

“Failure Deprived” - the Actual Problem is a Lack of Failure :

Resilience Strengthening Initiatives in U.S. Universities

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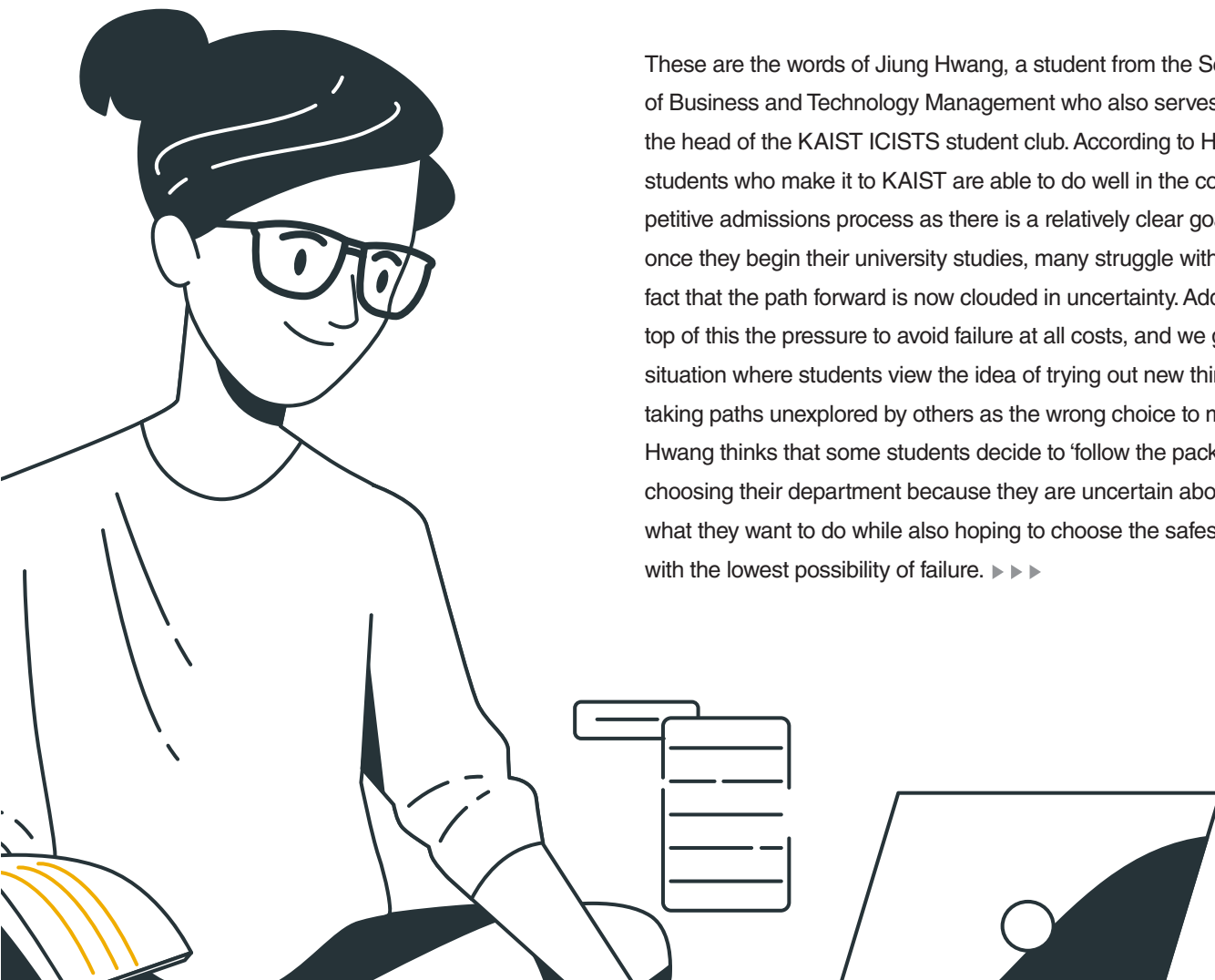
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The model student paradox

