Credit: Toby Bartle

Your CV does not define you

The pressure to outperform others can gradually lead PhD students to believe their academic achievements define who they are, argues PhD student Toby Bartle; he calls on his peers to focus on learning—not achievement—and never lose track of their identities.

Imagine if your eulogy read like your CV: achievements, accolades, prior experience, qualifications and two referees to cross check it all. Wouldn't that be kind of ... sad? A bit impersonal and highly self-absorbed? While working toward a PhD, there is such a strong emphasis placed on achieving success that in some ways, our CV comes to define who we are.

Every time we submit an application—for funding, conferences, publications or otherwise—we're encouraged to emphasise our academic successes. With each, we learn we have to stand out and have an edge over other candidates. To do that, we need a good CV, so our once rich and colourful life inevitably becomes a monochrome summary of career highlights instead.

I do want a career in academia, but I don't want to become defined by different shades of only one colour. Yet, it feels like I have to do just that if I'm going to have any chance of advancing my academic career—so, what's my edge?

I'm a provisionally registered psychologist working toward an interdisciplinary PhD in education and neuroscience; I'm also lecturing to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. I have over a decade of experience working in mental health, disabilities and education, and I've received written commendations from College Deans for my teaching efforts. I've submitted publications, presented at international conferences, established international research collaborations and, earlier this year, was named a Post-Graduate Research Fellow of a prestigious research institute.

So, how did I do? Was my application successful?

Probably not. Due to the overwhelmingly large number of high-quality applications—a phrase we've all heard before—it's likely mine will be unsuccessful. Academic environments are highly competitive and rejection is common at every level, particularly while working toward a PhD; no one starts out an expert.

Established academics have more knowledge, experience and, hopefully,

more perspective than PhD candidates. With perspective, it's easier to recognise rejection as part of the role and know your career won't now suddenly end; other opportunities will come along. But my career isn't established, and to paraphrase 90's rap superstar Eminem, "success is my only option, failure's not, this may be the only opportunity that I got." Or so working towards a PhD makes it easy to believe.

From this point of view, rejection isn't just part of the role. It's a push to develop an edge over other candidates. It means I didn't stand out enough, that my edge wasn't enough; it needs to be bigger, better, edgier. So, I need to do more, be better and edgier too.

Because current candidature frameworks disproportionately emphasise achievement, standing out and having a good CV comes to define who I am.

Everyone has needs more important than achievement though, including PhD candidates: sleep, food, water, fun (remember fun?), relationships and exercise, to name a few. It's what gives our lives variety and colour. While working toward a PhD, it becomes easy to neglect these needs because there is such a strong push to achieve success.

We shouldn't only be encouraged to succeed. Yes, having a good CV is something, but it's not everything; instead, we should primarily be encouraged to learn.

As it stands, learning moments often come with apologies: "I'm sorry, I'm not sure" or "I don't know how." These moments often feel like let-downs, but they're not. Urgency to meet deadlines and publication outputs or failure to do everything perfectly the first time can leave us all feeling inadequate at times. We're still learning, though, so why are we so hard on ourselves? Candidature frameworks should remind us that learning is okay. A PhD candidate has a lot to learn, and always achieving success should not be part of the lesson plan.

Moreover, emphasising success alone lends itself to developing a fear of failure. Instead, the emphasis should be on

learning, including from failure. Some of our most valuable lessons will come from some of our most unsuccessful moments. If we're unwilling to fail, we become unwilling to try, and in doing so, deny ourselves these valuable lessons. Receiving a desk rejection for your manuscript isn't a failure: it's a lesson in finding more suitable publication outlets. Similarly, rejection after review is not a failure either. It's an opportunity to learn from highly skilled reviewers who've taken the time to critically evaluate your work.

With the pressure taken off increasing publication quantity, we can appreciate these moments for the lessons they are and focus on improving publication quality. Recognising the lesson and being willing to try again, means we're willing to learn what are often very valuable lessons.

Reorienting candidature frameworks to emphasise learning—including from failure—will make it easier to recognise achievements, such as having your manuscript accepted for publication, as a product of what you've learned while working toward a PhD, instead of the reason for doing one in the first place.

A good CV is something, it's not everything.

Don't let the push to achieve success turn you into a monochrome summary of your achievements; you have needs that are more important. Instead, focus firmly on learning, and learning well. In doing so, a good CV—complete with ample evidence of having achieved success—will develop incidentally, without having to neglect any of your other needs along the way. □

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Published online: 10 October 2019
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0736-x>

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.