REFLECTIONS ON REJECTIONS

A compilation of reflections by and for students, faculty, and staff about normalizing rejection, set-backs, and growth in academia

BU School of Public Health

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Introduction

February 2024

As the name suggests, *Reflections on Rejections* is a compilation about rejection, set-backs, and growth in academia. The compilation includes reflections from faculty, staff, and students, underscoring the ubiquity of rejection across career stages. As one contributor writes, "Everyone gets rejected. A lot." In fact, when I began asking members of our community to contribute to this compilation, the most common response was, "How will I choose from the many, *many* rejections I've received?"

Some reflections focus on the sting of an early career rejection, others focus on lessons learned from hundreds, even *thousands*, of rejections over decades in academia. As you will read in the pages that follow, many contributors explicitly state that the number of rejections they've received far outweighs the acceptances. I don't know of anyone for whom this is not true. And yet, we rarely talk about rejection (*unless you count internal monologues!*). Social media presents a highly skewed reality, one where we see only the accomplishments and successes of our colleagues—tweets about papers published, grants received, and fellowships awarded. This asymmetric information perpetuates a false sense of perfection. These conditions seep their way into our classrooms, research team meetings, advising conversations, and casual interactions with colleagues. This compilation is one small but important step towards normalizing rejection and shifting our collective dialogue to more accurately reflect reality.

Rejections come in many forms, including letters, emails, phone calls, and excruciating silence. Sometimes we see rejection as so inevitable and painful that we can't bring ourselves to submit the thing in the first place; we reject ourselves before anyone else has the chance to. At the end of this document, you will find a list of resources, including wellness and mental health services. Perhaps the most important resource comes in the form of supportive colleagues. I feel we have this resource in abundance at BUSPH.

The motivation for *Reflections on Rejections* came out of our Department of Health Law Policy and Management's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ) Committee, with the name borrowed from a similar initiative I was involved with at Harvard. After launching the departmental version of the compilation in 2020, momentum continued with the support of the Emerging Women Leaders Program beginning in 2022. Now we have expanded to include reflections from members of our BUSPH community across all departments and units. We hope that this compilation will strengthen our approach to mentoring and training a diverse generation of talented, resilient, and innovative public health scholars, practitioners, and advocates. To all of our students, the hope is that reading this will remind you that you deserve to be here. Experiencing rejection does not mean you are not talented or capable. A rejection can feel devastating, but as described in numerous pieces throughout, can lead to new directions and opportunities. Remember that rejection is not failure; it is a part of the process. I hope folks will read this compilation, reflect on it with peers and colleagues, draw on it in

educational settings (classrooms, advising programs), and use in any other ways that support the resilience and openness that it is at the heart of this initiative.

Thank you to everyone who shared their experiences as part of this collection. Though arguably a universal experience, rejection is also deeply personal. It is amazingly generous of these individuals to share in this way, and I hope readers will appreciate their vulnerability, courage, insights, and humor throughout. As the "editor" of this collection, I feel a responsibility to be a good steward of these personal reflections. I am humbled that so many members of our community chose to be part of this initiative. I think this speaks to the importance of this topic and the wonderful community we have within the school. I hope this collection sparks dialogue among our students, faculty, and staff. We intend to build on this document, adding new reflections to it each year, and we invite feedback and ideas about this initiative at any time. Special thanks to Dean Sandro Galea, HLPM leadership (including Michael Stein and Lunise Joseph), and the Emerging Women Leaders Program (particularly Veronika Wirtz and Molly Hoffman) for their support of this initiative. Students, faculty, staff are welcome to reach out to me at any time to discuss ideas related to *Reflections on Rejections*.

Best wishes,

Sarah Ketchen Lipson, PhD EdM (she/her/hers)
Associate Professor and frequently-rejected human being
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"I suffered rejections and insults often enough to stop fearing them."
– Barack Obama, A Promised Land

***Knowing When to Move On* (2022)**

Rachel Sayko Adams, PhD, MPH
Research Associate Professor, HLPM
Pronouns: she/her/hers

Thinking back to this rejection as an early career researcher is particularly painful. I was working so hard to try to get my first NIH R01grant from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). I had assembled a fabulous team of researchers across the field of traumatic brain injury (TBI) and had access to the only longitudinal dataset in the US that could provide us with much needed information about the risks of lower-level drinking on long-term health following more severe TBI. I was doing all the "right things" – talking to NIAAA project officers, researching which Center for Scientific Review group to target, meeting my colleagues at in-person at conferences to strengthen the grant, incorporating innovative preliminary analyses, and perfecting every sentence of the writing. I felt so good when we got our score back on the first submission with a 34% score. I connected with the project officer and was told that NIAAA's funding line for R01s for early career researchers was 25% - so I was super close to getting this grant into a fundable range. This felt achievable!

I worked with my colleagues to address the summary statement diligently and we updated our preliminary data with the most recently available data. I felt confident when we submitted the grant. Four months later when I logged into my ERA commons account and saw that the resubmission was "not discussed" I was shocked and crushed.

Now what I haven't mention yet was that the work on this grant actually began 3 years earlier when I led an R21 to NIAAA in response to a program announcement for part of the study aims with this same team. We received a score of 41 on the first submission with a very positive summary statement. However, we learned while planning for the resubmission that NIAAA was ending the program announcement and we couldn't submit a resubmission – and after numerous talks with NIAAA project officers, I was told that the Director of NIAAA was not in favor of R21s with secondary data. This meant we needed to pivot and come up with a new strategy. We decided to transition the grant into an R01 with additional aims. Before I submitted the R01 that I told you about above that got the 34% score, we submitted an earlier version of the R01 to NIAAA and were "not discussed."

So really at this point, the work on this grant had been going on for 4 years, with tons of investment not only from myself, but by my esteemed, busy colleagues. I started to get this strong feeling that I needed to let this go for the time being and focus on other goals and grants. I realized that if I insisted on moving this forward again it might negatively impact my future collaborations with these great colleagues. It was a super hard decision, but the right one. What I did do which helped me feel better was to develop a paper from the preliminary analyses that were done for this grant. Getting this paper published 5 years after the initial

work began, felt like we were able to contribute important knowledge to the field and that something came out of all the hard work we put in over the years (i.e., it wasn't for nothing). And importantly, allowing myself to put this aside, helped me focus on developing other productive grants and collaborations with colleagues. I still wish this grant was funded in some shape or form, and I still feel somewhat bad about myself when I think back on this process, but I know now that this is part of academia. I'm proud that I pushed through and didn't let it derail me from doing the work that I love.

BRIEF REPORT

Prevalence of Drinking Within Low-Risk Guidelines During the First 2 Years After Inpatient Rehabilitation for Moderate or Severe Traumatic Brain Injury

Rachel Sayko Adams, PhD, MPH, Jessica M. Ketchum, PhD, Risa Nakase-Richardson, PhD, Douglas I. Katz, MD, and John D. Corrigan, PhD

American Journal of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation • Volume 100, Number 8, August 2021 www.ajpmr.com | **815**

An Imposter at the New England Journal of Medicine (2020)

George J. Annas, JD, MPH
Director, Center for Health Law, Ethics & Human Rights
Pronouns: he/him/his

The New England Journal of Medicine
10 SHATTUCK STREET, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02115—TELEPHONE 617/734-9800
OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL SOCIETY

OFFICE OF THE EDITOR

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George J. Annas, J.D., M.P.H.
Center for Law and Health Sciences
Boston University School of Law
209 Bay State Road
Boston, Massachusetts 02215

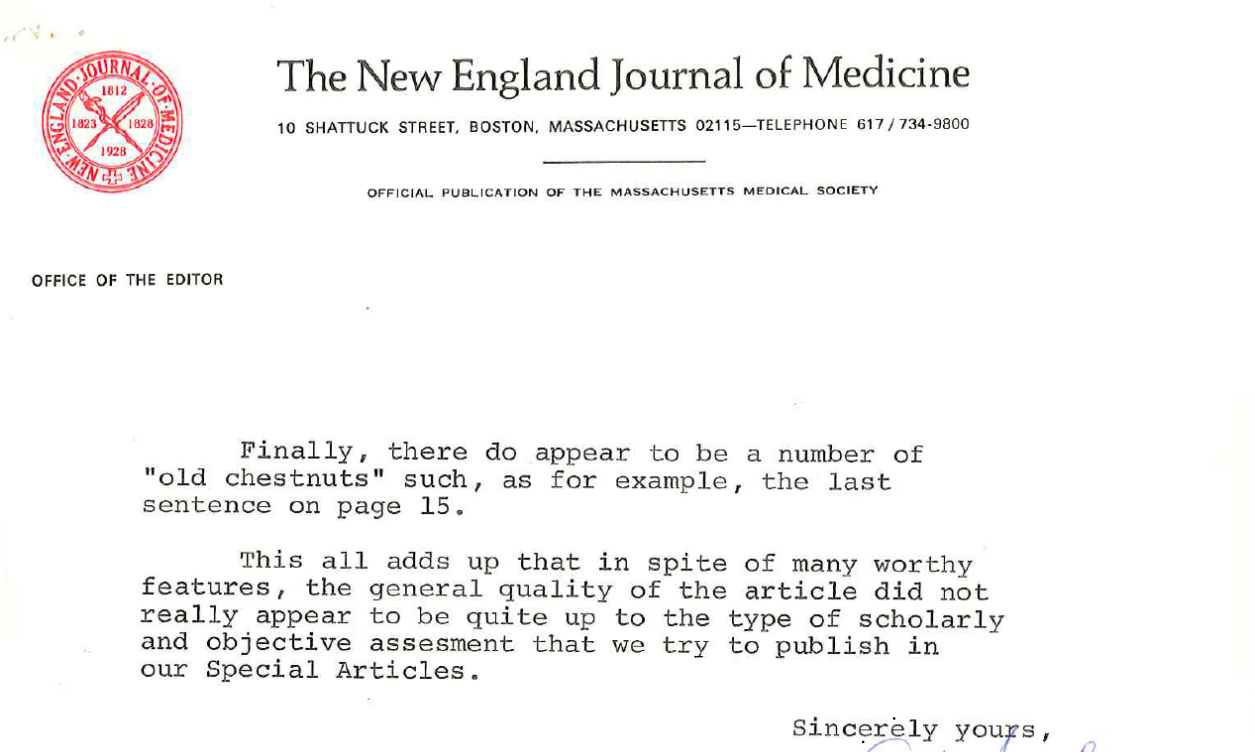
Dear Dr. Annas:

Thank you for submitting to The Journal "Medical Malpractice: False Problems, Real Problems and a Consideration of Alternative Solutions". It certainly is a most important subject and the paper has many attractive features. Indeed, two outside reviews were favorably disposed towards it. However, I am afraid we are returning the paper to you as not accepted for publication by The Journal because of what appear to be some very basic problems.

In the first place, the nature of the article is inconsistent. In some places, such as in the discussion of alternatives, it appears to present an objective appraisal. In other places, however, it is frankly editorial with ex cathedra assertions and sometimes even polemics. Indeed, the manuscript contains some of the very oversimplifications that you properly question in your first two paragraphs. Thus some of the article would be appropriate for The Journal's "Sounding Board" section, but other parts for the Special Articles section.

The general nature of the discussion does not appear to be very scholarly or profound. Evidence that is cited is often limited and frequently refers to what are essentially news accounts rather than scholarly articles. In addition the quality of articles cited is not considered. The Duke study on page 3, for example, has a number of serious defects in design.

