The Pennsylvania State University Division of Undergraduate Studies

The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal

Actualizing Social Justice in Academic Advising: The Importance of Self-Care

- June 17, 2016
- No Comments

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Abstract

This article focuses primarily on the necessity of critical self-care for staff dedicated to social justice while advising diverse student populations. Applying social justice approaches to academic advising is considered a best practice in the field of student affairs; however, making this a reality can be challenging and emotionally draining. As academic advisers commit to actualizing social justice in advising practices, feelings of burnout and fatigue may increase. This article pulls from currently recommended advising approaches while cross-referencing self-care in social justice work to supplement academic advising as a best practice. This article focuses on benefits, barriers, and action steps to nurture self-care while advising diverse students.

Introduction

Social justice activist Audre Lorde (1988), defined self-care as a radical act of justice to preserve the soul, spirit, and well-being of an individual to self-empower others and contribute to transformative societal change. Academic advisers play a specific, dynamic, and critical role in societal transformation. More particularly, they strongly influence a students’ abilities to reach self-empowerment as they pursue academic, career, and personal aspirations. Lorde (1988) stated, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (p. 131). Academic advising provides a profound opportunity to expound and integrate social justice advocacy (Lantta, 2008; Selzer & Rouse, 2013). To achieve optimal standards in efforts to support all involved in academic advising services, self-care is a necessary act of sustainability. This article encourages self-care for academic advisers who experience an urgency for social justice advocacy in higher education.

Through commitment to self-care, academic advisers will intentionally build their own capacity to address diverse needs. Furthermore, advisers providing accommodations for varied needs and identities are secondary recipients of the emotional strain in students’ lives. With such overwhelming expectations to accommodate different needs of diverse student bodies, the need for self-care is critical. Intentional self-care allows advisers to maximize effective critical self-reflection; their work with students and staff; their efforts to foster an inclusive campus culture; their ability to influence personal, departmental, structural and systemic changes for social justice; and most importantly, their ability to develop their skills as agents for social change in the role of academic adviser in our society.

Critical Need for Social Justice in Academic Advising Practice

As the “gatekeepers for students transitioning into the campus community” (Lantta, 2008), academic advisers play a pivotal role in a student’s first impression of the campus climate. Academic advisers’ roles and responsibilities embody Adams, Bell, and Griffin’s (1997) definition of social justice: “full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society that is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure” (p. 3). Given this understanding of social justice, each academic adviser has the choice to act as an individual agent of potential social change.

Reflecting the vast diversity in the United States, academic advisers are called to embrace social justice action in their positionality on campus. Increased numbers of students often underrepresented on campus include, but are not limited to students of color; international students; women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, ally (LGBTQIA) students; students demonstrating significant financial need; veterans; first-generation students; students with disabilities; students with mental illness; Muslim students; undocumented immigrants; and nontraditional-aged students (Renn & Reason, 2013). This challenging dynamic, managed with thoughtful intention, can offer a rewarding collective impact for the college campus as whole. As a result of such diverse identities and needs, professional competencies in the field of higher education underscore the importance of bringing social justice advocacy to academic advising. Organizations like the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (2014), National Academic Advising Association (2016), American College Personnel Association (2006), and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) (2010) set professional competency standards that hold academic advisers accountable for actualizing social justice in their work.

The Role of Academic Advisers as Social Change Agents
Efforts to actualize social justice in academic advising demand strong emotional intelligence and capacity. Academic advisers who advocate for staff and students’ diverse needs are often leaders in their workspaces. Academic advisers may work hard to develop themselves as aspiring social justice allies while also leading diversity initiatives in multicultural competence, equity, and inclusion for their academic advising team (or for the institution). Advisers might refer to tools like “Aspiring Social Justice Ally Identity Development” (Edwards, 2006) and the “Social Justice Development Model” (Rouse, 2011) to further develop themselves through self-reflection, while supporting their social justice leadership on campus. This ability to reflect deeply and effectively on an individual level while also challenging a departmental, committee, or staff unit can be draining.