“Most undergraduate students who entered KAIST after graduating from a high school in Korea would have entered the school through the comprehensive student record screening. A student who makes it into KAIST via this route is likely to have a near flawless academic record throughout their three years in high school. In other words, KAIST is home to many individuals who have lived much of their lives as ‘model students.’ Because of this, many students feel as if failure is not an option for them while in KAIST, and it feels like students are pressured to show a perfect image of themselves to their peers. Despite the fact that mental strength can be cultivated by bouncing back after a dip in grades or a fall in status, students who have experienced Korea’s admission process seem to feel as if making a step backward is unacceptable, whether it be in school or in society as a whole.”

These are the words of Jiung Hwang, a student from the School of Business and Technology Management who also serves as the head of the KAIST ICISTS student club. According to Hwang, students who make it to KAIST are able to do well in the competitive admissions process as there is a relatively clear goal, but once they begin their university studies, many struggle with the fact that the path forward is now clouded in uncertainty. Add on top of this the pressure to avoid failure at all costs, and we get a situation where students view the idea of trying out new things or taking paths unexplored by others as the wrong choice to make. Hwang thinks that some students decide to ‘follow the pack’ when choosing their department because they are uncertain about what they want to do while also hoping to choose the safest path with the lowest possibility of failure. ▶▶▶



Such a phenomenon is nothing new, nor is it a recent trend. KAIST Emeritus Professor Soonhung Han from the Department of Mechanical Engineering (and Head of the Ocean Systems Engineering Division) once described a similar situation in a column^[1] titled 『Why Model Students Do Not Succeed』 over a decade ago. As someone who has taught and advised a wide range of students, some for as short as two years and some as long as ten years, Professor Han noticed how many students who were exemplary in school were unable to achieve their full potentials once they graduated. He suggested two reasons for this. The first is that people who are relatively less talented with less to lose tend to be more courageous and are willing to take on difficult challenges that others avoid. In contrast, individuals who are viewed by others as promising and bright prospects tend to be more cautious due to the high expectations surrounding them. The second reason is that model students usually lack the ability and experience to be able to push through adversity. Professor Han believes that both factors stem from a lack of experience with failure. ◀◀◀

“Failure deprived”

This issue is not unique to KAIST or Korea’s admissions process. In 2017, The New York Times published an article titled 『On Campus, Failure is on the Syllabus』^[2] where the term “failure deprived” was used. This term, first proposed by professors in charge of student counseling at Stanford and Harvard, was introduced to explain ‘the phenomenon where students who, on paper, showed tremendous academic prowess but struggled to cope with simple everyday struggles.’ According to these professors, many students who entered prestigious universities based on their outstanding academic grades tended to have resumes that were nearly perfect on paper filled with all the tutoring they had received for every subject, but they also struggled with small setbacks in university, such as failing to get into a particular course or being rejected from a student club. They also described how the number of such students seemed to increase year by year.