Under the heading "Real Problems" there appears to be only one listed.



The New England Journal of Medicine

10 SHATTUCK STREET, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02115—TELEPHONE 617 / 734-9800

OFFICE OF THE EDITOR

Finally, there do appear to be a number of "old chestnuts" such, as for example, the last sentence on page 15.

This all adds up that in spite of many worthy features, the general quality of the article did not really appear to be quite up to the type of scholarly and objective assesment that we try to publish in our Special Articles.

Sincerely yours,

At least since law school ('70) one of the things I wanted to do was write about health law (then called "legal medicine") for both lawyer and physician audiences. I thought, and still do, that these two professions need to know more about each other and can be more effective in serving the public if they understood each other better. While working on my first book (The Rights of Hospital Patients), I submitted a piece on medical malpractice to the New England Journal of Medicine. This was in 1973. I published the book in 1975, but didn't get back to the Journal until the late 80s. I don't keep many rejection letters—but I kept this one.

As is obvious from the letter, the editor, did not like my article very much, and went way out of his way to tell me the many ways he found it inadequate (mentioning "scholarly" as in "does not appear to be very scholarly or profound" three times in the rejection letter). Other choice words included: "basic problems," "inconsistent," "frankly editorial," "oversimplifications," "news accounts," and "old chestnuts." I decided both that editor was a lost cause, and that I wouldn't write about medical malpractice for a physician audience again.

About two decades later, long after the editor had died and shortly before Bud Relman retired, I proposed an irregular feature in the Journal called "Legal Issues in Medicine" (later "Health Law, Ethics & Human Rights"). Bud liked the idea, and the feature ran a few times a year for 25 years under Relman, Jerry Kassirer, Marcia Angel, and Jeff Drazen. We parted ways over the major informed consent flaws of one of the most controversial research projects of the 21st century, the "SUPPORT study" of oxygen levels delivered to extremely premature infants. Twenty-five years was more than long enough in any event, and long

outlasted a 15 year stint writing “At Law” for the Hastings Center Report (a bimonthly bioethics journal) and a 10 year one for the American Journal of Public Health.

My 25 years at the Journal is summed up pretty well near the end of a piece I wrote for the Journal’s 200th anniversary: “Doctors, Patients, and Lawyers: Two Centuries of Health Law” (367: 445-50; 2012). The former editor would not have been entirely pleased with all my writing about the law in his journal, and the increasing presence of the law in medical practice and research, but he certainly would have been happy to see that none of my writings in the Journal were devoted to medical malpractice. He would also have been pleased that the features were peer-reviewed, and that many that read more like editorials were rejected. I am not familiar with the imposture literature, but I can certainly see how a solitary lawyer in a group composed exclusively of physicians and scientists could easily see him or herself as an imposter.

***The Woes of a Multi-Rejected Article* (2020)**

Sam Auty, PhD, MS
Research Assistant Professor, HLPM
Pronouns: she/her/hers

For the fourth time, I re-read the reviewer feedback from the latest journal. This is the second journal the article has been submitted to, and I expected to receive a 'revise and resubmit.' I keep trying to piece together the comments into a cohesive plan of attack for the next submission, but all I can think is 'this needs to be completely reworked.' I draft an email to the co-authors and lay out a few options, trying to highlight the fact that I know how much work this project needs. Send.

Within a day, the co-authors responded with different advice than I anticipated. Each tells me that this project is strong as is, and if I want to make changes I can - but they don't think they are wholly necessary. After going back to read the reviewer's comments (again), I realized that I tended to focus on the comments that were tersely written, and the ones that didn't really make sense.

Leading a project lends itself to insecurities. The little voice in my head that questions each decision and the wording of every sentence gets loud. Rejection flames that voice and tends to make me wonder if I should be doing this at all, but supportive co-authors have the capacity to throw water on a fire. I have found it incredibly important to work with people who know when to critique versus when to support. Rejection stings – and for me, it may always feel like someone has discovered that I do not belong, that I am not smart enough, that my ideas are not interesting. As with any endeavor, it is critical to have people in your corner who remind you that your work is not in fact, completely horrible. I still hate rejection (hate, hate, hate) but it holds less shame for me than it once did. So, with support, I will submit this article (again) and hope it finds a home eventually.

Lessons from an Unfunded Grant (2023)

Jonathan Buonocore, ScD
Assistant Professor, Environmental Health
Pronouns: he/him/his

We had developed a proposal for a federal funder for a campaign to measure gas leaks in homes, using kits that could be mailed back and forth between us and participants. We were hoping to recruit folks across eastern MA, and to engage with Boston area NGOs and EJ groups, hopefully recruiting a diverse cohort of participants for a "citizen science" style project. Participants would receive the kit, watch a Youtube video demonstrating the protocol, take samples (which was just filling a bag with air using a hand pump), and mail the kit back to us.

We spoke to a program officer who was extremely worried that a group of "citizen scientists" would be unable to perform the sampling protocol reliably and we might get a lot of "wild" values. They then suggested we rewrite the protocol to recruit science teachers and other "STEM professionals" to ensure that our participants have technical training, since in this program officer's view, scientific training was required to fill a bag with air correctly.

We rewrote this grant with the new plan and a substantially weaker DEI plan as a result, submitted the grant, and then received the following in our review: "I do, however, urge the research team to expand their search for participants beyond their network of scientists, science educators, and students. Despite the current proposals to achieve a more diverse sample by recruiting from student groups that represent first-generation students and students from underrepresented groups, I worry that the socioeconomic demographics of the overall sample may still be skewed if recruiting is done solely from groups associated with the university. Because there may well be socioeconomic influences on methane leakage, sampling across socioeconomic groups and living situations will be key to upscaling results without bias and to assessing environmental justice issues associated with methane leakage. This expanded search for participants may be achieved through greater community engagement, which could strengthen the Diversity & Inclusion aspect of this proposal. Dialogue with renters and low-income residents about their concerns regarding indoor air pollution may strengthen this proposal, particularly if such a dialogue results in members of these communities being provided with the tools and skills necessary to measure methane emissions (and potentially co-pollutant emissions) in their homes, thus obtaining important information for their own health and safety while also providing the research team with additional data from a wider variety of demographics. I think that there may also be an opportunity to recruit student researchers who are particularly interested in the environmental justice implications of indoor air pollution and methane leakage, and this recruitment could also strengthen the Diversity & Inclusion aspect."

The grant was not awarded. I'm unsure what to take away from this, other than you shouldn't weaken your ideas just because someone didn't like them, even if that person has some control over resources!

***The Accidental Acceptance* (2022)**

Timothy Callaghan, PhD
Associate Professor, HLPM
Pronouns: he/him/his

Throughout my career, I have had more rejections than I can count. Rejections from journals, rejections of grant proposals, rejections for fellowship programs, and more. In one sense, rejection is a good thing – it means that you are trying and that you are putting work out into the world that could someday lead to new scientific knowledge. While many of these rejections have stung when I first got them, none have had a long-lasting impact on my life. Instead, the rejection that stands out to me and that impacted me most, was an accidental acceptance.

Going into my undergraduate career at the University of Connecticut, I was driven to make the most of my undergraduate experience. I got a job working for UConn Athletics, volunteered as a research assistant, and got heavily involved in community outreach on campus. I was also determined to get into the honors program. I had many friends in the program and knew firsthand that honors students lived in better dorms, had more access to faculty, and seemed to get great jobs when they graduated. I spent the first year-plus of undergrad hellbent on doing well in classes so I could get in, even as I was taking weed-out pre-med courses in chemistry, physics, and calculus. In the end, I knew I did everything I could to impress the honors program admissions committee and hoped for the best when I sent in my application.

Months later, I got an email with the good news - I had been admitted to the honors program! I was ecstatic about what it meant for me and so was my family. Then reality came crashing down. Just a day later, I got an email noting that due to a clerical error, I (along with several other students), had been accidentally accepted to the program when they meant to reject me. From there, things got crazier. UConn's lawyers got involved (one of the rejected students must have complained?) and it was decided that all accidentally accepted students who met the objective criteria for program admission had to be admitted to the program.

This left me in an incredibly awkward position – I was officially in the program I had strived so hard to get into, but I also knew they didn't actually want me. From there it seemed I had two choices: I could spurn the honors program, or I could join the program, outwork the other students, and make them regret ever thinking I wasn't good enough. My determination (or stubbornness) pushed me towards option B. The accidental acceptance gave me the drive to re-double my efforts. I doubled down on my academics and graduated a few years later with not one but two degrees and an award as the undergrad student most likely to succeed in a political science grad program. Ultimately, the rejection gave me a drive that I still carry with me to this day. It also helped me realize that I shouldn't look to external sources for validation of my 'worth.' I now know that as long as I try my best and put in my full effort, I can be proud of the work that I do and that I will usually succeed in the end.

***Persevering in the Culture of Rejection* (2020)**

Megan Cole Brahim, PhD
Associate Professor, HLPM
Pronouns: she/her/hers

When I had to identify a rejection to write about, nothing immediately came to mind—not because I don't have any, I have plenty, but because rejections and setbacks are so commonplace that often no single rejection feels defining or particularly memorable anymore. Not that in the moment it doesn't feel like a gut punch – it often does – but generally speaking, a day or two later, it's on to the next. For that reason, I think successfully navigating rejection is more about persevering in the culture of rejection and less about any single rejection letter. Navigating this is often especially hard in academia, I think, where rejections may often feel like a personal failing as opposed to one that's more collective or shared. And it's made even harder against a backdrop where we only hear about successes and accomplishments.

I'm still learning these ropes myself, but I can offer a few thoughts on dealing with rejection and setbacks:

First, everyone gets rejected. A lot. In big and small ways. Behind every major accomplishment, accepted manuscript, funded grant, or successful application is most likely a series of rejections or setbacks along the way. These don't get announced on Twitter or sent around in congratulatory emails, so it's easy to feel like you're alone in your rejections amidst others' success. But it's really just asymmetric information. I try to remind myself of this.

Second, sharing news of rejection offers a nice, lifted weight. I remember submitting my first ever first-author peer-reviewed manuscript to a journal – it was reviewed and rejected, with some harsh comments. I felt like I let my co-authors down and was nervous to share the news. In retrospect, this was silly, as co-authors, senior mentors, and other team members are the best source of encouragement and always help to put things in perspective. I now forward all rejections right away with more optimism towards what's next.

Third, I realize rejection is probably the wrong word here, which sounds terminal. These are really just setbacks that are part of a perhaps not-so-fun, but inevitable, process. A silver lining is that many forms of "rejection" or setback are coupled with valuable feedback and learning opportunity. Reviewer comments on a rejected manuscript or grant application can be used to develop a better submission that gets accepted on the next try. The experience of an unsuccessful interview can be used to improve the next one. They say the greatest predictor of success is how many times you try, which may be cliché, but I think it's an important motto to carry.

Final food for thought is that you can try to offset the disappointment of any recent rejection or setback by maintaining perspective in the context of all your successes and accolades, big and small. You can keep a running list or email folder of these if you need a readily accessible reminder. You are smart, accomplished, valued, deserving, competitive, and 100% capable. We should know this, but sometimes these more tangible reminders are helpful.

***Rising Strong* (2023)**

Harold Cox, MSSW
Professor of the Practice, Community Health Sciences
Pronouns: he/him/his

I was thrilled to start my doctorate at Brandeis University. Things seemed perfect—I participated in several invitational conferences, including one at the iconic Wingspread Conference Center. I served as a research assistant for the Commission on Developmental Disabilities in Washington DC. I was on a roll, or so it seemed.

