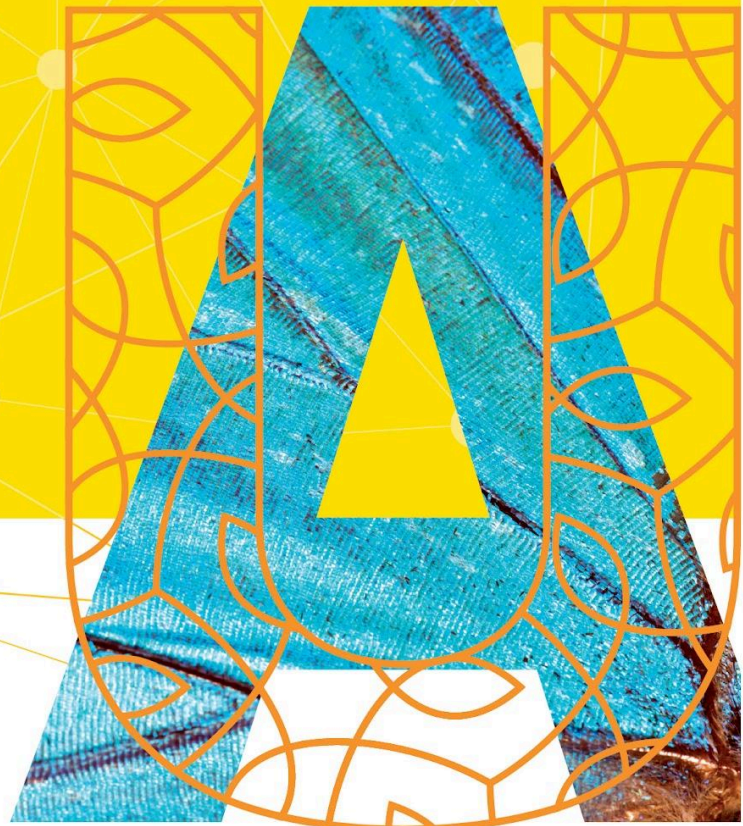




**UNIVERSITY  
OF ALBERTA**

# **FACULTY OF ARTS**

**Failing Forward: Dealing  
with Setbacks in  
Academic Life**



# A Synopsis of the Panel Discussion

The Nov. 22, 2024 panel discussion, **Failing Forward: Dealing with Setbacks in Academic Life**, hosted by the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta, provided a candid exploration of academic failures and how they can serve as catalysts for growth. The moderator, associate dean Jared Wesley and the panelists – Dean Robert Wood, Vice-Dean Academic and professor Marie-Eve Morin and PhD candidate Vivian Giang – shared their experiences and insights on navigating setbacks, emphasizing resilience, reframing failure and leveraging community for support. This synopsis captures the key takeaways from the event, offering actionable advice for all members of the faculty community.

## Personal Setbacks and their Impact

**Key Takeaways:** Setbacks often redirect us to better opportunities or help clarify our values. They can be painful in the moment, but reframing them as learning experiences is crucial.

Wesley asked the panelists to reflect on significant academic setbacks that shaped their careers. Wood recounted a time when he applied for the vice president of research role at the University of Lethbridge and was not selected despite excelling in the interim position. "It was deeply distressing to not get it," he shared. However, he later recognized it was a blessing in disguise. "I am so happy I did not get that job. It would have taken me in a different direction, and I wouldn't have reached the right place in which I now find myself." This perspective highlights how rejection can lead to better-suited opportunities.

Morin shared a story about receiving a B in a class on Plato during her undergraduate studies, a grade that initially devastated her. "It didn't matter in the end, but it was formative," she said, using the experience to remind students that one setback does not define their worth.

Giang faced a significant challenge when COVID-19 disrupted her PhD research plans. Unable to conduct fieldwork, she reevaluated her research question. "I felt like I had wasted three years of my life," she admitted. However, this setback ultimately allowed her to deepen her commitment to her research's core values and emerge with a stronger focus.

## What Sets Resilient Academics Apart?

**Key Takeaways:** Resilience stems from processing failure constructively, reframing it as a learning experience, and seeking support from mentors and peers.

Wesley asked the panelists what distinguishes individuals who recover from setbacks from those who struggle. Wood emphasized the importance of reflection and reframing. "Internalizing failure is normal," he said, "but at a certain point, you need to cast it loose and recognize it as a learning moment." He noted that authenticity plays a critical role in success: "When I've strayed from that, it tends not to go my way."

Morin highlighted the value of external perspectives: "Having a friend or mentor to help filter what the rejection really means can help you move forward." She pointed out that setbacks often reflect broader systemic or contextual issues rather than personal shortcomings.

