How to Advocate for ... Learning Diversity in Graduate School

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Describe a time when you had to advocate for graduate students with a disability.

I have had to advocate for myself as a graduate student with a disability on a regular basis throughout my time in graduate school. My disability affects how I consume content in school (i.e., I cannot read text and rely on text-to-speech and audio forms of content). My disability also impacts how long tasks take me. I have to explain my needs to faculty each semester and on an ongoing basis throughout each semester as different challenges arise. As a graduate student with a disability, I have found myself confiding in peers who also have disabilities. Although I have never directly advocated for another student with a disability, I work at the teaching and learning center at our university to help other graduate students better understand how to teach and support their undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities. I also support my graduate peers with disabilities in navigating their own disability-related challenges in graduate school and finding avenues for self-advocacy.

What advice would you give individuals in their graduate career on how to advocate for issues specific to graduate students with a disability?

It can be helpful to understand a few things when supporting graduate students with disabilities: The way a disability manifests can change over time and a student’s needs can also shift. It is, therefore, important to consistently check in with students with disabilities to ensure the supports in place are appropriate and to be open to making changes as the semester proceeds. Self-advocacy can be emotionally draining for graduate students with disabilities. Taking the time to listen to your students’ or peers’ experiences and responding without judgment and, to the extent possible, offering connections to resources can be powerful in showing that you are an ally. It is natural to compare and judge one another’s accomplishments in graduate school. However, this can be the most detrimental and psychologically damaging practice for any student, but specifically for students with disabilities. Speaking for myself, most tasks take me longer and comparisons that relate to efficiency or productivity can be very harmful to my mental health. I do not have control over the amount of time certain tasks take me because of my disability, and hearing my peers rank accomplishments and define success through these metrics can make it more difficult for me to feel like a valued member of the graduate student community. It would be helpful to have peers understand this and be mindful of comparisons and judgments they make.

What is the main thing you want readers to know about advocating for graduate students with a disability?
Going through life with a disability is hard. Unfortunately, the world isn’t built for people with disabilities to navigate successfully. Graduate school is just one of many areas of life that graduate students with disabilities need to move through. It takes extra effort and energy (often both emotional and physical) to make it through graduate school with a disability. From my perspective, what has been most helpful is when my graduate student peers take the time to ask me how my disability affects my life both in school and outside of school. Having peers offer to support me in small material ways has been instrumental. Also, it has been incredibly helpful to have peers offer to stand by me when I need to advocate for my needs with faculty or employers. Although they have not been able to do the work for me, it has been incredibly empowering to know that I have classmates who see the injustices I have faced and are brave enough to stand by me and speak up about inequitable practices that often take place in graduate school teaching and clinical work.

**What’s your best self-care advice?**

A few strategies have been incredibly helpful for me. Eating nourishing meals, prioritizing my sleep and fitness, and seeking therapy have all been incredibly important. In order to develop the confidence needed to engage in self-advocacy, I have found it very helpful to build a community with other graduate students with disabilities. Hearing how to navigate similar situations and learning about helpful resources on and off campus has been key to building self-efficacy in advocacy. In addition, hearing that I am not the only one experiencing the hardships I face because of my disability helps me remember that these difficulties are not a “me” problem but are linked to larger structures that reinforce inequity.