**The role of the student counselor in the Department of Social Work at the Emek Yizrael Academic College in light of intersectionality and the theory of marginal social locations**

**Abstract**

As part of the conference lecture, we will discuss the college’s attitude towards its students who come from peripheral social backgrounds, by looking at the role of student counselor. We recommend adopting an approach that is conscious of intersectionality among people from marginal social locations, such as the one that 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 rural and peripheral areas and from various backgrounds on the margins of society. According to the theory of marginal social locations, 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 term ‘marginal social locations’ refers to situations or areas in which students are located, which are on the margins of society and outside the social consensus (Resner & Zeira, 2014). 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 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. Identifying appropriate responses to this conflict may lead to the student making extreme decisions, such as dropping out of her academic studies.

Practical assistance offered by the Emek Yizrael Academic College, as part of 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: assisting in the integration between students’ academic life and career and their life goals and home environment; providing links to resources; providing information regarding eligibility, policies, and procedures of the institution; understanding students’ personal background and personal needs; encouraging students to take personal responsibility for learning by assisting them in developing problem-solving ability and decision-making skills.

However, we assert, based on the intersectionality approach, that a student counselor undertaking such actions will not be able to understand the experiences and distress of students who seek counseling without examining and weighing the complex relationships among other overlapping categories of their identity and lives (e.g. a single mother who is a new immigrant; a student struggling with mental illness and living in poverty; a 40-year-old Arab widow with children who lives in a village). It is the role of the counselor to understand that students may feel simultaneously strong and powerless, capable and incompetent, with resources and lacking resources (Nagar-Ron, 2014). Such understanding will be possible only when the student’s perspective is placed in the center. Identifying and acknowledging the experiences and conflicts that students face, as well as their strengths and the areas of their lives in which they have control, may lead to open dialogue and a working alliance between the counselor and students. This process will allow their realization 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 periphery in a compassionate manner. However, in doing so, it is worth noting that fulfilling the role of counselor in light of Critical Theory is not without limitations and dilemmas. Analysis of individual cases of students and presentation of their dilemmas will be discussed at the conference.