Carnegie Mellon

Community Think Tank

Self-Advocacy

Leadership, Dialogue, and Change

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Table of Contents

Introduction and Problem Statement

Self-advocacy is a skill that can support self-awareness, independence, and self-confidence in individuals. Executing it effectively typically involves understanding your own needs, knowing the resources available to help you meet those needs, and communicating those needs to people who can help you access these resources. Most commonly, self-advocacy is thought of as a type of confidence that is learned through observation and experience.

Academic Development, the HUB, the Office of Disability Resources, CaPS, and the Center for Diversity and Inclusion are just a handful of the institutional supports CMU offers to students grappling with a wide spectrum of issues. On a more personal level, students may reach out to their professors, mentors, and advisors for advice and assistance. Finally, students may fall back on their informal support networks of family members, colleagues, and friends.

Between the official support systems CMU provides and the unofficial support systems students build in their personal lives, it would seem that self-advocacy is a fairly uncomplicated matter. After all, there's plenty of help to go around. So, you may be wondering, what's the problem with self-advocacy at CMU? Is there a problem? We—that is, the organizers of this think tank and students in Dr. Linda Flower's Leadership, Dialogue, and Change course—began this inquiry with a hunch that self-advocacy is harder in practice than it is in theory.

Our hunch first began to solidify when we started reviewing the literature on self-advocacy in education and found that nearly all the existing research situates self-advocacy within disability studies. While it is certainly true that self-advocacy is a critical skill for students with disabilities, we believe that all students should be effective self-advocates. Thus, we set our first goal for this project: to extend the conversation around self-advocacy to the general student body.

Next, we really started unearthing problems when we began speaking with members of the CMU community. We spent the semester interviewing students, recent alums, professors, and staff members about their personal experiences with self-advocacy. Common trends run through each of their stories—for instance, that self-advocacy is scary. It puts one in a vulnerable position, opening them to criticism, negative impressions, and conflict. We also realized that institutional supports are less accessible than they seem. Not everyone knows how to access them, or even that they exist. Additionally, not everyone knows what support to seek when they need help—especially if they lack a clear sense of their problem.

Grounding our inquiry in our interviewees' situated knowledge, we held a think tank discussing the confusions, fears, and attitudes surrounding self-advocacy. Here, again, we brought together students, professors, and staff members to lend their perspectives on these issues. We also tried to generate solutions that students, professors, and CMU itself can implement to overcome the barriers to self-advocacy. This report distills our best thinking on this subject.

If you have any questions, please contact Linda Flower at lf54@andrew.cmu.edu.

Fact Sheet

Self-advocacy is a skill that fosters self-awareness, independence, and self-confidence in individuals.

Definitions of Self-Advocacy:

Concunan-Lahr and Brotherson

One form of advocacy, occurring any time people speak or act on their own behalf to improve their quality of life, effect personal change, or correct inequalities.

Strodden

Self-advocacy is referred to as the ability to articulate one's needs and make informed decisions about the supports necessary to meet those needs.

Tufail and Lyon

Advocacy is speaking up for yourself or for others when you think people with power over your life are ignoring your needs.

Self-Advocacy Skills:

To successfully advocate for yourself, it is important to understand your own needs, know the available resources to meet those needs, and communicate your needs to those who can help.

To build self-advocacy skills:
- Identify your short-term and long-term goals
- Identify personal strengths and weaknesses
- Identify your preferred method of learning
- Educate yourself on your rights and responsibilities
- Consider and contact potential mentors
- Research available resources
- Plan problem-solving solutions for potential barriers
- Network with peers

Being a good self-advocate can help students emotionally and physically. Strong self-advocates tend to be more confident, open to taking risks, and become self-sufficient. A large self-advocacy toolset helps students with classes, leadership activities, and dealing positively with mental health, as students are able to realize and set educational goals.

Labels:

Disability: a physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities; or, a disadvantage or handicap, especially one imposed or recognized by the law.

Self-sufficiency: someone who is self-sufficient does not need to rely on others for assistance with basic needs, and is someone who will self-advocate when those needs are not being met.

Findings

       Our insights into self-advocacy shed light on the process by which self-advocacy occurs at Carnegie Mellon, the methods by which students make the decision to self-advocate, and the surprising barriers that exist for authority figures. We identified three surprising findings related to the level of planning students engage in before self-advocacy, the importance of peer-support networks, and instructors' reluctance to engage in self-advocacy. Additionally, we unearthed divergent goals related to self-advocacy. Specifically, we learned how students can approach self-advocacy from a short-term task-oriented mindset, or from the perspective of one wishing to engage in self-improvement and developing skills. Ultimately, we find self-advocacy to be a difficult but often rewarding process at Carnegie Mellon.

