How to Advocate for … and as, a First-Generation Student

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What advice would you give individuals just starting their graduate career on how to advocate for first-generation students?

I cannot speak for other first-generation college (undergraduate and graduate) students; I can only speak for myself with the hopes that others have lived through the same thing and can relate.

Right before I started classes as a graduate student, I didn’t know that a student’s GPA effectively starts over in graduate school. For some reason, I suspected GPA was calculated by combining undergraduate and graduate GPA. As a first-generation student, I’ve learned that networking and keeping professional relationships are critical to success. I was aware that this was a basic question, so I didn’t dare ask my mentors such a question out of fear of being judged. In the end, I searched Reddit and Quora to answer my question. Looking back, that shouldn’t have been the only space I felt comfortable going. And so, if you would like to start advocating for first-generation students on a small scale, actively welcoming any and all questions related to college, regardless of how basic the question is, will be a HUGE help. If you are a faculty member, kindness and reaching out go a very long way. If you are a first-generation faculty member, share your experiences with the world and how you learned to navigate academia; we’d like to know.

If you’re thinking about establishing a community, my best advice is to see what communities already exist, and then look for a way to get engaged! I know it may be intimidating or you may not feel like you know what you’re doing, but NASP is a large professional community to reach out to, and with it come ideas, perspectives, and new information that will only benefit you and the growth of your cause. You can do it!

What is the main thing you want readers to know when advocating for first-generation students?

Advocating for others who have been through similar circumstances may require a certain amount of self-disclosure on your behalf to help people without the same experiences understand the injustices that are occurring.

Whew! I don’t intend to confuse anybody here. All I’m saying is that everyone has a story, and regardless of whether you are a first-generation college student or not, it deserves to be told in the most honest and authentic way possible, in order to help others in the same situation. Disclosing how the community you live in is suffering is hard because of the fear of judgment, and some people may disagree with it, but it is honest and necessary.
What is your best self-care advice for first-generation graduate students?

For me, learning when to choose acts of self-care has been essential for my growth as a student. Growing up, my stepfather and mother lived on disability, or they had to take on low-wage jobs that were rough on their bodies. Self-care wasn't talked about because it wasn't much of an option. They were focused on surviving, and therefore they, unfortunately, developed ineffective and unsafe coping mechanisms that led to turbulent lifestyles, chronic illness, and early death. That isn’t to say that they weren’t lovely and inspiring people, it’s just that living in poverty with a lack of self-care significantly affected their well-being.

My bachelor's degree affords me the ability to choose work that isn’t as physically taxing as the jobs they held, and I have much more of an opportunity to take care of my mental health than they did. Still, as a graduate student, I find myself learning how to choose between working myself into the ground and acts of self-care. Even though it can be rough to put it on your schedule, if you weren’t taught how essential self-care is, we all need to learn when to choose acts of self-care.

Scheduling self-care has worked really well for me thus far. I currently have an internship, I am on the Graduate Student Council at Wichita State, and I have my coursework to attend to. There are many unexpected and wonderful things going on in my life, and for that reason, I can’t plan too far ahead. What has worked best for me is to set aside a bit of time each Sunday to plan out my week, putting aside time for self-care activities, using an agenda. Planning week by week is much more effective than planning out a whole semester at a time. Journaling has helped me, as has setting aside time to paint or play video games I like.

Of course, not all acts of self-care can be scheduled. I saw a quote on social media that said something to the tune of, “Self-care isn’t just chocolate and hot baths, it’s building a life you don’t want to escape from” and that really resonated with me. Carefully choosing who we decide to interact with within our lives, actively staying away from social choices that result in a turbulent lifestyle, and learning when to say “no” to a larger workload are all crucial acts of self-care that cannot be ignored if we want to continue building a safe life for ourselves as graduate students.

One last thing: If your definition of self-care is to eat something sweet and you’re broke, go to Sonic during their happy hour and order a blue-raspberry slush with lemon slices added. It tastes just like a Bomb Pop for super cheap.