Giang stressed the role of community, particularly during the isolation of graduate studies. "Talking to people in my cohort helped me realize I wasn't the only one struggling," she said. She also credited her supervisors for fostering an environment where setbacks could be openly discussed and reframed as growth opportunities.

### Lessons from Witnessing Others Handle Failure

**Key Takeaways:** Observing how others navigate failure can provide valuable lessons in resilience and reframing setbacks.

Giang shared an inspiring story about a senior professor who faced rejection from a prestigious funding agency but maintained a positive attitude. "They simply said, 'You can't win them all,' and started preparing for the next application," she recalled. This resilience taught her the value of focusing on future opportunities instead of dwelling on past disappointments.

Wood spoke about a colleague who was unsuccessful in their tenure application. "After some reflection, they recognized it wasn't the right fit and moved on to excel elsewhere. It wasn't about them, as a person. It was about the department and its direction," he explained. This experience underscored the importance of finding an environment where one's work is valued rather than personalizing institutional decisions.

Morin reflected on her early academic career, where she admired colleagues who navigated repeated rejections with determination. "Seeing friends who I admired get rejected made me realize rejection is a normal part of the process," she said. Observing their resilience helped her develop a healthier perspective on her own setbacks.

Wesley emphasized how departments, research teams and classrooms need to create a culture that's not only conducive to sharing these sorts of failures, but that encourages us to do so.

### High Expectations and Overcoming Overwhelm

**Key Takeaways:** Balancing academic pressures requires setting realistic goals, creating boundaries and avoiding perfectionism.

The panelists addressed the challenges of managing high expectations in academia. Morin highlighted the pitfalls of perfectionism. "Push through, but not at the expense of your well-being. Learn to let things go and to accept that – at some point – good enough is good enough," she advised, emphasizing the need for realistic expectations.

Wood urged students to avoid clinging to ideas or work that isn't progressing. "Sometimes, you just have to vaporize those ten pages that aren't working," he said, advocating for adaptability and letting go of unproductive efforts.

Giang shared how building supportive peer networks helped her navigate challenges. "Having peers to talk to made me feel less isolated," she said. She also stressed the importance of open communication with supervisors to align expectations and foster mutual understanding.

Wesley drew attention to the difference between internal expectations and the perceived expectations others have of us. "We wouldn't worry nearly as much about what others think about us when we realize just how infrequently they think of us," he suggested.

### Dealing with Rejection: Strategies and Insights

**Key Takeaways:** Rejections are inevitable but should be viewed as part of the academic journey. Seeking feedback, maintaining perspective and cultivating resilience are key.

Giang shared her experiences with grant rejections, including repeated attempts to secure major funding. "Don't take it personally," she advised. "Sometimes, it's just not your year." She emphasized the importance of healthy coping strategies, such as exercise, peer support and self-reflection.

Morin stressed the value of constructive feedback. "Talk to someone who has been on the committee or involved in the process," she suggested, noting that this insight can provide clarity on how to improve future applications.

Wood highlighted the importance of perspective. "Rejection is a data point, not a definition of your worth," he said. He encouraged academics to embrace the learning opportunities that come with rejection and view them as part of the broader academic journey.

## Practical Tips for Being Present

**Key Takeaways:** Staying present requires mindfulness, structured planning and clear boundaries.

The panelists offered strategies for maintaining focus and presence amidst competing demands. Wood recommended mindfulness practices such as breathing exercises. "In high-stress situations, check in with yourself. How are you breathing?" he advised.

Wesley introduced the concept of "parking your work downhill," where tasks are organized in advance to create a smooth transition into the next day. "Plan the work and trust the plan," he said, emphasizing that effective planning reduces stress and allows for greater focus.

Morin added the importance of creating organizational systems tailored to individual needs. "Invest time in building a structure that works for you," she advised, highlighting how this effort pays off in the long term.

## Final Reflections

**Key Takeaways:** Cultivating a culture of openness about failure and investing in health and well-being are essential for long-term success.

In their closing remarks, the panelists emphasized the importance of normalizing failure in academia. "This culture shift can help combat the isolation many feel," Wesley noted. Wood added, "Sharing experiences like these reminds us we're not alone and helps normalize failure as a part of growth."

Giang offered practical advice: "Take care of your health. Sleep, eat well and move. You can't give your best if you're not at your best."

The discussion concluded with a call for academics to develop resilience, embrace community and prioritize well-being. As Wesley summarized, "Academia can be isolating, but it doesn't have to be. You're not alone in this."

To continue the conversation, the Faculty of Arts will develop a new workshop series on resilience in academia, with sessions starting in 2025.

In the meantime, faculty, staff and students are encouraged to nominate members of the university committee for the [Fearless Innovator Award](#), a recognition "celebrating those bold innovators and the invaluable lessons that come through our failures."



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