

## Know Better, Do Better

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The challenges associated with advising individuals of a different gender-identity than my own are real. As are challenges associated with advising individuals of different races, ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and physical abilities than my own. That statement is not made to minimize gender-identity matters, but to acknowledge advising individuals, or groups of individuals, brings with it natural complexities that must be navigated carefully but courageously.

To advise all students with perfection is an unrealistic expectation. We are charged to offer our best efforts with the knowledge, skills, and experiences we have. And, as the world evolves, so must we. I cannot relate, in any way, to what it is like to be born and live as a woman. Nor can I relate to being born a man and live as a woman. As a professional advising students who identify with one of these, my job is not to relate to them. My job is to advise them to most successfully navigate life. I believe I can do that without personally experiencing every aspect of their being.

My professional experiences have afforded me opportunities to advise organizations of different genders and of different cultural backgrounds. The lens through which I approach my work has widened as a result. Included are a few of the lessons I have learned through my efforts.

**“All my successes have been built on my failures.”** -Benjamin Disraeli

As an overeager young professional, I sought to relate too greatly to the identity of others rather than allow students to own and share their experiences. I should have spent more time listening, and then offering challenging and supporting insight to assist students in enhancing their place in the world, rather than making assumptions about their experiences.

When working for a culturally based women’s organization, I attempted to master the idea of advising not just women, but women who identified as Latina. I spent much time reading, listening, and learning about Latina culture. How arrogant to think a few books would make me an expert on all things woman, not to mention Latina, a label that already lumps together many individual and unique cultures! I definitely overreached, and as such, was not doing my best work.

Through time, experience, and the patience and advice of many members who recognized that my intent to serve the organization was at the heart of my foolishness, I believe I was able to

temper my approach to be of greater counsel to members in a variety of situations that followed. As well, I learned a great deal about the real experiences of students and alumnae who had wildly different identities than my own.

**Don't make too many assumptions.**

Though women are half of the world's residents, I consider them to be an underrepresented population: women are underrepresented in our country's government and certain sectors of the workforce; pay inequity issues are real; and women are far more likely than men to be sexually assaulted. Let's not get into the global atrocities that exist with women as we have neither the time nor space in this article. While I know many folks aren't on board with the facts I just presented, I assumed all women were! This was not a safe assumption.

One of the most difficult situations I have faced in my work advising women was navigating the follow-up provided to a chapter after the sexual assault of one of their members. No other staff or volunteers were able to quickly visit the campus to respond to the needs our chapter. Thankfully, a very supportive Dean of Students and campus FSA helped me provide on-site assistance to members. The campus support center provided counseling to the survivor of the assault and other members who were interested. My role was to support the organization, aid chapter officers in understanding what happened, and develop actionable items to move forward.

I never anticipated facilitating a conversation that had chapter members at odds with one another, several questioning the validity of the member's report. I assumed the chapter would rally around their sister, work to protect her, and demand justice both on campus and through civic law enforcement. Rather, I was faced with members making accusatory remarks, suggesting the survivor was lying, and coming to the defense of the accused male student. I was in no way prepared for that conversation, but I was able to get through because of the courageous comments of several collegiate members during the conversations. Had I been more objective and looked past assumptions, I could have done better.

**Be mindful of what you bring to your work.**

This is a great life lesson no matter what you do. As in the sexual assault situation, I had to be very self-aware. I had to know, in advance, that my mere presence as a male in this situation brought with it challenges to my role in advising.

The higher education community is blessed with many social justice warriors. The blessing can sometimes also be a curse. I believe we should enter every encounter to advance social justice, but rarely will our combined life experiences equal that of the students we advise.

We miss important teachable moments with students who, for the first time, are experiencing, witnessing, or for that matter committing acts of sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, etc. I cannot assume in every interaction I am working with someone who does, or should, have the set of experiences I have. I bring to my work my combined experiences, the knowledge I have gained directly through my own study, and the knowledge I have gained from my peers. Students are doing the same, and our work is designed to help them navigate *their* experiences, not replicate ours. We must expect our students to do better, but we also must respect the timeframe in which real student development takes place.

**Do not be afraid to do your job.**

Mary Peterson, former Executive Director of Sigma Lambda Beta Fraternity and Sigma Lambda Gamma Sorority, former fraternity/sorority advisor at the University of Iowa, and my current mentor, frequently challenges me not to fear advising others. She will recount her stories of advising NPHC as a young professional or aiding in the formation of two culturally based organizations. Many times she was challenged with her capacity to understand the experience of students of color. She never feared those conversations and rooted them in the expectations promoted by each respective membership organization.

My job is to advance the mission of the organization for which I work. I invest in women by instilling the skills necessary to navigate life, and inspire members to enrich their own lives and the lives of others. I am not a member of the organization for which I work. I am not a woman. My job requires me to be knowledgeable, challenging, and supportive. My job requires me to communicate the mission, vision, and values of Alpha Sigma Tau, and to expect them from our members.

I cannot fear whether I will be credible in the act of advising, so long as my work remains rooted in the mission, vision, values, and membership expectations of Alpha Sigma Tau. If I were to espouse my own personal ideas of how women ought to behave and live, I would be laughed out of my office directly to the unemployment line.

My credibility has most often been questioned during the process of a membership review. Members who have been alleged to violate organizational expectations question my ability to truly understand what it means to be a member, or how I could possibly have the authority to investigate a matter as a nonmember, but especially as a man. My work is greater than me and my personal self-identity. To fear my work because of the challenges associated with folks with a different identity than my own would be to fail in my work. I believe I owe it to each member of Alpha Sigma Tau to courageously execute my duties and advance their mission.

**Conclusion**

Everyone's challenges advising individuals or groups of a gender identity different than their own will be unique. As there becomes greater acceptance of a non-binary gender identity, these challenges will become even more complex. When all else fails, the following rules will get you through just about any identity-advising challenge: 1. You don't have to understand it to accept it; 2. Be compassionate; 3. Don't be a jerk.