**The student counselor’s role in light of intersectionality framework**

**Abstract**

In this presentation we will discuss the college’s attitude towards students who come from marginal backgrounds, by referring to the role of student counselor. We recommend adopting an approach that is conscious of intersecting and overlapping social identities that may be both empowering and oppressing the students. Such an attitude has been implemented in the Department of Social Work at Emek Yizrael Academic College in Israel.

The Department of Social Work accepts students from diverse social and political identities some of them on the margins of society. According to the theory the term ‘marginal social locations’ refers to situations or areas in which groups are located, which are on the margins of society and outside the social consensus (Resner & Zeira, 2014). The intersection of multiple factors such as ethnicity, class, race, color, sexual orientation, age, disabilities, culture, gender, identity, immigration status, and religion, may psychologically and socially affect students, and may even create situations of distress and risk (Krumer-Nevo & Komam, 2012). The encounter with academia, which represents the dominant and hegemonic Western culture (Nichols & Stahl, 2019) may increase students' experiences of alienation, separateness, and exclusion, and thus might jeopardize their integration and success in academic studies, to the point that they may drop out (Kayam & Talmor, 2015; Totry, 2009). For example, a young female Israeli-Arab student may be called upon to help support her family, who have financial difficulties, at the expense of her attending. Identifying and approaching this conflict by appropriate responses may moderate extreme decisions, such as dropping out of her academic studies.

Practical assistance offered by the Emek Yizrael Academic College, in addition to the support services provided through the dean’s office, includes student counseling provided by a member of the academic staff of the Social Work Department. Studies have shown that the role of a counselor contributes greatly to student retention and academic success (Myers & Dyer 2005). Such studies discuss a number of components of this role: integration between students’ academic life and career and their personal goals and home environment; connecting to resources; providing information regarding eligibility, policies, and procedures of the institution; understanding students’ personal background and needs; encouraging students to be independent learners by promoting their problem-solving ability and decision-making skills.

However, we assert, based on the intersectionality approach, that a student counselor will not be able to understand the experiences and distress of students without considering the complex relationships with overlapping categories of their identity and lives (e.g. a single mother who is also a new immigrant; a student struggling with mental illness and living in poverty; a 40-year-old Arab widow with young children who lives in a rural village). The role of the counselor demands understanding that students may simultaneously feel strong and powerless, capable and incompetent, with and without resources (Nagar-Ron, 2014). Such understanding will be possible only when the student’s perspective is placed in the center. Identifying and acknowledging the conflicts and challenges that students face, as well as their strengths and the areas of control, may lead to open dialogue and a meaningful alliance between the counselor and students. This process will allow their recognition as unique individuals and hence increase their sense of empowerment in the unfamiliar academic environment.

Use of Critical Theory, which helps student counselors examine the full range of interactions between students and academia, is in line with the vision of promoting the development of students from the marginal social locations in a constructive manner. However, in doing so, it is worth noting that conceptualizing the role of counselor in light of Critical Theory is not free of limitations and dilemmas.

Individual case studies and dilemmas will be presented and discussed at the conference.