course realm because it contained a course that needed to be passed, but it included other realms as well. The problem that P4 identified concerned his approach to his studies and future career:

I was looking at English and history, but I'm just not the biggest fan of political science, you know, governmental body and stuff. Just not my cup of tea...So I like poetry. I like writing. So, I really wanted to do English. So, I'm much more satisfied with that.

Throughout his narrative, P4 identified his fundamental problem as a lack of realism about his preferences and abilities. The result of this problem was that P4 took courses in which he had little interest.

Participants' fundamental problems were often multifaceted, but in most cases, participants were able to clearly verbalize the fundamental problem of their experience of the phenomenon. However, this clarity evaded P5 and P9. They could name elements of the problem, but the elements were not tightly bound into a problem that was easy to articulate. The diffuse nature of their fundamental problems would have implications for other components of their experience of the phenomenon.

Being or Feeling Alone

Participants expressed that they were or felt alone throughout their experiences of failing a course. This constituent manifested in two ways. Some participants felt a no-one-understands aloneness. For P1, to be alone was to be "on my own." P1 felt alone because of her distance from home, but she also shared that she was alone because she "had nobody who's been in the same experience as I was going through." Meaningfully, P1 did reach out and receive critical support from her parents, but since P1's parents had not been to college, their support did not alleviate or refute her position that no one understood. Other participants described a dimension of aloneness that was connected to care. As she summarized her experiences of academic course failure, P5 reflected, "I feel like if somebody would have told me, 'Oh, there's people who actually want to help you,' I probably wouldn't have failed the first time." Here, P5 associated being alone with not having people who desired to help her.

Discussion

The results of this study both support and diverge from the four themes identified in the literature review. Regarding the first, researchers often establish the value of studying academic course failure as a way to contribute to a larger conversation about retention (Ajjawi, *et al.* 2020; Van Duser, *et al.* 2021), but overall, participants' narratives did not connect to retention.

In the second theme, researchers conceptualize failure as a concept that needs to be reframed because of failure's negative effects (Ajjawi, *et al.* 2019; Cox 2009; Feigenbaum 2021; Jones 2019). Participants' narratives affirmed the adverse effects of failure, particularly through the strong emotions that they experienced. However, reframing failure was not consistently articulated across participant narratives.

Consistent with the third theme, the findings of research on academic course failure established that academic course failure is a multidimensional phenomenon (Ajjawi, *et al.* 2020; Cherif, *et al.* 2013; Crosta 2013; Dibbs 2019; Van Duser, *et al.* 2021). The three realms through which academic course failure is experienced

affirmed the intrinsically multidimensional nature of the phenomenon.

According to the fourth theme of research on academic course failure, the phenomenon of failing a course is enacted by agents of responsibility, which generally include students, faculty, and institutional structures (Cherif, *et al.* 2013; Cox 2009; Hanley, *et al.* 2015). In their narratives, each participant identified agents that bore responsibility for the failure experience; participants always included themselves. However, the presence of institutional representatives in participants' narratives often reflected an unbalanced power dynamic between participants and institutional representatives.

Participants also provided alternative viewpoints to those present in the literature. Participants attributed value to academic course failure because of its active function in clarifying their visions and beliefs. For example, was working and making money a greater priority than good grades? Experiencing academic course failure had a clarifying function: it helped participants judge their options and make optimal decisions.

Participants conceptualized the phenomenon through problem solving; their narratives described identifying a problem and fixing it. Since a multi-realm problem is an essential constituent of the phenomenon, it is appropriate that problem-solving was a central activity within participants' experiences.

Implications

Because the constituents of academic course failure form a framework for what it is like to experience failing a course, exploring these constituents can be likened to walking through an experiential museum of course failure. The heightened understanding of the experience of failing a course that this framework provides has implications for how researchers and practitioners approach the phenomenon of failing a course. These implications can inform how we should think about course failure.

One implication is that institutional responsibility is paramount to approaching academic course failure. This implication is represented in constituent three: identified agents of responsibility, always including self. In

their narratives, participants specified what they had or had not done that contributed to their failure experience. Even though their strategies proved ineffective, participants took ownership by talking about what they did: proactively seeking help from a professor, determining not to give up, and looking up the content online to help them understand the content better.