Beneath the surface, at the same time, I was battling my inner demons. Imposter syndrome gnawed at my confidence, making me doubt my abilities. Writing papers became an agonizing task, and when I failed my comprehensive exam, it was as if the ground had crumbled beneath me. Even entering the school building was intimidating. I would break into a sweat, and my heart raced.

Through it all, I was still determined to finish the degree. Then, failure struck again, and Brandeis University suggested that I take a master's degree to salvage what I had achieved. However, my gut told me differently. I couldn't settle for less than what I had set out to accomplish. So, I asked to finish the doctorate, and Brandeis gently but firmly told me it was time to move on.

This rejection hung over me like a dark cloud, a constant reminder of my shortcomings. I was embarrassed. The weight of the disappointment was suffocating. I questioned every decision that led me here. Plus, I suffered alone. Who could I tell? Who would care?

Yet, in the following years, I discovered a new path outside academia. Life had more to offer than just classrooms. I developed new relationships with people that didn't know or care that I flunked out of doctoral school. I did things I used to enjoy and felt happy again. My wounds of rejection slowly began to heal, and I realized that the scars they left behind were not marks of failure but badges of resilience.

My career, luckily, continued to advance. I moved from "Director of Client Serves" at the AIDS Action Committee to "Chief Public Health Officer" in Cambridge to "Associate Professor and Associate Dean for Practice" at BUSPH. And any day now, I hope to hear that I have progressed to "Professor of the Practice."

Looking back, that time of rejection was a turning point. It forced me to confront my doubts and fears, teaching me to stand strong in adversity.

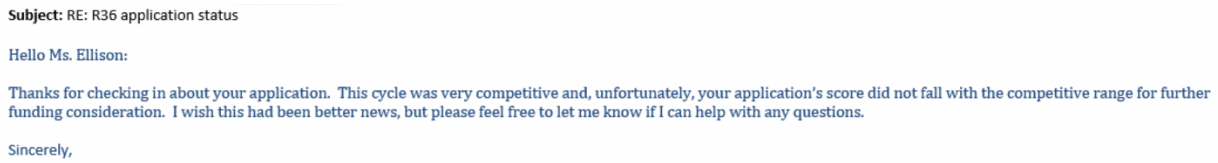
Sometimes now, my students call me "Dr. Cox," assuming that I must have a doctorate degree. I am, after all, a professor at Boston University. Don't all professors have PhDs? I used to correct them. But it happens so often that I just roll with it and chuckle to myself. Nope, not me.

I may not have the "Doctor" title from Brandeis, but I gained something more precious--a deep understanding of my strength and the ability to embrace life's uncertainties. Rejection is tough, but it's not the end. It's a chance for growth, a steppingstone to new horizons.

I didn't end up where I planned, but I found where I truly belong, and for that, I'm grateful.

***At Least I'm Trying* (2020)**

Jackie Ellison, PhD, MPH
Assistant Professor, University of Pittsburgh (HLPM alum, 2020)
Pronouns: she/her/hers



Subject: RE: R36 application status

Hello Ms. Ellison:

Thanks for checking in about your application. This cycle was very competitive and, unfortunately, your application's score did not fall with the competitive range for further funding consideration. I wish this had been better news, but please feel free to let me know if I can help with any questions.

Sincerely,

I spent something like four months obsessing over the AHRQ dissertation application, to the point where it was affecting my mental health. Getting this grant was essential because it would buy me time to truly dig in and execute THE BEST dissertation in the history of dissertations. I also wanted the validation. I felt that people in my field didn't care about the populations that I care about, and that if I just make my research methodologically innovative and rigorous and interesting then I can make them care. And I think in grad school my identity as a person was very much tied to my research agenda (please try to avoid this). Which made the rejection sting so much more, because it felt personal.

A friend of mine was awarded the grant and after talking with her I realized that she did not obsess over the application the way that I did. But she got the grant anyway. At this point I decided that compromising my mental health for work will never be worth it and is ultimately not sustainable. I also realized that no matter how 'good' my research is, I can't make everyone care (and that not everyone *should* like your work). And I'm not sure this is the best way to process rejection, but at the time I just felt pissed off and that gave me a lot of energy. In retrospect, reviewer comments were helpful in that I learned to always articulate <u>why</u> my question matters. Anyway, the research that I proposed in this rejected grant ended up winning an award at a national conference and will be published in the open JAMA journal soon.

I think many of us go into research because we enjoy learning, which requires a certain level of comfort with not immediately being good at everything we do. But in hypercompetitive academic culture this is easier said than done. In moments of professional insecurity, I try to remember how boring it would be to spend my career only doing things that come easy. Having papers and grants rejected that I've put a lot of effort into is always disappointing, but it happens a lot and it's gotten much easier. It also makes the successes so much sweeter. And this sounds cliché, but regularly getting rejections means that at least I'm trying.

***All Worthwhile* (2020)**

Yevgeniy Feyman, PhD
HLPM alum, 2023
Pronouns: he/him/his

Dear Mr. Feyman,

Thank you for submitting your manuscript to Journal of Health Economics. I have now received two reports on your submission which can be accessed below. Unfortunately, the referees raise a number of concerns, in particular suggesting that the paper offers only a marginal contribution to the existing literature on this topic and questioning your empirical approach and interpretation of results. The comments imply that the paper is too under-developed and its contribution to the existing literature is insufficient to merit publication in the Journal of Health Economics. I appreciate that my decision will come as a disappointment but I am sure that you will find the referees' detailed comments and suggestions of great value in helping you reflect on your work.

Thank you for submitting your manuscript to this journal and for giving us the opportunity to consider your paper.

This was a paper that just recently got accepted! At the time, I had been working on it for two years, and now it has been over 4 years that I've been working on the paper. It went through another round of rejections at another journal, as well as rejection from a conference. Seeing the acceptance letter come in recently makes it all worthwhile!

***About 1,000 Rejections* (2020)**

Sandro Galea, MD, DrPH, MPH
Dean & Robert A. Knox Professor, BUSPH
Pronouns: he/him/his

I have had the privilege of being involved in a range of papers and grants, all of which have undergone extensive peer review. Looking at my papers and files, I suspect I have received about 1,000 rejections of various pieces of writing over the years. I find each of them difficult and continue to find them difficult to read even two decades into an academic career.

Perhaps some of the hardest rejections I received over the years were about conceptual papers trying to push the field forward in different directions. I share comments from two reviewers for one such paper that aimed to push complex systems thinking forward in epidemiology, my disciplinary home. That paper was rejected by several journals before eventually being published by the International Journal of Epidemiology. The reviews along the process made me wonder if I understood anything about the field. Looking back, the reviews probably reflected some combination of my writing not being clear enough, and resistance in the field to new ideas. Since the paper was published it has been cited some 200 times, downloaded more than 6,000 times, and has led to two books. Perhaps more importantly the notion that systems science has a role to play in epidemiology is no longer controversial and a new generation of scholars see this as a natural part of their armamentarium.

I am not sure what I learn from this. I suppose the compelling narrative is that one triumphs through the adversity of rejection to get to success. But in the work of the academy, rejection is deeply and personally felt, while "success" is diffuse, slow, and seldom brings much immediate gratification. All of this suggests to me the importance of fairness, dispassion, and kindness in review. I think that can all be achieved while maintaining rigor and I am immensely grateful to the many reviewers who have so reviewed—and in so doing helped improve—my work and my thinking over the years.

Reviewer comments

This is a commentary on the need for a broad(er) view of causes and for the use of complex systems dynamic models in epidemiology. This commentary, however, invites a lot of head scratching as to what exactly the author is proposing. First of all, the commentary spends a full 7 pages setting up a straw man, namely a supposed definition of "independent" causes. However, nowhere in current epidemiologic methods or practice do we subscribe to that definition of causality. We talk about "independent effects", but that does not mean that we assume causes are independent. Simply put, an independent effect is the effect of a particular cause on a particular outcome, when all the other causal effects are accounted for. Nowhere do we assume that one cause cannot "co-occur" or "influence" another…. So, the

commentary's basic premise about what's missing in epidemiology is simply not as compelling as the authors make it to be.

…..

Some of what the authors say seems both counterintuitive and counter to some of the things they say elsewhere. For example, there is a suggestion that complex systems models will push epidemiology through to a closer concern with the health of populations. I think this is untrue. As the authors correctly state early on in the paper removing cigarette smoking form a population will remove most lung cancers. One needs no complexity thinking here. Complexity thinking has generally been applied to working out why some individuals seem more susceptible to smoking than others, which I think is misguided.

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Causal thinking and complex system approaches in epidemiology

Sandro Galea,* Matthew Riddle and George A Kaplan

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Identifying biological and behavioural causes of diseases has been one of the central concerns of epidemiology for the past half century. This has led to the development of increasingly sophisticated conceptual and analytical approaches focused on the isolation of single causes of disease states. However, the growing recognition that (i) factors at multiple levels, including biological, behavioural and group levels may influence health and disease, and (ii) that the interrelation among these factors often includes dynamic feedback and changes over time challenges this dominant epidemiological paradigm. Using obesity as an example, we discuss how the adoption of complex systems dynamic models allows us to take into account the causes of disease at multiple levels, reciprocal relations and interrelation between causes that characterize the causation of obesity. We also discuss some of the key difficulties that the discipline faces in incorporating these methods into non-infectious disease epidemiology. We conclude with a discussion of a potential way forward.

Keywords Agent-based modelling, dynamic systems modelling, epidemiology, regression

***Ride the Ride* (2020)**

Sarah H. Gordon, PhD, MS
Assistant Professor, HLPM
Pronouns: she/her/hers

It was 2017 and I was in the third year of my doctoral degree at Brown. I was gearing up to submit the first of my dissertation papers, a survival analysis of enrollment in ACA Marketplaces. I was dead set on getting it published in *Health Affairs* for some reason. In my mind, it was the stamp of approval I needed to believe I was capable of a career in research. I was really proud of the paper, and I had worked incredibly hard on it. I was on vacation in Mexico with my family when I submitted it (yes I was so excited to submit it that I locked myself in a room inside on vacation while my family drank margaritas in the pool).

It was the first time I was putting myself and my work out there for peer review evaluation. Well, it didn't take long. I got back from the beach the next day (a Sunday) and they had already desk rejected it. They desk rejected the thing I had worked so hard on, and apparently it had been so bad they felt the need to do so immediately, on a Sunday. I was so disappointed. I felt embarrassed for being so excited about it. My dissertation committee all sent me nice messages when I told them, but I couldn't shake the sense that I just wasn't cut out for this. Was my work even any good? Had I learned nothing in my doctoral program so far? Would I ever get a paper published? I spent the remaining days of the Mexico vacation moping.

I look back on this moment and while I have compassion for my younger self, I also laugh a bit, as it was the first of so many rejections to follow. The sting from that first rejection goes on to follow a downward exponential function – it gets easier and easier each time. Two year later, that paper ended up in a different journal and was cited in Senate testimony about the Affordable Care Act; and I ended up publishing the third chapter of my dissertation in *Health Affairs* on a topic that was not even on my radar when I had proposed my dissertation. Sometimes the ideas that resonate most are the ones you just stumble on, not the ones you spend years developing and putting all your chips on. Biggest lesson for me in all of it: be open and just ride the ride – best not to grip any one success or failure too tight, because the next one is just around the corner. And certainly don't let it ruin your vacation!

