

## The Harvard Success-Failure Project

For almost 20 years the Harvard Success-Failure Project created a broad range of programming to facilitate reflection and conversation about what it means to be “successful,” and what it means to make mistakes or to “fail.” The Project offered many activities and initiatives, including panel discussions, faculty-student dialogues, and workshops, and served as a placement site for interns from Harvard’s Graduate Students of Education and participants in Harvard’s Administrative Fellowship Program. The Success-Failure Project garnered national attention and spawned several related initiatives on many campuses. The BSC was permanently closed in December 2019, along with the SF Project.

The Harvard Success-Failure Project began with reflection and conversation about the lives of students. In approximately the year 2000, a number of staff members from Harvard’s Bureau of Study Counsel and Office of Career Services held a retreat to share ideas and experiences. Both offices had observed that some students focused on grades to the detriment of their ability to enjoy learning and that many students considered only a small number of possible career paths (medicine, law, and investment banking). This seemed to be in part because those paths were associated with students’ conception of a “successful” life, and they tended to gravitate toward those few paths without much reflection.

Following that retreat, a working group chaired by Ariel Phillips met several times to consider possible action steps and, beginning in 2000, Ariel was invited by Harvard’s Admissions Office to organize and moderate several panels on the topic of “Perspectives on Success and Failure in College” for the parents of prospective Harvard College students.

Subsequently, the staff of the Bureau of Study Counsel began incorporating material about success and failure into many of their workshops and campus activities. The SF Project website featured many written materials and videos of faculty members, students, and staff telling personal stories and discussing these themes. These included the addition of Abigail Lipson’s *Reflections on Rejections*, a collection of actual rejections letters and videos featuring Harvard faculty, alumni, and administrators.

The Success-Failure Project spawned many conversations, reflections, exhibits, panels, and other activities, both at Harvard and beyond. In 2016, thirteen institutions of higher learning formed the [Academic Resilience Consortium](#) (formerly the Resilience Consortium) as a means to share their related programming and experiences.

c. 2020 Ariel Phillips