

FAILING FORWARD FOR SUCCESS: WHY JUST DO IT

Rychiee Espinosa / 2025 CTL Faculty Fellow

Failure is a key component of the creative process, specifically when it comes to making in order to overcome pre-existing notions that define 'success' in design. Today, students have a tendency to work towards 'final' results, lacking the awkward in-between period of incremental growth in which we learn from mistakes. Many students are simply not aware this is an issue. Idealized visions of success, external pressures, fear to produce without clear results, ambiguity in the prompt are possible obstacles that hinder experimentation, or the willingness to try without knowing the endgame. Evaluative terms are subjective, for instance-- how does one define "success"? What is "excellent" work? There is a wide range of metrics for evaluation, and it differs across courses, faculty pedagogy, and curriculum. In academia, 'failure' carries along with it negative connotations; a failing grade is something to be avoided at all costs. In the creative design process, I argue that 'failure' is essential to learning in design research.

Therefore, at this mid-point in the fellowship year, I have pivoted my research from the topic on "Making a Material Ecology: Unpacking Material Methods and Research Within the Institute" to "Failing Forward for Success: Why Just Do It. I plan to unpack how failure can become a tangible design process in the classroom environment. This will be done via qualitative assessments of curriculum and student outcomes.

Q: What have you accomplished this semester as a CTL Fellow?

'Failure' as a productive tool for innovation and adaptation exists everywhere in our world— biologically, scientifically, economically, psychologically, etc. I have been conducting research on those outside the field of design to understand how failure operates in other disciplines, presented by those outside of design.

I will identify faculty and students whose process of 'learning through making' is central to the design process— to conduct interviews, roundtable discussions, and possible exercises to test how failure can generate unexpected, productive outcomes.

Q: What did you learn, what are your important takeaways so far?

During the research process of my former topic "Making a Material Ecology: Unpacking Material Methods and Research Within the Institute" I realized my interest in "methods" related to experimentation and discovery in order to innovate. During previous studios in which the project design was initially generated from material exploration, the limitation in innovation resulted from a lack of experimentation. Students were eager to understand what 'successful' outcomes should 'look' like, rather than 'behave'. The desire to be successful overcame the importance of developing a concept based on an unknown trajectory. The fear of failure in experimentation distracts from students' ability to learn from them. I became further interested in understanding these limitations, overriding my interest in material innovation as a specific topic.

How will your project continue to evolve or change in the next semester?

Future plans may include:

Pecha Kucha-style faculty presentations to share how their processes facilitate iterative design

Interviews with faculty and students

Distribution of cross-departmental survey

(Please list the number of people you reached out to, communicated with, especially those who attended your events.)

Edited 10/27/2025: A roundtable discussion / workshop with students and faculty is scheduled to discuss the role of failure in the design process. Faculty will include Jason Lee (Tenure Track Associate Professor, Pratt UA), Robert Brackett III (Adjunct Associate Professor CCE, Pratt UA) and Ann Dinh (Visiting Assistant Professor, Pratt UA); students will include Violet Zhang (B.Arch, 5th year), Ana Bulacovschi (B.Arch, 4th year), and Heet Desai (B.Arch, 4th year).