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Advice on Advising: How to Mentor Minority Students

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ABSTRACT

"I did not always understand how much labor, thought, and care went into meaningful mentoring, how emotionally draining that work can be, and how little prepared I was for it."

FULL TEXT

All successful academics owe their accomplishments to the guidance of good mentors, whether or not we choose to recognize and honor their labor.

The infamous "old boys' club" used to serve as a system of mentorship, helping reproduce - in ways not always visible or obvious - a white, male academic world. Breaking through the institutionalized patterns of elite reproduction has required the brave, hard, and sometimes risky labor of professors, staff members, and administrators. Those mentors were willing to support - and, if necessary, advocate for - students from underrepresented groups who found themselves adrift in academe's sometimes-alienating culture.

In graduate school I benefited greatly from mentors who, quite literally, saw me when I felt invisible, encouraged me when I felt lost, and were there for me at certain critical times when I thought I would not make it.

It was hard not to feel similarly lost and alienated when I arrived as a new faculty member at an elite liberal-arts college. In recent years the college has made some (albeit inadequate) strides toward diversifying its student, faculty, and staff populations, but 18 years ago it was a very lonely place to inhabit as a nonwhite female assistant professor.

Graduate school doesn't teach you ***advising*** skills. Mostly you model your mentors. Like most faculty members I had to learn how to ***advise*** on the job.

I realized early on that I was going to be a magnet for students of color, international students, and women who took my classes and frequented my office. But I didn't know then what I know now: that faculty members who are female, nonwhite, or both perform a disproportionate share of the care work at institutions like mine. And it took many more years before academic institutions even began conversations on how to recognize that labor in the formal evaluation process.

Carrying a six-course load, maintaining a scholarly agenda, and giving birth to two kids in the five years before I went up for tenure also meant that I had to figure out - usually on the fly - how to be attentive to the very different needs of minority students. There was no guidance on that.

Today many colleges and universities have instituted formal programs to train us on mentoring and ***advising***. But those programs still pay scant attention to the complexities and nuances of ***advising*** students from a mix of underrepresented groups.

Based on my (continuing) experiences on this front, I offer the following lessons I've learned. I hope they will be of value to all faculty members, but especially to those who disproportionately take on the responsibilities of ***advising*** minority students.

They feel seen and unseen. Students of color can find themselves at opposite poles on the visibility spectrum:

- On the one hand, they feel "invisible" - and inaudible. In certain settings and forums they are trying to be seen and heard but are constantly overlooked. Students notice, for example, if the professor calls only on white men in class discussions about male-normed topics such as "international security."
- On the other hand is the problem of being "hypervisible." Either they are viewed as representatives of "their cultures" (e.g., an international student asked to speak for her country in class), or they are seen as the source of some infraction (e.g., a black male student profiled and singled out to show his ID in order to enter a campus party).

After such incidents, minority students are left confused, questioning their own behavior and wondering if they are "overreacting."

Good ***advising*** requires listening and taking their concerns seriously. If all you do is respond with the sort of assimilative language of "inclusivity" that has taken over higher education, that's not going to help these students feel like valuable members of the campus. What will help: treating their concerns as valid critiques that require a personal, departmental, or institutional response.

And don't just commiserate. Offer students practical tips on how to navigate these sensitive situations. If they object to problematic comments or situations in class, teach them how to write a respectful email to the professor. Show them the steps for filing a formal complaint in a case of harassment. Explain the structure of institutional accountability on the campus so they know which supervisor to contact in a particular situation.

At the same time, in order for the wider campus culture to change, it may be necessary to advocate for these students. Consider raising their concerns as an institutional problem that requires our awareness and attention.

There's a lot of diversity in diversity. When a campus is relatively homogenous, like my own, there's a tendency to clump all forms of difference into a broad category of "diversity," and neglect the enormous heterogeneity of experiences, needs, interests, and occasional tensions that exist within.

In your ***advising*** it's important to be attentive to the specificity of a student's experiences. The kind of pervasive racism that leaves African-American or Hispanic students feeling devalued may be quite different from the stereotypes that attach to students from third-world countries. Likewise, the needs of immigrant students might well be quite distinct from first-generation American college students who cannot afford to participate in important aspects of campus life.

How any particular student you ***advise*** sits at the intersection of race, gender, sexual preference, class, nationality, ethnicity, and religion will determine the specific kinds of support he or she will need. It's probably impossible to figure that out for every student, but try to be attentive to this issue to the extent that you can.

Similarly, while it is important to encourage students (and faculty members) of color to support one another on the campus, it is equally important to remind them that solidarity has to be built rather than presumed. Tell your minority students that they don't all need to be friends, but they should work to create networks of solidarity that make space for difference and disagreement.

How approachable you seem will change. You might consider yourself an easygoing, open-minded faculty member. It is easy to forget that first-generation, minority, and foreign students can be very intimidated by college professors - and less willing than other students to seek out our advice.

When those students do reach out for help, they tend to approach a minority faculty member. That is, in part, because they identify more with a nonwhite and/or female professor. But it also might be due to age - minority professors are often on the younger side of the faculty, having been more recently hired. At the same time, like all students, minority students carry their own prejudices about which faculty members' time is most valuable, and who is "approachable."

I found that, as I acquired more seniority as a professor, I became less of a magnet for the students of color who had once flocked to my office. As the college diversified its faculty, there were simply more of us to share the ***advising*** load. But as I gained institutional stature, students found me more intimidating and less approachable. They were more comfortable talking with a young assistant professor than an older full professor.

In recent years, as I have seen my junior colleagues of color take on a disproportionate level of ***advising***, I have had to learn to be more explicit about inviting students to approach me for help. I reach out to struggling students of color more than I once did. As your career progresses, try to pay attention to any shifts in how students perceive you.

Be as open about your own vulnerabilities as you can. I have come to recognize that, whether or not I want to play the part, being in the very small minority of female faculty members of color who have made it into the rarefied upper echelons of academic rank, I serve as a "role model." I will confess to sometimes experiencing that role as a burden rather than a gift, especially when I am exhausted by the need to constantly model a vocal presence on the campus in order to be taken seriously.

Throughout academe, the impulse to either dismiss outspoken brown and black women - or be threatened by the space we take up in campus discussions - is quite pervasive. It takes effort to resist the temptation to follow an easier course of shutting up, opting out, or playing civil.

However, over time, I have also come to realize that being willing to share my vulnerabilities openly - especially with students from underrepresented backgrounds - is far more effective in helping them relate to me.

This is not easy to do. Such a practice might not even be advisable for junior faculty members of color, who have to work hard to earn the respect that comes with professorial distance. But I have learned to be more open with my students about the challenges I have faced and continue to face. That helps my students to be honest and upfront with me about their own lives and priorities.

The work of ***advising*** and mentoring is critical to recruit and retain a diverse student (and faculty) population at any institution of higher education and, much more important, to ensure that minority students thrive and leave with the life skills to succeed after college.

Before I became a professor, I did not always understand how much labor, thought, and care went into meaningful mentoring, how emotionally draining that work can be, and how little prepared I was for it. Any institution that is interested in preventing the burnout of faculty members of color at predominantly white institutions must learn to acknowledge, understand, and reward this work.

Shampa Biswas is a professor of politics at Whitman College, in Walla Walla, Wash.

Graphic

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Advicing Minority Students

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