Academic advisers might encounter fatigue through the bulk of their work in individualized appointments with students. Through a variety of researched advising approaches (Gordon, Habley, & Grites, 2008; Drake, Jordan, & Miller, 2013), this list demonstrates how advisers’ actualizing social justice in appointments utilize immense creative, thoughtful and vital energy:

- Through the developmental model (Hardee, 1970; Crookston, 1972/1994/2009; O’Banion, 2009), academic advisers might take a holistic approach to support students by getting to know who they are, their social identities, their restrictions, and effective methods for their self-advocacy. For example, enabling discussion about racial identity development with a student of color as it relates to their coursework and feelings of belonging in the classroom.
- With the appreciative advising model (Bloom & Martin, 2002; Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008), academic advisers may support student development with effective communication and solid relationships. For example, advisers offering a space for a transgender student to unpack feelings of marginalization while supporting the student in achieving academic and career-oriented dreams.
- In the adviser as coach model (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001), advisers may enable students to make self-empowering long-term goals; for example, working with a student to set goals for achieving passing grades during academic probation.
- In strengths-based advising (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005), advisers might identify student strengths that can help cut through barriers in academic or career plans; for example, advisers that support first-generation students to see themselves as strong—and to articulate their skills and traits as strengths despite feelings of weakness and inadequacy on campus.
- In proactive advising (Glennen, 1975), frequent check-in, critical outreach, and encouragement; for example, advisers might make an effort to reach out to a student who recently expressed strong feelings of anxiety and loss of motivation toward college work.
- Prescriptive advising (Crookston, 1972/1994/2009) might, for example, support a student who responds best to strict direction or to a premade list of possible classes that match academic interests.

One could also make the argument that the adviser as teacher pedagogy (Hardee, 1970; Hunter, 1982; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986) further supports social justice actions as well as learning-centered approaches (Chickering & Gamison, 2000) to academic advising. Each of these approaches underlines how advisers may work to actualize social justice using specific researched advising approaches. Advisers may often integrate these approaches, catering to specific needs of each student’s intersecting identities. This work takes time and emotional energy.

Advisers may also experience exhaustion as unit-level or departmental leaders and as influencers of transformative change at an institutional level. Beyond advising in one-on-one meetings with students, academic advisers might utilize emotional capacity to influence campus culture in other capacities. At a unit or system level, academic advisers may continue to advocate for social justice for students and staff by pushing for diversity and equity trainings; bringing attention to current events in the media that highlight national inequities; question resources present on campus and resources missing from campus; assess policies that may harm rather than help; establish personal contacts in women’s centers, disability resources, LGBTQIA services, equity and inclusion offices, multicultural education offices, international student services, and additional offices that provide specific services; build relationships with faculty committed to formal education that teaches students about privilege, oppression, diversity, inclusion, marginalization, culture, and other social identities that include, but are not limited to, gender, race, sexual orientation, levels of ability and class status. Additionally, staying current in models and approaches that support diverse identities will increase an adviser’s impact. Assuming an informal leadership role in facilitating change can come with few rewards; in fact, it can cause tension and rejection. This process can be emotionally painful, and again, takes time, energy, and dedication.

In efforts to lead transformative change with students, with staff teams, and even at an institutional level, academic advisers actualizing social justice can expect to encounter heightened levels of fatigue.

**Activism Fatigue Showing Up for Academic Advisers**

Causes of social justice (activist) fatigue, as researched by Chen & Gorski (2015), stems from heightened sensitivity to social ills embedded in institutional climates, cultures, and policies. Like most activists, academic advisers who take on the role of social justice advocates are likely to “develop a deep understanding of overwhelming social conditions related to suffering and oppression—conditions that society as a whole often is ‘unable or willing to face’” (Chen & Gorski, 2015, p. 3). For advisers, social justice fatigue might occur from previous illustrations of impacting change through their individual actions, at a unit/departmental level, and/or at an institutional level. Additionally, the following recurrences may leave advisers feeling emotionally exhausted: wanting to immediately facilitate the diverse needs of each student, yet not always knowing how or not always being able to meet those needs; engaging in
discussions about a system of oppression that is not actively changing; witnessing students experience barriers that also affect them directly (personal connection can re-traumatize the adviser) (Chu, 2015); constantly attempting to respond to toxicity in constructive ways; feeling invalidated, despite expectations to serve all students; internalizing stigma and shame associated with self-care; not fully understanding how to practice self-care. These circumstances are often realities that advisers face when working toward social change on campus. The emotional labor as a result of this challenging work underlines the necessity of self-care.