Peer Support Networks

       Our first surprising finding concerned how important a role peer support networks and word-of-mouth played in self-advocacy. Round table participants highlighted how self-advocacy became much easier when a student could rely on the recommendations of friends who had used a campus resource before. A 'trailblazer' could leverage a campus resource or advocate in some capacity and then promote that resource to their friends. Those students that know a 'trailblazer' feel more comfortable following in their footsteps. Peer-support networks help to remove some of the uncertainty surrounding self-advocacy and help to identify resources that would be most useful for a student. Ultimately, this suggests that if a student has a strong peer-support network of friends who are comfortable with self-advocacy and have done so in the past, then they are more likely to self-advocate.

Calculated vs. Impulsive

       Another surprising finding was related to the nature by which students make the decision to self-advocate. Our round table and interviews suggest that students often make the decision to self-advocate using two contrasting heuristics. On the one hand, students may meticulously plan their self-advocacy attempt, taking the time to weigh the pros and cons and consider likely outcomes. On the other, students may impulsively, almost subconsciously, self-advocate to trusted authority figures. Students will determine which method to use based on a variety of factors. Specifically, these factors include the severity of the student's problem, the comfort level they have with the authority figure, and the ease by which the problem can be solved. For a non-severe, easy-to-solve problem with someone the student trusts, they will often take the impulsive route and vice-versa. This surprised us because we had assumed that all self-advocacy attempts took the meticulously-planned route, and because of the importance trust played in the process. In a sense, the more a student trusted their instructor, the more likely they were to self-advocate

to them, even on topics unrelated to the course! This suggests that instructors, advisors, and other authority figures should invest more time in fostering a relationship with their students to help ease the process of self-advocacy, and to help the student with unrelated but potentially serious issues.

Fear of Assumption

Although we have largely considered the students' role in self-advocacy, we discovered a surprising road block for instructors and other authority figures at Carnegie Mellon. Many of our think tank participants were teachers or staff, and they all agreed that, even when they knew that a student was struggling, there was little they could do to encourage them to self-advocate. They didn't want to appear 'pushy' or imply that a student couldn't handle the situation on their own. Additionally, they didn't want to simply assume that a student needed help, and so had their hands tied by social convention. As such, they lamented that the best they could do was offer themselves as a resource and hope that a student would reach out. This clearly caused some frustration among the participants, but their perspective was that the onus is on students to reach out if something was going wrong. They thought it wasn't their 'place' to encourage student to self-advocate. This suggests that there might be cultural and social barriers in place which limits the frequency and efficacy of self-advocacy.

Image Anxiety

We also discovered how an individual's desire to maintain an external image of competence can act as a barrier to the practice of self-advocacy. Individuals in both our interviews and round table noted that they worried that other people would negatively perceive their attempts at self-advocacy. This fear of judgment limited the individuals' willingness to self-advocate. Self-advocacy was viewed as a social vulnerability and a risk to one's facade of perfectionism

The possibility of needing to self-advocate in order to succeed or achieve a goal also might also threaten the individual's own self-image or self-evaluation of capability. The need to self-advocate can be seen as a personal failure. If one needs to self-advocate, then they may feel that they have 'failed' to accomplish their goals independently. Students reported feeling "like it's their responsibility" to solve their problems, and that they are failing if they can't do so without external support. This suggests that some individuals may not view self-advocacy as a necessary skill but as a sign of weakness.

Benefits vs. Risks

Self-advocacy is especially difficult when students aren't exactly sure what the outcome will be--or what outcome they want. If students fear negative consequences from self-advocating, they may ultimately decide that the risks of self-advocacy outweigh the benefits.

Defining the Problem

One common trend we found in our interviews and round table session was that students don't always know how to define their problem. This creates a stumbling block, as one's definition of their problem will likely determine the means they take to address it.

Sometimes, students won't necessarily know they have a problem until it becomes too late to address it. Our interviews with CMU students found that they tend to set very high standards for themselves and expect themselves to perform well on very hard tasks. For instance, a student may enroll in several very difficult courses in the same semester. If this student expects to feel overworked and stressed out all the time, how will she know when she really needs help?

The scope of the problem also makes a difference in the decision to self-advocate or not. Some students believe that self-advocacy should be reserved for "big" problems, while smaller problems may not be worth the effort.

Occasionally, we encountered students who tended to "essentialize" knowledge: they believe they are inherently able to do certain things and unable to do other things. These students indicated they were more likely to withdraw from a difficult course than seek their professor's help. In their eyes, they either knew how to do something, or they didn't--and no amount of practice or degree of help could change it.