However, even though most participants did not name the institution, the institution demonstrated some responsibility for their failure experiences. Perhaps it was because information was not communicated to the participants, because institutional processes were too complicated or were not transparent, or because participants sought out help and were turned away. Their stories reveal that failure cannot be a one-player game. Based on this implication, the question institutions should ask is not just, "How can we help our students make better choices or engage in more beneficial behaviors?" The question becomes, "How can we change our behavior to ensure that we are not contributing to students' failure experiences?"

The second implication is that academic course failure is an equity concern. Because, according to constituent two, academic course failure is inherently a multi-realm experience, students who experience more conflicts within and across realms are more likely to fail courses. Realm conflict is not arbitrary; research has established that certain groups of students experience greater challenges within the three realms. For example, researchers have identified challenges related to time, finances, and academic preparation for older students, low-income students, and Students of Color (Crosta 2013; Castleman and Meyer 2019; Kasper, Walleiser, and Waters 2020; Pulliam and Sasso 2016). On individual campuses, these students have labels: minoritized, marginalized, underrepresented, at risk, and disadvantaged, among others. Academic course failure becomes an equity concern since it is more likely when students experience greater disadvantage and less likely when students possess more privilege.

The third implication stems from constituent seven: a self or co-authored rationale. Alone or with the support of a parent, participants developed rationales that in-

formed their resolutions to their fundamental problems. Since these fundamental problems were not simply that the participants had failed a course, participants' rationales included things unconnected to academic skills or a specific failed course, things like asking for help, being realistic, and being persistent. Significantly, members of the institution were never involved in helping the participants of this study develop their rationales. There were possibilities of positive collaborations between participants and the institution, but these never manifested into anything that helped participants navigate the experience. For instance, P5 did share her desire to drop a class that she eventually failed with an academic advisor, but the advisor gave P5 an alternative rationale and an alternative solution that, P5 lamented, were not in P5's best interest in the end and actually prolonged the negative impacts of her failure experiences.

This mismatch of perspectives echoes the differences in the value related to academic course failure. Researchers have attributed value to academic course failure because of its connection to retention, but the participants never mentioned retention (or related concepts of persistence and dropout). Participants connected the value of academic course failure to its function in clarifying beliefs and decisions. As P5's situation demonstrates, these differences in perspective can inhibit the ability of institutional representatives to have a more supportive role in academic course failure experiences. Unfortunately, the institutional representatives who appeared in this study only negatively contributed to academic course failure. The implication connected to the seventh constituent is that without an accurate understanding of both the experience of academic course failure and students' values and personal trajectories of failure, institutional representatives will be relegated to being agents who cause students to fail and not agents who help students navigate failure.

Recommendations

In conclusion, the following are recommendations for grounding theory in practice. Here are three ways prac-

titioners can challenge the natural attitude and ground their efforts to approach academic course failure in the constituents of the phenomenon.

- Enact systems that bypass the natural attitude about academic course failure and challenge what those in higher education assume failure to be. Such systems should uncover individual campuses' unique landscape of academic failure. Constructing this landscape involves thorough questioning: how many students fail a course each semester? Which students are more and less likely to fail particular courses?
- Identify the outside-of-class, institutional, and course realm conflicts that an institution's students experience when they fail courses. Compare these identified conflicts with the institutional community's perceptions of academic course failure, and use evidence to change these perceptions where appropriate.
- Question the assumptions behind processes, procedures, and policies around failure. Think about institutional incomplete, probation, or suspension policies: are the assumptions these policies make about why students fail accurate? There are also financial aid policies, other academic policies, and many institutional processes and procedures that intersect with academic course failure.

The findings of this study show that simply knowing the factors that contribute to academic course failure provides an incomplete picture of students' experiences. The experience of the phenomenon of academic course failure is complex. Understanding how students experience failure can help higher education to celebrate and honor students' tenacity, their wisdom, and the challenges they face in pursuit of higher education. Such an understanding also repositions academic course failure as not just something that those who work in higher education help students navigate, but as an experience for which practitioners bear some responsibility to address.

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About the Author



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Candice Wilson-Stykes, Ph.D., engages in independent research projects to support institutions of higher education and their students. Her research interests are the

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