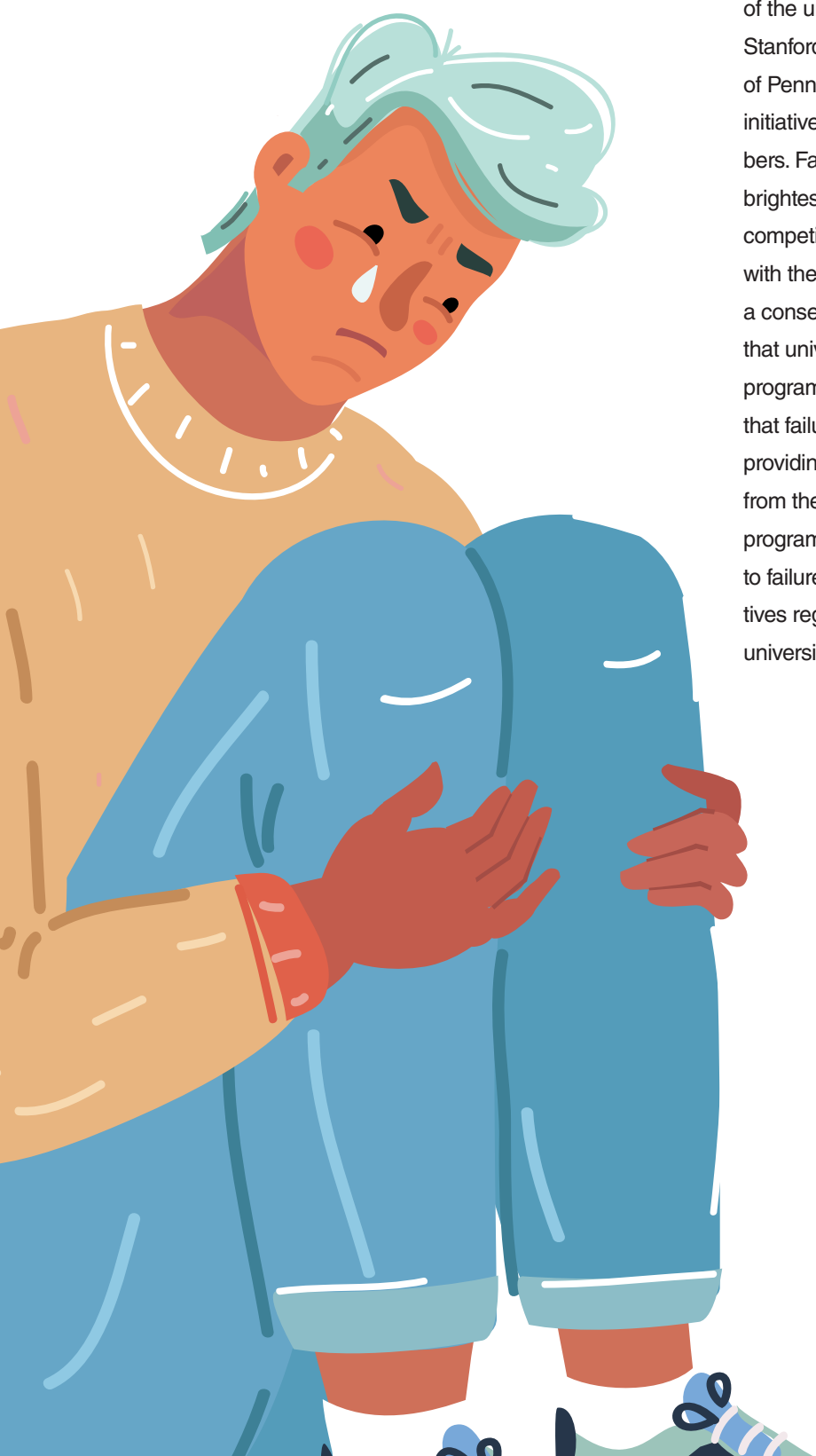
“We often see students who had their parents make all their choices for them throughout their lives struggle and fall behind upon entering university, where they have to do everything on their own. Some students even end up becoming depressed as they end up on a path they did not desire.”

Julie Lythcott-Haims (Former Dean of Freshmen at Stanford University)

Professor Julie Lythcott-Haims, who served as the Dean of Freshmen at Stanford University at the time, argues in her book 『How to Raise an Adult』^[3] that the reason behind the declining coping skills of university students in the U.S. lies in the complex interaction between America’s admissions culture and parenting methods. The ‘helicopter parenting’ method where parents micro-manage their children’s lives to send them to a good university may be useful in reducing failures and trial and error in the admissions process; however, Professor Lythcott-Haims believes that the overprotective nature of such methods can end up ruining a child’s life due to the shock they experience when they leave their parents’ care for the first time.