***A Gift of Time* (2020)**

Kevin Griffith, PhD, MPA
Assistant Professor, Vanderbilt University (HLPM alum, 2020)
Pronouns: he/him/his

Project Title:	**Assessing the Potential of Risk Targeting and Stratified Penalties to Reduce 30-day Hospital Readmissions**
SRG Action:	**Impact Score:59**

[illegible] Reviewers felt that there is no conceptual model guiding the overall study. Reviewers observed that the approach is not clearly written, and it appears that the applicant did not fully engage mentors in formulating the approach. Reviewers were concerned that the applicant is not experienced in computational techniques and is dependent on others for this expertise. Reviewers observed that Aim 1 does not take full advantage of completed pilot work. Reviewers commented that the application is difficult to understand because it is not well-written. In addition, the applicant does not address the issue related to the uncertainty of predictive machine learning as to whether predictions will be generalizable outside the setting in which the data were collected. Overall, the reviewers rated this application from "Good to Satisfactory" range with a level of "Medium Impact".

The third year of my PhD was a particularly stressful time. I had finally finished my coursework, but now I had comprehensive exams to worry about, a dissertation to start, and my existing grant funding was expiring! Fortunately, I'd managed to come up with what I thought was a really exciting set of three projects for my dissertation. I decided to apply for an R36 Dissertation Support Grant, but I had little experience with grant-writing beyond class exercises. I solicited successful grant examples from alumni and current professors. Since I was working full-time as a research analyst, I spent my nights and weekends working on all the required forms, polishing drafts, and iterating them with my mentors. Upon submission of the final draft, I was optimistic that NIH reviewers would clearly see the value of this research and I'd be able to secure funding to complete my dissertation.

Then there was a hiccup. Someone at NIH had misplaced a stack of grant applications, and mine was included - so it didn't even get discussed! At first I was resigned that I would have to wait for the next grant cycle, but there was enough of an outcry that NIH decided to hastily convene a special panel to review our submissions. There was hope! And then after months of waiting, I finally got my grant's impact score of 59. I was crushed. Not only was not dissertation not going to be funded, it *wasn't even close*. I wondered how could I have been so wrong - maybe my ideas weren't as interesting or novel after all?

Once thing about R36 grants is that you always get written feedback, regardless of impact score. The reviewers had many criticisms about my application:

1) My specific aims were not closely related enough
2) Weak integration of conceptual model

3) My analytic approach was poorly written and lacked sufficient detail
4) Doubts about whether my data were sufficient to answer my research question
5) The application focused too heavily on analytic techniques, versys impact

I recognized that the criticisms were fair, I could address them, and in doing so I would gain valuable experience that would be useful not just for this grant but for future applications. I re-drafted my materials again and again. I worked closely with my mentors at Boston University, who provided excellent feedback on "grantsmanship" and how to structure my Specific Aims and Research Strategy. I realized I didn't need to include my entire dissertation in the application; I dropped my third paper from the resubmission because it was not closely related to the first two. Then, as before, I hit the submit button and waited. Finally, the NIH emailed me with the score for my resubmission. The final sentence was: "Besides these minor weaknesses, the panel indicated this excellent application may lead to improved design of the Hospital Readmissions Reduction Program and similar programs in the future." I was going to be funded!

After some reflection, I realized that referees - whether it be for a grant, a journal article, fellowship, or something else - are giving us a gift of time. I was thankful for this, and the fact that every R36 applicant gets several pages of detailed feedback even if their scores are low. Even if I didn't agree with every point the referees made, I recognized that few people are going to read my dissertation materials as closely as they did and I should make a good faith effort to respond to all of their concerns. I also believe this initial rejection was valuable for my development. As a junior researcher, I learned a lot about what review panels are looking for and how they make decisions. If I'd been initially successful, I probably would have patted myself on the back and not taken their feedback to heart.

I've also had to learn to not fear rejection, and that it's a normal part of the academic process. Many of us doctoral students are not used to failing in our academic endeavors - that's why we're pursuing a PhD! But at this level, rejection for grants and journals is a fact of life. When others have asked for my R36 materials as a reference, I've been happy to share both my successful and failed applications. You can't take a rejection personally, it is not at all a reflection of the value of your ideas or your skills as a researcher. We need to normalize rejection, talk about it, and learn from it.

***Now I am Not Alone* (2020)**

David Jernigan, PhD, MA
Professor, HLPM
Assistant Dean for Practice
Pronouns: he/him/his

It was the year 2000. I had finished and submitted by doctoral dissertation. My dissertation chair nominated it for outstanding student dissertation of the year with the American Sociological Association (didn't win, nice to be nominated). Even more exciting, Dr. Griffith Edwards, editor of the journal *Addiction* and of a series of monographs on alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, wanted to publish a book version of it as part of his series. Great!!

Then there were months of no word from Griffith, and finally I met with him when I was in London traveling for other reasons. He was chagrinned and apologetic. He had submitted my book precis to Oxford University Press, and they had decided that there was not a sufficient market for a book on my topic (the globalization of the alcohol industry and implications for public health). He said they rarely over-ruled him, but in this case they had, and he was unable to publish my manuscript. I moved to plan B – work with another, smaller publisher. After three months of dancing around, they too took a pass.

In the meantime, neither life nor I stopped. I published the case studies from my dissertation in a book of edited case studies on alcohol policy in developing countries published by the World Health Organization. I published the theoretical and overview portions of it in a special supplement to *Addiction*, and in *Contemporary Drug Problems*. And I kept working on my work on the implications of structural changes in the global alcohol industry for public health, including publishing follow-up articles in 2009 and most recently in 2020.

For a long time I was pretty much alone in this space. Then, in 2009, I was invited to be part of a seminar series at Columbia about the implications of corporate actions for health. We had people from tobacco, food, pollution/environment, guns, and me from alcohol. Out of this I mined the tobacco papers collection at UCSF and published an expose of the main global alcohol industry front group in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

Not long after this, I started hearing from researchers in the UK about my work in this arena. The short version is that three groups of researchers there, who had done similar work on the tobacco industry, moved over to look at alcohol, and at this point they have churned out numerous studies analyzing the industry and its actions in opposition to public health. Now I am definitely not alone! I am still a "go-to" person for analyses of global industry structure and trends with a public health lens, but I have a whole group of colleagues who are adding sophistication and legitimacy to these analyses.

In short, I just kept plodding away. I never got my book from Oxford Press, but I think I actually gained something even better, which is global legitimacy for the point of view that the alcohol industry has no role in global health policy making about alcohol.

***Rejection and Accomplishment* (2020)**

David Jones, PhD, MSPH (1/18/81 – 9/11/21)

I enjoy highlighting a few major accomplishments when writing a bio or cover letter. But each time I highlight these cool achievements, I'm reminded of the many failures directly tied to these experiences. They still sting and evoke feelings of self-doubt. Seeing my accomplishments written on paper sometimes feels like an exercise in reminding myself that I did overcome the rejections and it has indeed worked out well.

I almost wrote that I wouldn't change the rejections because they have made me who I am today, but the first part of that sentence would have been a lie. I wish I didn't have these experiences because they can be brutal. But they have taught me a lot and the experience of overcoming these failures is in many ways what gives me the courage to set ambitious goals. Here's the back story of failure and rejection behind three of my proudest accomplishments.

First, someone reading my bio will see that I interned in the Canadian House of Commons. Working on Parliament Hill was an unbelievably cool experience, giving me an all access pass to private party caucus meetings, backroom chats with lobbyists and foreign dignitaries, the Prime Minister's question period each afternoon, and press scrums with ministers. But this internship would never have happened had I not just experienced major disappointment.

Shortly after getting accepted to grad school to do an MPH, I found out that it would take a lot longer than I thought for my fiancé to receive a visa to live with me in the US. The advice we received from an immigration expert was that our process would be dramatically faster if we were married rather than engaged, so we quickly got married. We did not want to live apart during the first year of our marriage, so I deferred graduate school for a year and stayed with her in Hull, Québec where she was working while we waited for her visa.

I was pretty disappointed to not be starting graduate school and eventually got tired of twiddling my thumbs. I was not allowed to get a job because of my status as a visitor in Canada, but as I looked at the Parliament building from the parking lot of our grocery store across the river, I thought about how cool it would be to work in that building. I did not have much more on my CV than a line about interning in the Idaho Legislature earlier that year. I knew nothing and no one, which was scary but also gave me a sense that I had nothing to lose. I went on the website for the Health Committee of the House of Commons and found the list of phone numbers. I called every single office, other than those of the Bloc Québecois party. My spiel was brief, effectively that I was willing to do grunt work for free. All 20 or so offices ignored my call, outright said no, or said they would have to think about it.

I wasn't very hopeful, but after a week or so, I followed up with the few offices that said they would think about it, knowing that they wouldn't take the initiative to call back. I didn't want to

be rejected again but figured it would be better to put myself in a position of them saying no to me rather than to not even give myself a chance. They all did say no, until one of them didn't. Amazingly, the chief of staff to the chair of the committee said his boss was open to the idea. They invited me in for an interview and soon enough I had an ID badge and was in meetings with Members of Parliament.

This amazing experience came on the heels of more than two dozen rejections. I learned that landing a great job is not just about whether I am qualified, but is the result of quirky dynamics that the applicant cannot see or control. But you are not likely to have cool experiences if you don't put yourself out there, including to the opportunities that aren't advertised.

Second, someone reading my bio will see that along with my master's and doctorate degrees in public health, I have a master's degree in political science. As cool as this is, it is the direct result of a major failure. When I started my PhD at the University of Michigan I followed in the footsteps of a small number of people attempting a joint degree between the School of Public Health and the Department of Political Science.

I gained so much from this unique combination, but it was a pretty jarring experience. Throughout my political science coursework I grew increasingly frustrated with comments that I shouldn't study health as an outcome or goal, but as a case study for building theory about things like federalism or how Congress works. I understood where they were coming from but disagreed, seeing health is important in its own right.

This dissonance made it hard to study for my political science prelim exam (the equivalent of our ACE candidacy exam). I could summarize the theoretical arguments of the major works in the field, but they somehow never seemed to really stick and I had hard time using them in conversation. I see now with hindsight that it was partly because I didn't feel the theory reflected or informed what I had experienced in the Idaho Legislature or Canadian Parliament, but at the time I was pretty sure I was struggling because I just wasn't as smart as everyone else. Nonetheless, I pushed ahead and scheduled my exam.

The poli sci candidacy exam is a grueling experience under the best of circumstances as you are in a small room with four of the top scholars in the field who grill you. You get to shape the questions in advance, but even that was a struggle for me. The two-hour oral exam was brutal. I got flustered regularly and stumbled constantly. I got lost in my head trying to guess what they wanted me to say, but it was like the blood had completely left my head in a way I had never experienced and nothing was there. I was eventually excused from the room and from my seat down the hall couldn't hear their words but could tell from the tone and occasional laughter that this was probably among the very worst exams they had ever seen. I was not surprised when they brought me back in, told me I failed, and that I had one more chance to retake the exam or would be kicked out of the program.

I was absolutely gutted for at least a full year. Every time I attended a seminar I worried about what the students and faculty thought of me. I spent the summer studying to retake the exam, working with classmates who couldn't have been more gracious or kind. But as time went on and I developed a clearer sense that I could keep up with others who were thriving in this program, I came to realize that I did not really want to.