Task-Oriented vs. Growth Mindset Self-Advocacy

We began this inquiry working under the assumption that self-advocacy, by default, involves solving problems. While it is certainly true that we need to self-advocate to overcome obstacles, we found that the goal of self-advocacy can't always be reduced to problem-solving. Some forms of self-advocacy are proactive, as opposed to reactive, and serve to help people build the skills they need to succeed on future tasks. We've named this positive form of self-advocacy **growth mindset**.

Whereas **task-oriented** self-advocacy responds to problems we have in the present, growth mindset self-advocacy is future-oriented. A college student, for example, practices

growth mindset when she asks a professor to let her modify an assignment so it can better align with her professional goals and/or academic interests. An intern writing for a newspaper practices growth-mindset when he consults the editor in order to better understand the style guidelines for articles. A supervisor in an office practices growth-mindset when she asks how she can receive additional training—not just to improve her performance in her current position, but also to cultivate the skills she'll need when she is promoted to a managerial position.

When we engage in growth-mindset self-advocacy, we may or may not be responding to a problem we have at the moment—but we are trying to gain knowledge and skills that will benefit us in the long run.

Recommendations

Once we explored a number of different problems that could help or hinder the development of self-advocacy skills, we attempted to find real-world solutions that could solve these issues. As many people struggle with their self-advocacy skills in one way or another, we believe that we have determined a few different methods to improve the way that self-advocacy can be accomplished. Each of these methods works depending on the individual and their specific capabilities, which means that what feels comfortable for some may not be the ideal choice for others.

Trial-and-Error

One method that we found was that many students simply use trial and error as a way to develop self-advocacy skills. This method is not only risky, but it puts the individual directly in the "line of fire." As a result, it is typically used in low-risk scenarios. This method is used when people are comfortable in the environment and with the different individuals in the situation.

Develop a Support Network

This method requires work before a problem arises and is built to deal with future self-advocacy problems. Developing a support network is a method that we determined many students use for situations in which more is at stake. A support network can be defined as a group of people that have a relationship with a singular person. These relationships can be of any type, from casual acquaintances to close family and friends. Each person that has met the individual in question is another branch of the support network.

Once a support network has been made (this could be as simple as a one-person network, or consist of hundreds of people), the people in the network become resources for the individual, and opportunities to learn more and feel more comfortable about any potential self-advocating situation. Word-of-mouth is used to spread knowledge of self-advocacy based on support networks. Many times, individuals' fear surrounding self-advocacy can be mitigated by mentioning that someone similar to them had been through this situation before, but overcame the problem through self-advocacy. Speaking to someone that they trust about the situation also can help them prepare for what to expect. This could be someone of authority, such as a teacher or boss, as well as a family member or close friend.

Another resource actually developed by CMU students comes from a Think Tank on "Decisions and Networks of Support." The TT Reports page has both the "Findings" and The Decision Dialogues Interactive Guide that helps peer mentors and small groups share both problems and experience. https://www.cmu.edu/thinktank/docs.html

More Pre-Developed Paths to Choose From

Many issues with self-advocacy come from individuals being unable to see the steps forward to accomplish their goals. People tend to choose the paths that are more traveled, and straying from that path towards an unknown destination tends to cause people to doubt their resolve and their personal abilities. One method to counteract this uncertainty is to develop those paths before people need to use them. Facilities and employers such as schools and businesses are the most common places to self-advocate. If these places explained in detail the different paths that people could self-advocate, those that struggle to do so now have different paths to choose from. This means that they can advocate to the "lowest risk" representative that can deal with their problem, and the future steps are clearly visible for them to see.

Believe in Yourself

One of the biggest problems when it comes to self-advocacy is a lack of self-confidence. Some people do not believe in themselves at all, leading to under-confidence and hesitancy at any problem. The future is unknown, and therefore these individuals wish to stay where they are, never to improve or develop. On the other hand, some people believe in themselves too much, which leads to overconfidence and recklessness when a problem comes through.

Finding ways to balance confidence and overcoming fears can dramatically increase self-advocating skills. Many of the internal barriers that come from self-doubt or overconfidence can be eliminated based on a healthy amount of confidence in one's own ability. Essentialism is not true, and by working hard at the subject matter, one can learn anything that they wish to learn.

Overall, eliminating many of the stereotypes of self-advocacy can improve the ways that one can self-advocate.

Briefing Book Scenarios

What follows is a series of hypothetical scenarios we used to generate conversation during our round table session. We crafted these scenarios from the experiences shared with us by interviewees at the early stages of our investigation. The scenarios are designed to provide concrete situations that draw out beliefs and attitudes about self-advocacy. While we have provided several possible options and outcomes for each scenario, we encourage you to create your own.

