How to Advocate for … Yourself and Overcome Impostor Syndrome

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What is your positionality?

Taylor Martin del Campo (TMDC)
I am a Latinx womxn, and I am the first person in my family to pursue a graduate-level degree. My parents initially kindled my love for learning and education. This passion continues to develop with every experience that reminds me to recognize and appreciate the agency and power I carry. Entering into this graduate program, I have become more aware of how leaders from different spaces can make transformational changes at individual and system-wide levels. Furthermore, this platform provides me with the potential to make a positive impact within the communities I serve. One lifelong goal I have is to share the beauty of education with others and to create inclusive spaces that welcome students from all backgrounds to engage in opportunities that serve as a step toward a meaningful pathway. One career goal I have is to advocate for change within the K–12 system as well as within universities to continue disassembling barriers to education and increasing accessibility for the students we serve.

David Ifediba (DI)
As a first-generation, Nigerian-born immigrant, I was taught that education is key to one’s success and is vital to creating impact on and foundation for one’s family. With both of my parents being public school teachers, education was imperative in my household. As I continue to rise in academia, I have noticed the number of African American faces dwindling. It is not to say that education is not deemed important in our households, but rather that the supports needed to succeed are few and far between. During my undergraduate studies at the University of California, Riverside, I was fortunate to be mentored by Dr. Carolyn Murray. Dr. Murray instilled the spirit of fighting for African American excellence in spaces where we are heavily discriminated against and have biases placed against us. One of my career goals is to become a research director to bridge the educational gap between public and private education for African American students through practical research interventions guided through the lens of diversity and equity.

What do you want readers to know about overcoming imposter syndrome?

TMDC: First, it is important to keep in mind that you are not the only person experiencing imposter syndrome as you enter into a graduate program. Although your feelings are valid, remember that you were chosen for the program because the faculty, alumni, and current students believe in your potential to be a successful school psychologist. Second, as you enter your program, it is essential to remember your purpose for pursuing a graduate degree and align yourself with others (e.g., cohort members, family, faculty, and
supervisors) who will provide words of encouragement and opportunities to continue your professional growth as you navigate your studies. It is equally as important to have self-compassion when you experience imposter syndrome and work towards grounding yourself, because you will make a meaningful difference in the lives of the students that you interact with. Third, remember to take the time to celebrate and share your successes and wins. Graduate studies are rigorous, and this specialty requires you to be knowledgeable in many areas, but it is important to use this opportunity to form connections with potential lifelong friends and mentors as well as network with individuals who may help you advance your career down the line.

**DI:** Feelings of imposter syndrome and not belonging are normal when beginning in a new space, and it is important to address these relevant issues. First, you should recognize imposter syndrome as early as possible. Some examples of this include self-doubt pertaining to your place within your program, questioning your ability to perform well in the profession, sabotaging your success, and attributing your success to factors beyond your control. These symptoms can greatly impact every aspect of your academic career and prevent you from reaching your full potential. Next, focus on your strengths. You are in the position you are in for a reason, and you should not dwell on your weaknesses. Afterward, set realistic expectations and remember that perfection is unattainable; it is okay to make mistakes. Finally, practice self-care through proper sleep, exercise, and activities that bring you joy, because developing these self-care practices will bolster your performance as a school psychologist.

**How can graduate students develop and maintain capabilities to advocate for themselves?**

**TMDC:** One way is to identify a mentor and form friendships during your time in your program. These will be the people who will provide you with the space to discuss your interests, explore your personal and professional goals, and share your challenges during your time in the program. They will also help you recognize when to advocate for a healthy school–work–life balance, have a better fieldwork experience, practice self-care, and seek out opportunities that interest you. Furthermore, become involved with your college, university committees, and student organizations because, within these spaces, you will learn how to advocate for others, and that will consistently remind you that in order to promote this skill to others, you have to model it. Advocacy takes courage, and sometimes it means having difficult conversations even when your message is not received well. However, remember that any time you advocate for yourself or someone else, it is because you believe this is what is right, and that is the most important takeaway. Having a supportive community within education will also help you remain strong in your resolve, even when obstacles and challenges surface. Within this profession, our first priority is to advocate for the students we serve. Learning how to advocate for yourself is the first step towards understanding what it means to be an advocate for those who may not have the agency to advocate for themselves.

Advocating for communities that have been historically marginalized in educational institutions requires intensive work. When I have listened to advocates belonging to BIPOC communities, often they share that accepting the responsibility of fighting against the injustices affecting their communities can lead to burnout and a lack of engagement in self-care. As we know, you have to fill your cup first before you can fill another’s cup. Set boundaries with yourself and decide what priorities you would like to dedicate your energy to. Remember that there will be setbacks along the way, so give space to acknowledge those emotions and then develop a new strategy to continue to move forward. You may also come across people with differing views, but do not tire yourself by challenging someone who is not ready to reconstruct their perspective. Remind yourself to have fun engaging in this work, and develop a comprehensive list of resources and various forms of media to share with others who would like to educate themselves on these prevalent issues. Most importantly, you do not need to engage in the work alone. It is important to not only bring awareness to these causes but also to inspire and invite people to become allies and advocates as well. Identify strong leaders and form a team that builds on each person’s strengths. Determine what initiatives you would like to tackle together, set deadlines, and distribute the workload evenly. Do not be afraid to ask for support and to take
time for yourself as needed. All of the work you engage in independently and communally is worth your time and will leave a lasting legacy.

**What advice would you offer fellow first-generation, international graduate students of color and those who support them in overcoming imposter syndrome?**

**DI:** Find spaces and communities where you feel welcomed and encouraged. For example, I use the Black Resource Center to integrate myself into the African American community. Additionally, I lean on the Student Affairs Center to find a place where I belong and can go for resources such as scholarship opportunities, mentorship, and professional development. Considering community through a broader lens, I would recommend attending conferences of interest; using various forms of online media, such as Facebook groups for school psychologists and podcasts on YouTube such as SchoolPsyched; and participating in NASP committees that are dedicated to navigating a graduate-level program, increasing cultural awareness, and promoting culturally competent practices in the field of school psychology. This is essential, especially on arriving in a new community where initially you may not feel as comfortable. Next, befriend your professors and all of your cohort/classmates. They will carry you throughout your time as a graduate student. Additionally, they are receptive to the struggles that you may be going through because they are completing the same assignments as you. Finally, creating study groups and fostering biweekly events to increase camaraderie among your peers will be vital to you as a graduate student and during your time as a school psychologist. A provost once told me, “The best way to counteract discrimination and imposter syndrome is through excellence.” Find the spaces where you can be comfortable and excellent, and the world will be your oyster.

For faculty, I advise you to be receptive to the needs and concerns of first-generation, international graduate students of color. Although this may not be an identity that you hold, it is imperative that you continue to actively listen and be culturally responsive to students of all backgrounds. This will not only benefit the students you mentor and teach; it will also reframe how you approach all students within the educational setting. Likewise, participating in student-led events, hosting coffee socials, and encouraging students to attend office hours are a few ways to create a safe space for students to feel comfortable and vulnerable, especially when they may be experiencing imposter syndrome. Faculty are the bridge to an amazing academic experience; they can lessen the burden of imposter syndrome significantly through their support and aid for all students, especially first-generation, international graduate students of color; they are our allies.