I approached trusted mentors who at first tiptoed around their advice in case I decided to stick with the dual degree, but once I started asking questions about whether it was worth it I clearly saw that they did not think so. In fact, they thought that trying to satisfy both disciplines in my dissertation would invite logistical challenges of having two chairs and risked diluting the contributions in either directions. When they asked what I most wanted to study, they said it sounded more like a public health dissertation. Having a political science PhD would only matter if I wanted to work in a political science department, which I did not. I was so relieved when I finally decided to stop pursuing a dual degree and grateful to mentors in the political science department who helped me see that the coursework and papers I had already completed satisfied their requirement for receiving a master's degree in political science. This is why I am one of the few people in the country who have this degree!

The third major rejection I'll reflect on here suggests that this decision to focus my dissertation worked out. The good news is that I received the Outstanding Dissertation Award from AcademyHealth and that my dissertation was published as a book by a major press. The hard truth is that every abstract stemming from my dissertation that I submitted to the annual AcademyHealth research meeting was rejected. A colleague pulled me aside at one of these meetings and told me that she was on the review panel for one of my abstracts. She probably shouldn't have said anything about the panel's deliberations, but she told me that my work scored poorly because people felt it was too political and too qualitative.

You can imagine the dissonance of health services researchers finding my work too political while I was also failing the political science candidacy exam! I persisted with the dissertation questions and methods that excited me, worrying at the same time that this meant I would not able to find a job in academia. I sought out mentors who had successfully threaded the needle between these fields. Their advice was enormously helpful in big and small ways, but I couldn't help but notice that it was not always consistent. It was not easy, but I tried to develop a sense of self through which I would filter the advice I received. It was gratifying but also pretty funny that I then received the annual outstanding dissertation award for work that was mostly qualitative and political.

The process to getting the book published was in some ways harder than being rejected. I was ignored by an editor who promised it was under review. I couldn't send the manuscript around as I waited for these reviews, but I would go months without any news. The response was just encouraging enough that a review or decision was coming soon, but all in all this process took nearly three years from when I first submitted the manuscript for review to when I held a copy of the book in my hand. This experience actually made me appreciate the near

constant rejection I receive when submitting articles for publication, because then you are at least not left hanging. You have closure and can move on to pursuing other avenues. Every paper has a home, it's just a matter of finding where that is.

These failures have been such an instrumental part of the major accomplishments they accompany, teaching me not to get too emotionally invested in my failures. They have also shaped how I view rejection now that I am more and more in the position of being the person who rejects someone else. Whether it's doing peer review, reading admissions applications, grading exams, serving on faculty search committees, or even commenting on a Tweet, I try to remember that on the other side is a person probably experiencing the same insecurities I feel and felt. These experiences of deliberating about others and sometimes rejecting them has also helped me see that sometimes these decisions could have easily gone another way but for the quirks of the particular combination of people that were brought together. With this in mind, I probably shouldn't get too emotionally invested in my successes either.

***The Heaviest Weight* (2020)**

Sarah Ketchen Lipson, PhD EdM
Associate Professor, HLPM
Pronouns: she/her/hers

When I began my PhD, I had almost no prior research experience. I started in a higher education program. At the end of my first semester, at the urging of a professor in the School of Education, I emailed a faculty member in public health who had similar interests to mine in college student mental health. Days later, I made the trek across campus to the School of Public Health for the first time. There I met with Daniel, a professor who would later become my primary advisor, dissertation chair, lifelong mentor and collaborator. We began working together immediately, and I was a full-time RA with him the summer after my first year. It was a fulfilling summer. I fell in love with research. In August, days before I was set to begin my second year as an education doctoral student, I wondered out loud to Daniel, "Do you think I should take some classes in public health?" His answer was an enthusiastic, *yes*. I got special permission to enroll in the first-year courses for health policy PhD students. I rearranged my schedule and enrolled in a mix of courses in higher education and health policy. I began the new semester keenly aware that Daniel had vouched for me to get into these classes.

In my health policy classes, I was an outlier. I had never so much as taken a class in public health. Most of my peers had strong backgrounds in quantitative methods. I had taken one statistics course as an undergrad many years earlier. I was terrified of asking a stupid question in class. When an unfamiliar acronym was used, I didn't dare ask what it referred to. Surely, I was the only one who didn't know. I saw gaps in my knowledge as deficits, and I worked furiously to fill these on my own time. I worked alone, fearing that collaboration on problems sets would expose my ineptitude. Even though my health policy classes were an enormous source of stress and insecurity, I loved what I was learning. I wanted to join the program. I worked 7 days/week that semester, got straight A's, and was officially admitted into the health policy PhD program. Everything had worked out *perfectly*.

Then I got my first string of rejections—a conference abstract, a paper I'd poured myself into, an award I'd had three people write letters of recommendation for—in a matter of <u>two days</u>. I dealt with this the only way I knew how: alone. I didn't tell anyone. I suppose my thinking was that I would share these rejections with Daniel once I had new successes to balance them out. I guess I imagined that I would tell Daniel, "So, a while back, I received some rejections BUT, don't worry, I've dealt with it and look at these shiny new successes!" I didn't want him to think he'd put his money on the wrong horse. I wanted to prove to him that I was worth betting on.

To add to the absurdity of my thinking, the paper that had been rejected was one I had begun in a course taught by Daniel. Days after I received that rejection, I met with Daniel for our weekly advising meeting. He casually asked me if I'd heard anything back from the

journal yet. My face flushed. I wanted to lie and say I hadn't heard yet, but I told him that I'd recently been notified that it was rejected. He paused. "Sarah, you can tell me about good news and bad news, you know that, right?" The only disappointment I picked up on was that I hadn't felt like I could tell him. (I should also say that I count myself among the luckiest PhD students in history because I had an advisor who cared about my success and wellbeing above all else. I will spend my career trying to pay this forward.) I realized in this moment that Daniel could only support me if I let him in, which meant dropping the "perfect" act. Calmly, he explained that he had been rejected countless times. He emphasized that it was a good paper and I should definitely find another journal to submit to. When we finished discussing the paper, I felt a weight lift. Then, shifting topics, Daniel asked me if I was interested in collaborating with him on a new project. He still saw me as someone worth investing in, nothing had changed. Let me repeat, nothing had changed.

In the end, I am so glad that my first paper, conference proposal, and award application were all rejected. This early string of rejections was a turning point. It marked the beginning of redefining of what it meant to be a "successful" PhD student. *My job was to learn*. I was not expected to know everything. I added value to classes by speaking up when I was confused. I joined the study group and began working collaboratively with my classmates. Removing the pressure to be perfect, I stopped taking myself so seriously. In my third through fifth years, I spoke at our health policy admitted students day, starting my remarks by saying that I hoped what I was about to share would assure any prospective students who might feel like outliers that they too could succeed. I explained what success meant to me, a very different definition than I'd had when I began the program. I became someone younger students came to for advice and solace during the inevitable challenges that come with pursuing a PhD. I was approachable. I was me. Being "perfect" was a barrier to being real and rejection broke down that barrier in a beautiful way.

In my time as a faculty member, I have had dozens upon dozens of papers and grants rejected. There will be many more rejections along the way, but none as heavy as the weight I carried trying to deal with rejection alone.

***Where I Needed to Be* (2020)**

Tim Levengood, PhD, MPH
HLPM alum (2023)
Pronouns: he/him/his

See that rejection letter above? Yeah me neither. That's exactly what I received from one PhD program (that will go unnamed) when applying for HSR programs. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. However the message was loud and clear, and it wasn't a silent, joyful "accepted!"

REJECTED: yet again. It wasn't the first time, and it certainly wouldn't be the last. But of the other four programs that rejected my application, this one stung in its resounding apathy. *We required you to submit a litany of tailored application materials, set aside time and money for interviews, craft the perfect personal statement, and we couldn't be bothered to even dignify your attempt with a response*. Thanks.

Luckily (?), at that point in my life, I had built up a real streak of painful rejections—professional, personal, and seemingly existential. And today, I experience a near-weekly wave of rejections, be they this one paper that has been rejected from 5 different journals, or the two small grants I applied for unsuccessfully last year, my initial dissertation topic form, or the sixth round of edits submitted on a mundane data request.

But rejections and failure only have power over you if you refuse to learn from them. Resilience is hard-won, but it is so rewarding. Equally important is honing your skill of discernment—identifying what is constructive feedback on areas you can improve and what is an unhelpful dismissal of things you can't. Neither is an easy lesson to stomach, and both require experiencing rejection first hand. It's important to experience failure, so you can experience the fulfillment of picking yourself back up. It's important to have your ego

bruised, so that you are reminded that (shocker) you're not always right, you're not always the most intelligent, eloquent or the most qualified. And it's important to acknowledge that sometimes (often) rejection is due to circumstances completely beyond your control.

So yeah, looking back on REDACTED's academic equivalent of "ghosting" me, it hurt in the moment, but it really all worked out for the best. I took a few days to regroup. And I started again. I thought about where the interviews that day had gone wrong. I reflected on areas I could be clearer, aspects of my elevator speech I could make more polished. I applied the lessons from this misstep to my (ultimately successful) BU interview. I made a point of distinguishing between those areas I could improve and the total lack of fit between myself and that department over which I had ultimately no control. I can't imagine working and learning at a program that can't even be bothered to reject a potential applicant – not a place I want to be. Where I am at now, and what I am studying is a really good fit for me. And the day-to-day rejections of this trajectory are balanced by the occasional, oh-so-sweet victories. So to that program I say, thanks for helping narrow the path to where I needed to be, and | | you too.

***Gut Punch* (2023)**

Jon Levy, ScD
Professor & Chair, Environmental Health
Pronouns: he/him/his

When I was an early-stage doctoral student in environmental health, I applied for a graduate fellowship through the EPA. This was particularly important for me, because I had been accepted into the doctoral program without funding. I was a somewhat non-traditional student, coming in without a master's, with no relevant work experience (I was a management consultant at the time) or academic background (I was an applied math major in college). I had managed to convince the doctoral program to take a chance on me, but not to take a chance that involved money. So, I had worked part-time doing management consulting during my first year as a doctoral student while taking full-time classes and doing some research, which was not a sustainable model.

The fact that I didn't get the fellowship isn't the important part of the story – I was eventually able to get funding from other sources, graduated on time, and so forth. The part that stuck with me was one of the comments in the reviews. I cannot for the life of me find the reviews (which I think were sent in the mail at that time), but I can still recall the comment almost verbatim more than a quarter-century later. The reviewer stated directly that someone with my academic background would have little chance of succeeding in the field of environmental health. Full stop.

This rejection hit me hard because it was aligned with my insecurities. I knew much less about the field than many of my peers, and I was clueless about academia in general. I felt like an imposter much of the time, so having something printed on paper that stated that an expert in the field concluded that I was actually an imposter was quite the gut punch. For many more years than was probably healthy, I harbored fantasies of somehow bumping into that reviewer at a professional meeting and waving my CV in their face – "See! I succeeded! You were wrong!"

