FAIL FORWARD: "Becoming a Professional Coder"

by Keara Jones, student

While working for a small company as a medical biller for 5 years, making a little over minimum wage, I desperately desired a promotion. I knew the most direct way to a promotion was to become a Certified Medical Coder. I pondered for weeks on the best way that I could approach my supervisor about this opportunity. One afternoon I approached Amber, who is the director of our department, about my idea. She was so enthused about the idea that she had the company to pay for the class, the state exam, and guaranteed me a nice raise once I received my licenses.

I started the 6-month coding class a few weeks after my conversation with Amber. The course consisted of 20 chapter and a 150 question exam. In order to pass you had to have an average of 70 percent or higher. I passed the course within the 6-month time frame with an overall average of 80 percent. Emily and Brooke were good friends of mine who happen to work alongside of me in the Billing Department. These ladies conducted study sessions with me every other weekend to help me on the chapters I struggled with. Emily had received her coding certification a couple of years prior to me starting the class. Brooke had just started the coding class a few months before me. These ladies were a tremendous help to me during this time in my life. I don't think I would have succeeded without their assistance.

It was now time for me to schedule to take the state exam. Preparing for this exam was one of the most tedious things I've ever had to do. The exam consisted of 150 questions. You were only allowed to bring in your coding manuals. Yes, the exam was open book, easy right? You only had 5 hours and 40 minutes to compete the exam. This amounted to about 2 minutes per question. I had two attempts to pass before I had to pay for another exam. I tried to prepare for the test with an open mind by telling myself "I'm just going to take the exam and see how well I do." Everyone in my office knew I was going to take my exam which only added more pressure on me. That Friday before my exam everyone wished me luck. Boy was I nervous. The next morning, I woke up at 6:00 AM praying that I would pass the exam on my first attempt. My husband drove me to Little Rock, AR to UAMS so that I could take the exam. The exam started at 8:45AM. The proctor checked my books upon arrival, asked for my driver's licenses, and wished me luck. I was focused, I started the exam and I felt as though I was doing okay. I was about half way done with the exam and the proctor yells your time is up put your pencils down. My heart fell into my stomach. I looked up at the clock and it was 2:30PM. I couldn't believe that it had been 5 hours and 40 minutes. It only felt like I had been there for two hours. I knew I didn't pass. The results would be emailed to me by Wednesday of the following week. I instantly started wondering what will everyone think of me. I couldn't even finish the exam. Should I tell them Monday morning or should I wait until the results come in. I felt like a failure. I thought "there's no way I will pass this exam if I can't even finish the exam."

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I arrived to work Monday morning, approached by everyone asking me "how did you do?" My eyes started to tear up when I told them that I had failed. Amber took me into her office and asked me what happened. I told her I only completed half of the exam before the time was up. I went on to say there's no way I will pass if I can't even finish the exam. She told me to hold my head up, dust myself off, and take the exam again. She stated that slow and steady wins the race. She told me to practice and start timing myself. She allowed me time at work to practice, and she encouraged me not to quit. So that is exactly what I did, I practiced for months until I could finish a practice exam within 5 hours and 30 minutes.

It was time for me to schedule my second exam. I think I was more nervous the second time around than I was before. The exam was in the same location. I woke up at 6:00am and called my mother. She prayed with me over the phone asking God to clear my mind and allow me to focus on my exam. My husband and I headed to Little Rock so that I could take the exam. While driving to Little Rock tears rolled down my face; I was so nervous I couldn't eat. Once we pulled into the parking lot my husband turned toward me and said "Keara you can do this." I cried and hugged him before walking in to the building. Upon entering the building, I went to the bathroom and looked into the mirror and I said to myself "you got this". The proctor checked my books and wished me luck. When instructed to start the exam I was focused, I had a strategy this time around. I narrowed my choices down to two answers and I kept moving through the exam. I finished the exam about 5 minutes before the proctor stated that the time was up. It felt so good to finish the exam. Now all I had to do was wait for the results. This was going to be a long week. Brooke called about 30 minutes after I finished the exam and asked me how it went. I told her I finished the exam and that I felt good about it.

I received an email Tuesday morning that my results were in. I was so nervous to view the results. I open the results and I passed with 74 percent. I was so excited that I yelled out YES! Everyone in the office heard me and knew instantly that I had passed my exam. I got the promotion that I had longed for so desperately. This was by far one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. Going through this experience taught me so much about myself. When you want something bad enough you will do whatever it takes to achieve it. In life, most of us give up on ourselves if we don't achieve our goal on the first attempt. Not realizing that as long as we are moving towards our goal weather the steps are small or big we are still moving in the right direction.

The Student Success Center is honored to share stories from students, alumni, faculty, and staff members about a time when they experienced a setback ("failure"), how they overcame that setback, and what lessons they learned through the process.

If you would like to be featured in "Fail Forward", submit your story to Jennifer Downey-Rutledge at jrdowney@asub.edu.