One month into college I found myself in a place that I never expected to be. This place was room 834 of McCormick with a failed exam in my hands.

When I had taken the test a week prior, I had an uneasy feeling in my stomach because I was not sure if I was answering all of the questions correctly. However, I quickly reminded myself that I had studied and thus declared the uneasiness to simply be nerves since it was my first college level exam. When the fifty minutes were over, I turned in the exam to my professor confidently and I was off to my next class.

A week later our professor had a stack of papers in his briefcase that had to be the exams. At the sight of this I had butterflies in my stomach. I was excited to see how well I had done, confident that I had gotten an A. This was always the case in high school so I wasn’t expecting any less on this morning.

As many of you may have suspected, thanks to my overconfidence and ignorance towards the difference between college academics and high school academics, I was more than disappointed at the grade that was staring at me and taunting me. I could practically hear the low percentage chanting, “loser, loser, loser!” and mocking me in my seat. I stormed out of the class, feeling angry at my professor. It was obviously his fault that I had failed this test. This had never happened to me before. He must have graded it too harshly, he failed to properly prepare me for the exam, and the test consisted of uncovered material. From the moment I left the classroom until the moment I threw myself on my dorm room futon, I had thought of a million reasons why he was to blame for all of this. I had studied. There was no way that I was responsible.

Before sitting down to page through the exam and come face to face with my errors, I practiced my normal bad situation routine; this consisted of destroying an innocent burger and a side of onion rings and posting a dramatic Facebook status. 1000 calories and zero Facebook ‘likes’ later, and I was able to call an end to my pity party and accept that it may not be the professor’s fault that I did so poorly. I began to evaluate my responsibility. “Did I go to all of the lectures?” Yes. “Did I pay attention in class?” Yes. “Did I study well?”... At this question I had to pause. Well, I had studied like I did in high school. I paid attention, took notes, and skimmed through the material the night before the test. Was this considered “studying well?”

Come morning, the grade was still on my mind. I stopped by my professor’s office hours since so many people talked about how helpful these were. We started by going over the test. He pointed out my math mistakes and explained some of the more conceptual questions. After we had gone over the exam, I asked, “Is there some big secret to studying for your tests? I thought I had done enough to prepare but this clearly wasn’t the case. I’m a little confused on where I went wrong. Maybe I’m not a chemistry kind of person...”

“First of all,” he said, “By calling yourself ‘not a chemistry kind of person’ you’re setting yourself up not to be. You’re already accepting failure. Second of all, how did you study? If you just tried to memorize equations and vocabulary versus actually understanding the material, you’ve learned nothing. Make sure you’re grasping a concept, not just learning how to regurgitate it. Lastly, make some friends in the class and study together. Talking about the material is the best way to understand it. As I thanked him and got up to leave, he stopped me and said, “You failed this exam, but luckily we have three more. Make it a goal not to let it happen again.”
I cannot tell you that the rest of my semester was unbelievably easy after hearing his advice. We are students at Marquette and the academics aren’t meant to be a breeze. I can tell you though, that changing my study habits paid off and resulted in an AB in the class; a grade that seemed unrealistic after failing that first exam.

The great part about my struggles in the past three years, however, is that they have led me to great discoveries about how to best study, how to best balance my classes with work and extra-curriculars, and ultimately how to succeed as a student at Marquette. My chemistry professor led me on a path towards academic success and I have only continued to grow as a student from that point.

In terms of my academics, the difference between my freshmen year and now is that I now view these failures as opportunities to grow as a student. I also now resort to eating 1000 calories of Sobelman’s (the local burger restaurant on campus) in only the most severe of cases. Each of your students will struggle at some point in these next few years. Remind them that what may seem like the end of the world at the time may just end up being a small speed bump in their road to success. Also, remind them of the resources they have available whether it be office hours, tutoring, etc. One of the greatest parts of Marquette is the willingness of faculty to help students succeed.

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