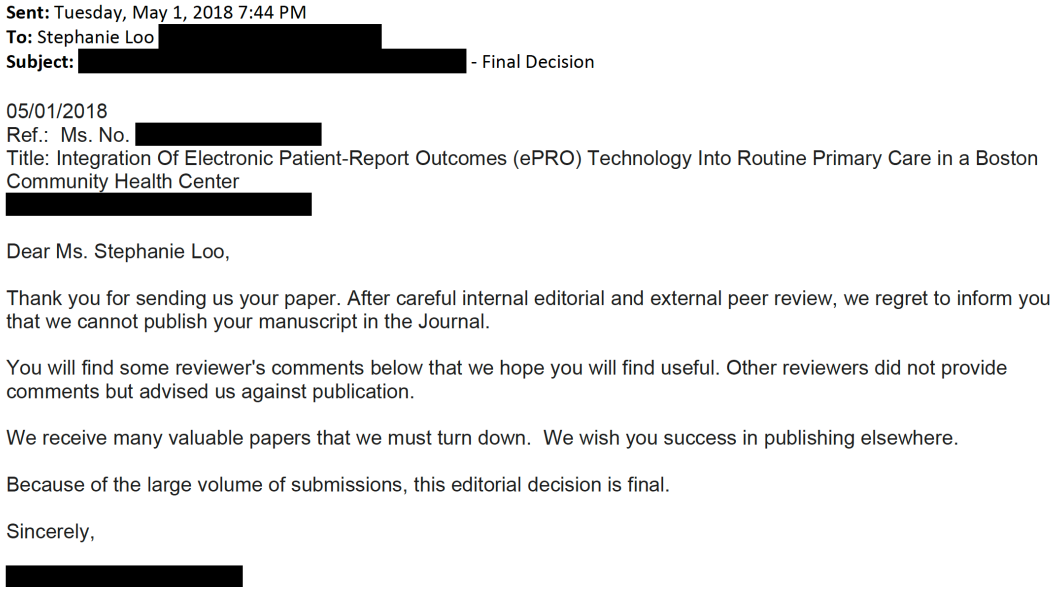
But over time I realized that the process for reviewing papers, grants, fellowships, and so forth is imperfect. Humans conduct reviews, with their biases and blinders, and they don't always get it right. The reviewer probably just had their specific conception of the field and could not get past it. Or maybe they just had a bad day and were in a lousy mood when they wrote the review. Or maybe they were correct that I had a lower probability of success given my background and were just playing the odds. Regardless, that review did not need to define me or my career.

I have taken a couple of important things away from that experience (and others like it). First, public health is highly interdisciplinary, and people can enter into the field from a wide range of backgrounds. I try to avoid presuming that someone with or without a particular background can be successful. Second, although we want a system where work can be improved by feedback from our peers and where good ideas carry the day, we also want to retain our humanity and avoid making rejection feel personal when it invariably isn't. In a field replete with rejection, how you deliver the rejection is extremely important.

Over the years, I've reviewed many grants, articles and applications. Some have been better than others. But I've always tried to avoid anything that could be taken as a statement that someone doesn't belong.

***Even if it Takes Years* (2020)**

Stephanie Loo, PhD, MS
HLPM alum (2023)
Pronouns: she/her/hers



Sent: Tuesday, May 1, 2018 7:44 PM
To: Stephanie Loo [redacted]
Subject: [redacted] - Final Decision

05/01/2018
Ref.: Ms. No. [redacted]
Title: Integration Of Electronic Patient-Report Outcomes (ePRO) Technology Into Routine Primary Care in a Boston Community Health Center
[redacted]

Dear Ms. Stephanie Loo,

Thank you for sending us your paper. After careful internal editorial and external peer review, we regret to inform you that we cannot publish your manuscript in the Journal.

You will find some reviewer's comments below that we hope you will find useful. Other reviewers did not provide comments but advised us against publication.

We receive many valuable papers that we must turn down. We wish you success in publishing elsewhere.

Because of the large volume of submissions, this editorial decision is final.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

"You have to publish; no one will 'take you seriously/will know who are you/you won't get into PhD graduate programs' if you don't have any first authorships."

The above was oft-quoted advice that I'd received over the years as a student, a research assistant, a manager, a consultant, and a director. It took me nearly two years to get a first draft of this manuscript together; I'd been more focused on actually implementing the project than writing the paper. I finally got a draft together and submitted my first-ever first authorship paper in late 2017. Half a year later (!), I received a 'revise and resubmit' request from the initial (and highest tier) journal I had submitted to – exciting! I frantically worked to answer their requests.

The above rejection letter arrived several weeks later. Needless to say, I was crestfallen. The manuscript above was resubmitted and rejected to three more journals over the next three years. Including a year-long break where I didn't get to resubmitting to the next journal on my list, given the demands of balancing graduate school and life. Meanwhile, I watched my peers work on and achieve multiple first-authorship acceptances. I marveled at others who entered a graduate program with first-authorship papers already under their belt – how was it that they could do within the span of months what was taking me years to try and achieve?

My first-first authored paper was finally accepted six years after starting my work on this project. I was able to get into a PhD program in spite of not yet having a first-authorship publication. Regardless, it was a really good feeling when I crossed this accomplishment off of my career bucket goal list. While I think that the papers and publications can matter, they are not the only things that matter. Some perseverance (even if it takes years!) will get you across that finish line.

***Door Shut, Wide Open* (2023)**

Lois McCloskey, DrPH, MPH
Clinical Professor, Community Health Sciences
Pronouns: she/her/hers

It is 1992. I am freshly minted DrPH. I had landed an interesting job at the intersection of research and policy as co-founder of the Institute for Urban Health Research, Policy and Education in Boston. The Institute was a pioneering initiative by the City to shift funding and control of research based in Boston's communities from academic institutions to community organizations by way of a city health department. It was a sort of 'first stop' on the way to genuine community based participatory research (CBPR). The position gave me myriad opportunities to lead community-rooted, action-oriented and multi-method research, yet no opportunities for mentorship or role models for academic success. That was ok, I thought, because what I valued most was to be positioned to do research that could be immediately applied to policy and practice at the local level and to be part of that translation process. The policymakers were my bosses! That said, I did have big ideas about research I wanted to do in the area I had most cared about in graduate school- the meaning of pregnancy and childbearing to girls and women in lower resourced communities. None of my ideas fit the mold of NIH research, but I had barely heard of NIH and certainly had not heard of a K award. But that didn't stop me. I had for a long time imagined a true ethnographic study that would get at the heart of what "unintended pregnancy" really meant in real life (as opposed to public health metrics and rhetoric) to young girls and women with varying amounts of control over their social and economic circumstances and vastly different racial, ethnic and cultural values. I could dream….

Then, out of the blue, a colleague sent me an RFA from NICHD, announcing a special call for quantitative and qualitative research on the determinants of unintended pregnancy. Here was my chance! Or was I naïve to think that I stood a chance from where I sat- not even in a university? Nonetheless, I got to work-gathering the community partners I had been working closely with and my favorite gender-focused colleagues-- a medical anthropologist, welfare economist, and qualitative sociologist. Together, we designed and proposed what I would call a deep community-rooted ethnographic project in neighborhoods in Roxbury and Dorchester. I remember the living room conversations, late night writing sessions, and the feeling of being at the center of something exciting and important and at the heart of what I wanted to do. We waited the requisite nine months.

Then came the unexpected call from Dr. Newcomer, the project officer (and a renown one at that). She said something like: "Dr. McCloskey, I have good news and bad. Your proposal was terrific and is very interesting to us. It was very well reviewed. Congratulations! BUT, we can only fund six projects, and your project score was tied with another one from Boston; we can only support one in the same geographic area. I'm sorry." My heart sank. Really sank. And the waves of sadness, deep disappointment frustration, and anger hung around for a long time. Was all that work and creativity going to come to nothing?

After some months, I guess I did what one does—shake off the disappointment and frustration, read the reviewers' comments, and prepare to re-submit. Only this time there was no special call and no special study section—that had dried up. I remember the long, lonely hours that followed, trying to respond to tough issues inherent in conducting in depth qualitative work in households and neighborhoods about sensitive topics of reproductive health across cultural, language and ethnic borders. I learned then what hard emotional and intellectual work it is to face critiques (the fair and unfair kind), glean the lessons and push forward.

We did submit our proposal to the regular NICHD social/behavioral study section. And this time, nine months later I got the pink sheets in the mail: They hated our ethnographic approach! I can still feel the sting of that rejection in the pit of my stomach. It felt not just like a grant unfunded but like a very special door shut in my face. And so it was. Our team was not to be among the selected scholars to pursue innovative research on unintended pregnancy- an issue that gained much traction in coming years. This time I felt not just angry but utterly defeated. How could one study section think it was great and another trash the same study? I had plenty of pie in the sky ideas but knew close to nothing about the rules of the game. This was my first lesson from the trenches of NIH proposal writing: be in touch with a well-placed project officer, know your study section, get lots of advice from those who know the inside scoop…

Knowing what I know now about how to fight the good fight of NIH funding, it's hard to understand why I stopped there, but I did. There was no one to tell or encourage me otherwise. In fact, once I eventually joined the ranks of bonafide academe at BUSPH, on two other occasions I led grant submissions in the early 2000's that were similarly ambitious and 'before their time'- before qualitative research and CBPR had a real place at the table. Those too were rejected.

I will not say that the burn of those rejections was 'for the best', but I will say that with those doors closed (or so I felt), I opened other doors that have been rewarding and in keeping with my values and strengths as an educator and leader. It would be years later before I again submitted NIH proposals-now with the support of a mentor-colleague and a keen understanding of the narrow (though expanding) confines of fundable NIH research. Most importantly, I found ways within these confines to honor my commitment to engaging community partners, researchers, policymakers and practitioners in a process of setting the policy agenda in reproductive and maternal health that is founded on lived experience, data analysis and shared decision-making.

It is easy for me to see now how these rejections early in my career helped me clarify my goals and forge my own path. I now see and feel in my gut what I did not then: mentoring is a precious gift that must be received and is a joy to give. Rejection too can be a gift- one that shows us to doors we would otherwise not see or open.

***Rejection by the Numbers* (2022)**

Matt Motta, PhD
Assistant Professor, HLPM
Pronouns: he/him/his

Eleven. That's the number of PhD programs that rejected my application for graduate study, as a twenty-one-year-old undergraduate.

Seventy Four. That's the number of assistant professor, postdoctoral, and private sector research institutions that rejected my post-PhD applications for employment.

One Hundred and Fifty-*ish*. That's the number of academic journals that have, at some point or another, declined to publish research from my colleagues and I.

One. That's the number of…

- PhDs I needed to advance my academic interests in my chosen field.
- Jobs I needed to earn my first post-PhD paycheck.
- Journals that can publish any given study that we submit for peer-review.

It's tempting to view rejection as a reflection on our scholarship, work experiences, and quality of our research. We care about all of these things *a lot*; so much so, that our work and scholarship often becomes intertwined with our sense of self. As a result, the rejection of our graduate applications, journal submissions, and job portfolios can feel *like a rejection of ourselves*.

The numbers, however, tell a very different story.

Before I tell that story, here's a few things you should know about me. I grew up in a working-class home. Neither of my parents went to college. As a teenager, I approached the college application process *expecting* (and, indeed, experiencing) a considerable amount of rejection. In my house, there was no such thing as a "safety school." Admittance to college was, in and of itself, a victory.

My upbringing helped me to focus less on "the many" (the number of rejections I expected) and more on "the one" (the opportunity to go to college). It helped contextualize rejection as routine, in service of achieving a goal for which acceptance *need not be plural* to be *useful*.

The numbers tell us that, rejection is present in nearly everything that we do. I want to argue that this can be both *empowering* and *humbling*.