Universities that are focusing on resilience

Given the current situation, several U.S. universities have begun to recognize that they need to intervene in this matter. The first school to make a move was Cornell University. The university, where several student suicide incidents took place in 2010, declared that “it is an obligation of the university to help students learn life skills.” Stanford, Harvard, Princeton, and the University of Pennsylvania soon followed by launching initiatives to develop the resilience of their members. Faced with the reality that many of their brightest students, most of whom grew up under competitiveness environments, were unfamiliar with the natural process of learning from failure, a consensus started to form around the idea that universities needed to fill this void. These programs all aim to help students understand that failure is natural and common while also providing support so that students can learn from their failures and setbacks. Moreover, the programs help members build up their resilience to failure and stress by instilling new perspectives regarding failure and by utilizing a variety of university resources.



Resilience



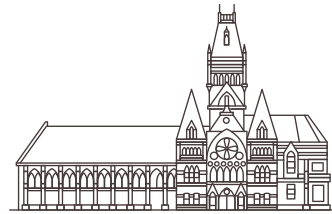


Examples of resilience building projects in key U.S. universities



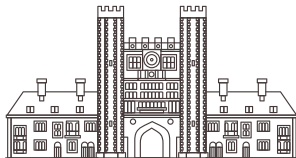
The Stanford Resilience Project^[4]

This project includes a variety of education programs that aim to develop resilience in students by helping them reflect upon their failures and learn from these experiences. The core ideas of the programs include 1) learning ways to learn from failure, 2) getting advice, 3) finding new perspectives, and 4) forming a sense of connection with the community. For this project, Stanford University offers online educational video content and organizes dormitory failure sharing programs, themed workshops, and the 'Stanford, I Screwed Up' festival on campus.



Harvard, Success-Failure Project^[5]

Through the 'Reflections on Rejections' program, Harvard University's deans, faculty, students, and alumni archived videos and texts describing their experiences with rejection, some of which were shared with the rest of the school. The ability to cope with failure and rejection is an important life skill, and thus the project aimed to teach students to seek out important information and lessons from rejection experiences instead of being defensive or discouraged.



Princeton Perspective Project^[6]

This project aims to help Princeton students develop healthy life perspectives that will allow them to realize their full potential. To achieve this goal, the school organizes video, essay, and creative campaign events to relieve students of the burdens of unrealistic expectations and constructively explore setbacks, disappointments, and loneliness. These programs help to develop the inner resilience of students so that they can embrace the risk of failure that comes with meaningful endeavors, and they also help students develop methods of adapting to and coping with stress. Ultimately, the goal of this project is to foster a strong, authentic, and resilient Princeton spirit by embracing inadequacy, fear, and failure.



Penn Faces Resilience Project^[7]

The 'Penn Faces' Resilience Project involves programs where students can openly share and talk about their successes and failures, rises and falls, pains and setbacks, and self-discovery experiences within the campus. One of the main goals of this project is to challenge the single-minded perspective toward success by helping students become free from the 'Penn Faces' that they are forced wear to always look busy, happy, and as if they are succeeding in everything.

These universities were convinced to carry out such initiatives due to the research results pointing to the fact that mental health problems such as depression and anxiety disorders have risen substantially among university students compared to several decades ago, and the numbers continue to increase to this day. However, these resilience fostering programs were different to the various mental health-related interventions that took place in the past on university campuses. Previous efforts were limited to providing care for psychologically vulnerable groups and taking passive precautionary measures to protect students from dangers in their minds. Conversely, the programs described above aim to psychologically strengthen members of the campus community. Most importantly, there has been a shift in perspective as students are no longer viewed as individuals that need protection; instead, they are now considered to have the potential to solve problems and grow on their own.

In conclusion: what it means to nurture talent

What meaning is there behind nurturing talent in universities? We examined the concerns and anxieties inherent in the academic, societal, and personal lives of not just KAIST students, but of all Korean and American students in pursuit of higher education, and we also learned about the various efforts being made at American universities to resolve these issues. Now, we are invited to rethink about the meaning behind 'being well educated.' We close this article with a quote from a bestselling book author.

"Colleges are revamping what they believe it means to be 'well educated.' It is not about your ability to write a thesis statement, but to bounce back when you're told it doesn't measure up. These are crucial life skills"^[2]

Rachel Simmons, author of 「Odd Girl Out」

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