Walking on Eggshells
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I have never been one to be easily embarrassed. My mom taught me to laugh at and make fun of myself at an early age, and I believe that positively impacts my ability to connect with students in my work today. Growing up, I was rarely afraid to say or do something wrong because I trusted myself, but I also knew, worst case scenario, I could laugh it off. However, when I am working with students the stakes feel higher. If I say or do the wrong thing, I will not always be able to laugh it off. For some, a conduct hearing or a roommate mediation might be their only interaction with me. For others, I might work closely with them as an advisor or supervisor for a few more years. What if I unknowingly mislead them? What if they lose trust in me?

Like many of my colleagues, I am constantly educating myself on identities that are different from my own. However, even with this education, I am often afraid I will show my privilege in interactions with students. My current campus is quite diverse compared to those I attended as a student. With 15% of our student body comprised of international students, and about 25% students of color, we see diversity not just in race, ethnicity, and country of origin, but also in gender identity, political opinion, religion, you name it. It is one of the reasons I was attracted to my current job. But, my students often seem to be ahead of me in terms of their exposure to cultures and identities different from their own. That can be intimidating for a variety of reasons and can impact my ability to build relationships and trust.

As an advisor of single-gender organizations, the topic of gender makes me feel like I am walking on eggshells. I feel like I am in this delicate position to encourage the traditionally exclusive fraternities and sororities to be as inclusive as possible, while still respecting the membership requirements of their organizations. This is one of many topics that scare me, mostly because it is totally unfamiliar territory for me. As an undergraduate student, I attended a women's college, where gender identity was not really discussed. In my current professional role, I work with a community of organizations that include many non-binary students. I love that my students have put an emphasis on inclusion, but I struggle with balancing the value I experienced within a single-gender organization. This is one conversation that leads me to feel vulnerable with my students.

When it comes to conversations surrounding varying identities, I preach transparency and vulnerability, but on a campus full of activists, I am constantly in fear that a slip of the tongue will offend the wrong person and be misconstrued for something intentionally insensitive or

worse, intentionally hateful. What student would trust a hateful person? How can I best teach my students if I am afraid to speak my mind or share a different opinion? I believe the answer is trust. But how do we establish a sense of trust with every student no matter the connection we have with them or how often we will interact? There must be trust in those vulnerable conversations. I like to think leading by example is usually the right way to go. When I feel a sensitive topic emerging in a conversation with a student, I acknowledge my own experiences, or lack of thereof, and share what I have learned from those experiences. Then, I remind the student that despite me being the "adult adult," as one of my students once referred to me, I do not know everything. More times than not, I am learning alongside them.

With that in mind, I find myself going back to that feeling of walking on eggshells. Does the fear of saying or doing the right thing hold us back from learning with our students? Has fear ever stopped you from learning with a student?