Rejection *empowers* us with the opportunity to "try again;" a second chance to make improvements to the work we do. And rejection *humbles* us to remind ourselves that our fields are not islands. Smart, qualified, and talented people (like ourselves!) experience the routine sting of rejection, and the occasional elation of acceptance.

To illustrate both the power and promise of routine rejection, I want to use the most recent rejection I received on a peer-reviewed manuscript submission as an example.

In Spring 2022, I became interested in studying the possibility that a second booster for COVID-19 would become authorized for all American adults. At the time, this was a hypothetical. Still, I felt that it was important that studies of vaccine hesitancy not only be backward looking (asking *why did some people choose to forego vaccination?*) but also *forward looking* (preempting why some people *might* forego vaccination), so that we might -- in turn -- try to do something about it).

Academic publishers, however, disagreed. The piece was desk rejected at six peer-reviewed journals, primarily on the grounds that the subject was not the right substantive fit.

This rejection was *humbling*. It reminded me that journals receive contributions about *many* important topics. Some work (even good work!) will, from time to time, be rejected.

Still, I was motivated by the promise of the policy promise of this research to keep trying. Eventually, the piece was granted review at a journal and received a revise and resubmit decision. Peer reviewers wanted to see a lot of changes in the revised piece. But, the promise of this journal being "the one," *empowered* me to change the manuscript for the better.

All peer reviewers on the piece, as well as the Managing Editor, agreed. The paper was substantially improved, and met all of the Reviewers' concerns about the original manuscript.

Unfortunately, this isn't the end of the story.

Despite reviewers' satisfaction with the manuscript, the journal's Editorial staff nevertheless declined to publish the piece. The journal opted not to provide a detailed rationale explaining why they made this choice. And, to be fair, they did not *technically* have to do so. Editorial Boards wield significant discretion regarding what they do and do not publish.

This hurt. Badly. But, after spending a day grumbling to anyone who might listen, I came to see rejection for what it was; an opportunity to appreciate the impressive volume of work being done on important subjects relevant to the journal and the chance to strengthen the manuscript.

Above all, rejection was motivating. Still believing strongly in the policy relevance of this research, I decided to build a conceptual and empirical case to appeal the journal's decision.

As I write this, I have no idea what the outcome of the appeal will be. And that's ok! Rejection does not have to be a uniformly negative experience.

At its worst, reject is frustrating and demoralizing. But, at its best, rejection is humbling, empowering, and motivating. And, at its most fundamental level, *rejection is routine*.

My hope is that we can choose to see the *best* in routine rejection; to learn from our (many) failures in pursuit of "the one." In so doing, we can harness the power of rejection to make ourselves better scholars, researchers, and members of our academic/professional communities.

***It Took a While to Get There* (2020)**

Steve Pizer, PhD
Professor, HLPM & Director, PEPReC
Pronouns: he/him/his

I defended my dissertation 22 years ago and recently mentioned to my wife that I think I finally know what I'm doing. It took a while to get there. Along the way, I experienced frequent rejection and often doubted my abilities and choices, so selecting a single example was challenging. That's why I've settled on three lessons I learned, illustrated with examples.

Lesson 1. Peer review is flaky
Early in my career I spent a few years working on nursing home cost and quality modeling. I was happily using the fancy econometrics I learned in school on a hot policy topic and I wrote a few papers I was proud of. I submitted one of those papers to a conference at about the same time I submitted it for publication. Both reviews came back and my paper was selected for a plenary presentation at the conference (Yay!) and rejected from the journal with scathing comments (Boo!). I was disoriented, but learned that conscientious reviewers can reach opposite conclusions in good faith. Now, as a journal editor, I see this all the time. In my own work, I always try to find the constructive elements in any negative review – after I let the disappointment fade.

Lesson 2. Persistence sometimes doesn't pay off
During the debate over the Affordable Care Act, I got excited about the potential for comparative effectiveness research to identify low-value care and thereby improve quality and efficiency. I heard about the lack of evidence supporting many costly surgical procedures and thought I could combine my fancy econometric skills and the unusually detailed VA data to have a meaningful impact on practice. My colleagues and I wrote about 10 proposals over 4 years and our scores typically improved with resubmission, but we couldn't get over the funding line. Surgeons on the study sections didn't have confidence in our methods, doubted surgery leaders would accept our results, and didn't believe we could change practice. I was frustrated, but they were probably right. I was trying to do something that was unlikely to work because the kind of evidence we could produce would be easily ignored without institutional backing.

Lesson 3. Persistence sometimes pays off
I've been working on clinic operations and access to care for about 15 years now. When I started, we were simply trying to identify valid measures of access using administrative data. From there, we evaluated a few unsuccessful pilots and lost a few battles over policy. Then in 2014 there was a national scandal over access to care in the VA. Congress passed new laws in 2014 and 2018 requiring VA to respond. When VA leadership started trying to formulate responses, we were ready with validated measures, appropriate models and policy prescriptions paired with supportive constituencies. We are well funded and engaged in high profile work with strong potential to improve efficiency and access to care. It sure took a while to get there.

Big Lesson. Learn from rejection – succeed more in the future.

***Try Again* (2020)**

Cara Safon, MPH
Doctoral Candidate, HLPM
Pronouns: she/her/hers

August 23, 2020

Dear Cara,

Thank you for applying to the [redacted]. We received applications from many high-quality students, including you. Unfortunately, you were not selected as a member of the 2020-2021 cohort. Please know that you were a competitive candidate and this was a very difficult decision.

If you will be a student next year, we highly encourage you to apply to be a member of the 2021-2022 Student Fellows cohort.

Best,

I was disappointed to learn that I was not selected as a fellow for a unique year-long program to which I applied for the 2021-2022 academic year. I remember feeling that the language in the letter – seemingly common in many rejections – informing me of my competitiveness failed to alleviate the sting of the rejection.

While I realized that applying for the fellowship meant competing against what was likely hundreds to thousands of talented students from across the country for one of two open fellowship slots, I nevertheless found it difficult not to get my hopes up. Participating would have enabled me to take on an extracurricular activity not unrelated to my academic pursuits, yet one that would have allowed me to expand my skillset and explore a new role while also completing coursework and engaging in my doctoral research.

That I had asked a very kind but very busy mentor to write a letter of recommendation on my behalf exacerbated the rejection. Upon sharing the news with her, I felt like not only had I let her down, but wasted her time in requesting her support in the first place. However, when I eventually indicated that I sought to apply to the fellowship again the following year, she was more than encouraging and eagerly volunteered to serve as a reference again.

Supportive mentorship is perhaps the most important virtue I have been lucky enough to receive as a PhD student in HLPM at BUSPH. Advisors directly and indirectly assure me of my accomplishments and remind me that the power in the successes, for me, outweigh the drawbacks that are the rejections. Projects like *Reflections on Rejections* bolster the faith I have in the program and in all of us academics to band together and battle the imposter syndrome which, at some point or another, afflicts us all.

Update: I applied to the same fellowship for the 2021-2022 cohort and was accepted! Lesson learned is to try again and keep going!

***~~Third~~ Ninth Time's the Charm* (2020)**

Paul Shafer, PhD, MA
Assistant Professor, HLPM
Pronouns: he/him/his

Health Services Research - Manuscript HSR-18-0704

HSR Editorial Office <onbehalfof@manuscriptcentral.com>
Mon 10/22/2018 1:52 PM
To: Shafer, Paul <shaferp@live.unc.edu>

22-Oct-2018

Re:HSR-18-0704/Persistence of uninsurance and substitution between emergency department and primary care utilization
Corresponding author: Mr. Paul Shafer

Dear Mr. Shafer:

We have completed our initial assessment of your manuscript, and, after a review by our editors, have decided not to consider it further for publication in Health Services Research (HSR). Regrettably, limitations on the number of manuscripts we can publish in a year and the numerous high quality submissions we receive force us to accept less than one of every seven manuscripts submitted for publication. Given such a competitive field for submissions to HSR, we often notify authors quickly (within 10 days, on average) when we decline to publish papers without sending them to outside reviewers

Over the past years, we have done this for about 65% of all submissions. Our reasons for doing this are not only related to the quality of the manuscript, but include a range of other reasons such as, the publication is well written, but better suited to a different type of journal (for example, papers that have an appeal to a more narrow subspecialty audience) or those that duplicate topics or findings from papers that were recently published or accepted in HSR.

It took a long time to get here but I finally had support from my committee to submit the first aim of my dissertation out to journals, how exciting! A question that had motivated to me abandon my developing career as a financial planner in the wake of the Great Recession and the 2008 election finally answered…by me. Well not answered, but progress and validation of prior findings. I wasn't the first to work on this question, far from it, but I was adding some incremental value. This would be my emergence onto the scene as an up-and-coming scholar in health policy as I was preparing to go on the job market the following year. Yeah, not quite.

I had been part of a great research team at RTI International so I had some idea of how the publication process goes. I saw my senior colleagues write amazing papers and take rejections and harsh comments in stride, always eventually finding a home for the work. My first lead authored manuscript was accepted with minor revisions at the first journal that I submitted it to. Like rookie goalie Cam Ward leading the Carolina Hurricanes to the Stanley Cup in 2006 as I watched from the upper deck all season, you find out later how hard it is to achieve the highest levels of success consistently. (Pretty damn hard.)

I had been planning this paper from the beginning, writing an application to AHRQ for restricted data while I was still finishing my second-year coursework. It was approved and I

got to work in the Census Research Data Center at Duke, which is a less exciting version of the compartmentalized computer lab at the CIA that Tom Cruise descends into in the first Mission Impossible movie. I was really doing it, the work that I had wanted to do all along. After years of extra courses, both pre-MA and pre-PhD to help strengthen my applications, my Masters, two sets of comps, and years of apprenticing at RTI, I was finally doing MY work.

I submitted my magnum opus to *HSR* in late September 2018 with the wide-eyed optimism of a young puppy. Three weeks later, it was desk rejected. A few weeks later, another desk rejection at *JAMA Internal Medicine*. Finally at *JAMA Network Open* I got some reviews to work with even though they were coupled with another rejection. A real gut punch came next at *Medical Care* where the editor noted, "the majority of the reviewers thought that you did not provide new information on the topic" and a reviewer added "The biggest issue with this analysis is that I'm not quite sure what I've learned from it."

This paper had gotten the blessing of my committee so it couldn't be that bad, right? Had I just waded into a part of the pool where no one can stay afloat? Questions of coverage effects on emergency department and primary care are really as old as health economics itself, dating back to the RAND Health Insurance Experiment. Maybe I had just bitten off more than I could chew and I wasn't really cut out for this. Side projects with other faculty and students were published after a few submissions, maybe it was just that my ideas were bad.

I submitted it to four more journals and got four more rejections. I was getting more despondent now. I know this isn't groundbreaking but it is reasonably well-written and not a pile of garbage so why can't I even get a revise and resubmit somewhere? Was it time to just let it go and add it to the dustbin of papers that weren't good enough to see the light of day? I could hear the voice of several mentors along the way saying that there is home for every paper. So I condensed, clarified, and rewrote it one more time and tried again, submitting it to a ninth journal (*PLOS ONE*) in April 2020.

A little over two months later, finally a revise and resubmit. But <*insert your favorite four letter word here*>, the RDCs are closed indefinitely because of the pandemic. Fate just wasn't on my side with this paper. I tried to address the comments as best I could using the public use data while acknowledging that I couldn't change the underlying analysis at all given COVID. I crossed all my fingers and toes, hoping the editor and reviewers would be understanding. Finally, in August, nearly two years after the first submission, the words I longed to here hit my inbox, "We're pleased to inform you…".