Practicing Self-Care

Integrating social justice in academic advising demands a strong emotional range and capacity, including the development of the capacity to practice self-care. Achieving a sense of self-care is, in part, an outcome of access to social capital—a privilege in of itself. Nonetheless, working toward any form of self-care can be enough to prevent burnout, and in some cases, save an academic adviser’s life. Goldberg (2013) first emphasized the need for basic self-care, which includes the basic foundations of physical, spiritual, intellectual, psychological/emotional, social, familial, occupational, and financial well-being. These areas are identified in Goldberg’s (2013) research as basic human elements of well-being. Advisers are encouraged to study these dimensions and identify practices of self-care (in the office and outside of the office) that foster basic dimensions of well-being.

Based on integrated research provided by the Center for the Education of Women at the University of Michigan (2016), as well as works by Claudia Horwitz (2002; as cited in Mullen, 2013) and Don Miguel Ruiz (2010), the basic recommendations below encourage self-care, as do Goldberg’s (2013) dimensions of well-being:

- **Be compassionate to yourself.** Cherish small victories and cultivate hopefulness. After an emotionally challenging day, recognize you are doing the best you can and remind yourself why you are dedicated to this work.
- **Design your own “board of directors.”** Build and foster a group of people that recognizes your brilliance and understands the complexity of your work.
- **Know your level of exhaustion.** Look for signs that you are “at your limit” for that day, and that it’s time to care of you. Perhaps your heightened fatigue has led to a headache or fogged your ability to treat others with compassion.
- **Connect with nature.** As cliché as it sounds, we are part of Earth’s ecosystem. Try to find connections to the world beyond technology, phones, computers, office spaces, and any indoor environment. For example, make it a ritual to step outside to reset after a tense meeting instead of getting on social media. This could also mean keeping plants in your office space. Remind yourself about what really matters. Acknowledge the importance of your dedicated work in the greater context of our world.
- **Set and keep boundaries.** This might come in the form of asserting your needs in one-on-one meetings with your supervisor or holding student-adviser expectations accountable by keeping an academic-advising syllabus.
- **Develop a plan to care for yourself given available time and resources.** For example, make of list or draw a picture of what feels soothing for your mind, body, and spirit. Aim to make at least one of those items happen each week. Maybe it is giving yourself a well-structured break for lunch. It could mean taking fifteen minutes at the end of each work day to center yourself by listening to your favorite music. It could be jolting down in a personal journal things for which you are grateful.
- **Seek external support.** Pursue professional therapy (or spiritual direction) if you have access to it. You are worth it. If not with a professional, spend time with people outside of the work space who give you energy and allow you the space to process your fatigue.

The works of Horwitz (2002), Goldberg (2013), and Ruiz (2010) can help academic advisers in need of self-care. These rituals, practices, and self-care action plans are at the heart of social justice work and self-sustainability.

Final Remarks

Academic advisers who strive for social justice action may take on more emotional stress in the workplace (Chen & Gorski, 2015). Meeting standards and professional competencies in social justice (and equity, diversity, and inclusion) takes ongoing time, energy, and thought. This process can feel painful and overwhelming. When academic advisers engage in this highly emotional process, self-preservation is threatened. Without self-sustainability, advisers are not well-equipped to participate in transformative social justice work. Lack of self-care undermines one’s work performance, ability to advance services for college students, and ability to shift hostile campus cultures for underrepresented students and staff toward constructive progress.

Though it might seem counterintuitive, advisers can aspire to be mindful, thoughtful, engaging, transformative and effective agents of social change on college campuses only by tending to their own needs. To reiterate the urgency of Lorde’s (1988) quote above, academic advisers must practice self-care in any small way they can by using available resources and social networks. Only by nurturing intentional self-care will advisers increase their capacity to embrace their work with rejuvenated passion and approach their work energized, excited, self-empowered, and confident in their unique role to support the diverse identities and needs of college students. The result will be intentional, patient progress toward the deeply needed social justice advocacy work our students deserve.

References


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ISSN: 1521-2211