It's not the best paper. It's not even my best paper. But it was the culmination of why I started down this path in 2009 when I talked to one of my former econ professors about how I could take what I had been seeing about gaps in the health insurance system in my job and study them, maybe even make a difference. So this one meant something and it finally had a home.

Press on.

***How (I'm trying) to Stop Worrying and Love Rejection* (2020, updated 2023)**

Chris Sheldrick, PhD
Adjunct Professor, HLPM
Pronouns: he/him/his

Rejection can be a wonderful thing. Deep down inside, I like to think that my beliefs are right and that my actions are good. Rejection helps me question these assumptions.

That said, rejection is both common and painful. I cannot count the papers and grants that have been rejected over the years. Nor the sleepless nights of worry and second-guessing that they have triggered. On many occasions, I have responded to rejection by giving up, surrendering, refusing to push on. Many papers and grants, I simply abandoned. As it happens, I highly recommend "cutting one's losses" as a healthy response to rejection...but ONLY when an idea SHOULD be abandoned. I recall from graduate school a methods paper I co-authored on confounding in regression analysis. A keen reviewer skewered the central argument. I could not help but be convinced. Terrible ideas are worth abandoning.

But then, terrible ideas are not the only ones to be rejected. Sometimes, the ideas are sound but the communication is flawed; or, perhaps, less-than-clear communication belies an unrecognized inconsistency in my thought. Frequently, I read a review that characterizes my work in a way that I think is mistaken. Did the reviewer misread my manuscript. Or did I mis[1]write it? Or mis-think it? Typically, I prefer one of the latter interpretations, choosing to assume that there is always room for improvement. Without exception, all of the work of which I'm most proud have followed this course. Feedback is (or, at least, can be) a gift.

And then there are those (rare) times when (I conclude that) neither the ideas nor the communication is flawed; these (I tell myself) are the times to push back. I can still remember the mentor who told me that I really needed to complete a full slate of undergraduate courses in psychology before I applied to graduate school in clinical psychology. Reasonable enough advice, I suppose. But as a 25-year-old with degrees in history and religion, following this advice would have been logistically and financially daunting. Besides, I simply didn't want to. So I pushed on and was ultimately admitted to graduate school (just one graduate school, mind you, and last off the wait-list. In other words, by the skin of my teeth). I've learned to be cautious before concluding I'm right unconditionally. To paraphrase a famous prayer, I wish for the grace to accept rejection that is well-founded and the courage to confront rejection that is not--the real challenge is finding the wisdom to know the difference (especially in the midst of yet another sleepless night second-guessing myself). So I suppose I still worry as much as ever. To tell the truth, it is a stretch to say that I love rejection. But I definitely hate it less than I once did and respect it a great deal more.

***The Five Phases of Rejection* (2020)**

Michael Stein, MD
Professor & Chair, HLPM
Pronouns: he/him/his

Application # R01-000000
Principal Investigator Stein
"There were few innovative components in the application. The impact of this project is likely to be marginal at best."
Recommendation: Do Not Discuss

When I read a grant review that casts my hard work--my dearest friend, my alter-ego--back into the ocean of failure, my first reaction is always to choose from a long list of curse words. These words are the best expression of my frustration. I stay with one or another of these fine words until my anger fades. This could take a few days, or a few weeks. The grant has been my best friend, my shadow, for two months; we've spent a lot of time together, and this reviewer has insulted us.

My second reaction then kicks in: this reviewer has misjudged. Amidst a hundred lines of pale encouragement, in the end the reviewer person told us what they really thought: "Marginal at best." Obviously, they were too hurried. Had a bad day. Were probably simple-minded. Missed the point. Bad luck that a brilliant submission had found its way to an unsophisticated reader. My reaction to this second reaction is: I'm not going to listen to this reviewer. This person was aberrant. I'm going to resubmit this work exactly as is. Just push resend when the time comes.

The third phase of rejection takes a darker turn. I think: I'm going to quit now. Enough of grant-writing. "Few innovative components" says all you need to know about me. My grant has been denied, which means I have been denied; after all, my grant and I are one and the same. As I enter this third phase, I feel a great distance from my friend; my grant, my best buddy. My confidante has betrayed me, let me down. I can't look at my associate, my work mate, for another few weeks. I don't want to touch. I delete this part of myself. But then I realize: I have betrayed my friend as well. Maybe I'm the one to blame. After all, we were in this together. I didn't represent us well.

If I want us to be friends again, I need to do better. We need to be friends again or it will be a long year. Slowly I approach my friend, this embarrassed part of myself. I circle. It's Stage 4: I pick up my fragile pages and I re-read. My word-friends looks up at me from their pages, soft-eyed. I recall my fondness for these phrases, these paragraphs. I say softly: You and I had some good times; we went through so much. We commiserate.

In Stage 5, my grant and I say aloud, at exactly the same time: Let's show them. My inner grant whispers, "I always suspected section A was weak. We're more significant than the reader thinks, but we didn't make the case. We could have done better. I invite my grant to breakfast and we sit together in the kitchen next to the coffee and a vase of freesia. We say: Let's give this another try. We don't talk for a few hours. Sheepishly, we finally admit that we have to think of our reviewer differently. Before, we didn't want that nasty reviewer in the house, but now we feel the need to invite the reviewer to sit at the table with us. We have to trust them again, get past our spite. Once we had disrespected their authority, we broke the process. We must return to imagining that the reviewer wants the best for us, they probably have a best friend themselves. Let's go back to look at section B, we announce more assertively; we actually are pretty novel, pretty innovative, if we can explain ourselves more clearly. The extreme comments of the reviewer mean we have a lot to do. But we had read their report too selectively, looking only at the worst. We need to go back and check out the positive remarks; that's the starting point. We look at each and say let's get back to work, we can fix ourselves up, get better organized, stand up straighter, try to impress the next reader who's lucky enough to meet us.

***Imagined Rejections* (2020)**

Kiersten Strombotne, PhD
Assistant Professor, HLPM
Pronouns: she/her/hers

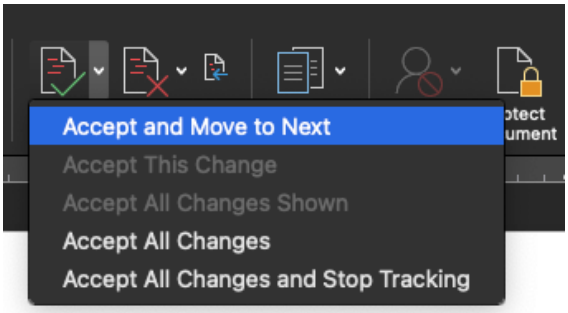
As I reflect on the rejections that I've experienced in my career, it occurs to me that the most pernicious rejections weren't from editors' letters or poor grant scores, but rather they are the rejections I conjured in my own mind, before I even gave myself the chance to face actual rejection.

These self-imposed rejections have come in many flavors, particularly during my PhD program, and it feels both shameful and cathartic to disclose them in writing. They are the paper I didn't submit because I was discouraged by crushing comments from imaginary reviewers. They are the researcher I never approached at a conference because our imaginary conversation made me feel unworthy. They are the analyses that took a month longer than they should have because the imaginary feedback from a blunt colleague made me question my intellect. They are the dissertation folder on my desktop that I couldn't bring myself to open because my committee members told me I did everything all wrong and, by the way, I probably shouldn't be in a PhD program after all (imaginary, of course).

In all these cases I never gave myself the opportunity to be rejected because I had already sabotaged myself. What helped me begin to drown out my inner critic was working closely with a mentor who had formal systems for incorporating rejection into his workflow. It seems obvious in retrospect, but at the time, the idea that rejection and criticism were inevitable, ordinary, and predictable parts of the research process felt revolutionary. I remember the rejection I received on my first grant application in graduate school was nowhere near as crippling as I had imagined it would be. At the time, getting to the stage of receiving a formal rejection was itself an odd form of personal progress.

~~Reject~~ Accept and Move to Next (2022)

Hill Wolfe, PhD, MPA
HLPM alum (2023)
Pronouns: he/him/his



Oh goodie, an email… I FINALLY heard back!
I wonder what the reviewers think.
Should I update my CV cuz I'm on track?
A rejection… but this study is on the brink!

"Not reviewed"—I wonder, what are their conditions?
A desk-reject? There must be a mistake.
Wait, the journal reviews *80 percent* of submissions?
I'm with the 20 percent of losers… the heartache!

Ding! Another email… and it's another journal!
ANOTHER REJECTION?! The editor must be a malefactor.
Something's off—was peer review even external?
Come on! Do they even have an impact factor?

At least there's the conference; the annual meeting!
Last year, I got a plaque for best abstract.
Wait… "I'm sorry to inform you…" How defeating!
Ugh, these rejections, I feel bruised and cracked.

Maybe I should just leave research forever.
Get a chateau in France as a fallback?
Oh yeah, student loans… I could never.
For now, I guess I'll grab tea and a snack.

Alrighty, back to work… the great abyss.
Let's look at my email… hm, what's this?

A fancy researcher wants me on their team?
Are they sure they reached out to the right one?
I'll tell them I'm an imposter; a walking scheme.
They have a response before I can say "no" and run:

Research, science, and academia can feel like a game.
Remember it is an enterprise; we all fail often.
Focus on advancing knowledge, having fun; not fame.
Researchers bluff; rejections should not make your coffin.

I guess I'll stick it out; I'm now feeling less vexed.
I'll take the feedback I did get and accept and move to next.

“I've never been a natural, all I do is try, try, try” - Taylor Swift, Mirrorball

Resources

There are many resources available to support students, faculty, and staff at BUSPH. As mentioned in the introduction to this compilation, one of the greatest resources is the support of colleagues and mentors. In addition, there are many resources that can help us navigate life in academia. Below is a working list of resources that I encourage folks to consider. If you know of other resources that might be added to this list, please let me know (sklipson@bu.edu).

Mental health and wellness resources

For students: Wellness and mental health resources are compiled here: https://www.bu.edu/sph/students/student-services/health-resources/.

For faculty and staff: Faculty Staff Assistance Office: https://www.bu.edu/fsao/.

Other resources and pieces about rejection

CV of Failures: Princeton Professor Publishes Résumé of His Career Lows https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/apr/30/cv-of-failures-princeton-professor-publishes-resume-of-his-career-lows.

Common Academic Experiences No One Talks About: Repeated Rejection, Impostor Syndrome, and Burnout https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1745691619898848.

The Silent Majority: Manuscript Rejection and Its Impact on Scholars https://journals.aom.org/doi/abs/10.5465/amle.2010.0027.

Why Is Academic Rejection So Very Crushing? https://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-Is-Academic-Rejection-So/146883.

Impostor Syndrome Is Definitely a Thing https://www.chronicle.com/article/Impostor-Syndrome-Is/238418.

"You Don't Belong" and Other Myths WOC PhDs Believe http://theprofessorisin.com/2019/05/24/you-dont-belong-and-other-myths-woc-phds-believe-woc-guest-post/.

The Mentoring and Induction of Educators of Color: Addressing the Impostor Syndrome in Academe: https://doi.org/10.1177/105268461102100405.

ThrivePhD: https://www.thrive-phd.com/.

"I have failed way more than I have succeeded, but that's what brought me here today." – RuPaul Charles, RuPaul's Drag Race, All Stars Season 7

At BUSPH you are....