Scenario #1:
A Teacher's Dilemma

Many students take on internships at some point in their academic or professional careers. These positions often entail course credits and possible job offers, so it's vital that students know how to advocate for themselves and make use of their support network when needed.

During our interviews, we found that many participants who were unsuccessful in self-advocating either didn't have a support network or didn't feel their support network was reliable. In some cases, hostility prevented our respondents from self-advocating: either the advocate's own hostility toward a boss or advisor, or perceived hostility on the boss or advisor's part. Uncertainty also played a role in many decisions not to self-advocate; when the respondents weren't sure exactly what they wanted or believed the potential drawbacks outweighed the potential benefits, they deemed self-advocacy too risky.

The Decision Makers

Katie

Katie is a full-time kindergarten teacher finishing up her master's degree in education. Katie works in a dysfunctional classroom in a depressed, underfunded school. She has 29 students crammed into a small room and one aide who doesn't do much. A number of her students have severe behavioral issues; they hit other students (and the adults in the room!), throw furniture, and run out of the room. Overall, the classroom is chaotic, and Katie is forced to spend most of her time managing the students rather than teaching them.

Lisa

Lisa is Katie's professor for her last education class. Lisa has five years of experience teaching kindergarten in a wealthy suburban city. She has recently gotten her PhD and is a new professor at Katie's university. As part of Katie's education class, Lisa observes each student

teaching three times throughout the semester. Although Katie's work in the class has been very good, Katie is usually quiet in class and doesn't come to office hours. Lisa doesn't know her very well.

The Scenario

The Setting: Lisa comes into Katie's classroom to observe her teaching. Katie has the written lesson plan for what she is supposed to be teaching, but Katie barely gets to teach at all. Instead, she spends the whole time trying to settle her students down and get them to stay in their seats--a mostly impossible task. The classroom aide yells at the students a few times during the lesson, but doesn't do much else. Lisa is horrified by Katie's classroom situation. After the school day ends, she talks to Katie.

Lisa: This girl isn't teaching. She has to chase kids around the room all day! I can't believe you have to teach in here! Most of these students belong in a special education setting. Nothing in your training could have prepared you to deal with this.

Katie: I know, but that's just the way it is in this school system. Most of the other classrooms are like this, too.

Lisa: I'm so sorry you have to deal with all this. I've never seen such chaos in my life. I want to make sure you're able to succeed in this course, but it's impossible for me to evaluate you as a teacher in this classroom.

Katie: So you think I'm not a "real" teacher because this school system is awful? This is what teaching in the real world looks like! Just because you taught perfect kids in a well-funded school, doesn't mean all of us get to! Well… You know, this is what it's like in these urban schools. We don't have a lot to work with here.

Lisa: I just don't see the point in observing you if this is what you're doing every day. How about I replace your three observations with three short papers? That way you'll be able to demonstrate your teaching knowledge without actually having to deliver a lesson.

Katie: Where am I going to find time to write three papers on top of the classwork I already have? Does this lady not realize I spend most of my time after school putting my classroom back together, filling out paperwork and incident reports, and having conferences with parents and administrators? Um, I guess that could work out, but...

Lisa: Good! I want to make sure you can pass this class no matter what.

Katie: And make my life even harder in the process. This lady's got her head in the clouds. I just want to scream! Yeah. Thanks!

The Setting: Later, Katie is home with her boyfriend.

Tom: How was school today?

Katie: Awful. My professor came in to observe me and decided not to go forward with the observations because she "can't evaluate me under these circumstances." She gave me three papers to do instead and expects I actually have time to write them.

Tom: Can't you talk to her about it to come up with something else?

Katie: She's an idiot. I don't want to talk to her. Besides, I don't want to make this into a huge fight. I just want to get through this stupid class and get my degree.

Tom: What about your advisor?

Katie: I don't want to talk to her, either. I don't even know if my professor is allowed to make this arrangement with me. If I tell my advisor about it, she might tell me that we can't do it at all, and then I'll be really screwed. I'm just going to try and write the stupid papers, although I have no idea how I'll manage to do it…

What's the problem here?

The Story Behind the Story
Whose Problem is This - The Student's or The Professor's?

Katie says: It's totally unreasonable for Lisa to demand I do extra work that nobody else has to do. It's like she's punishing me for working in a bad school system, which isn't my fault. I'm a new teacher without experience, so this school system was the only one that would hire me. I can probably get a job in a better school once I have a couple years of experience, but for now, I'm stuck here. Even though my classroom is terrible, I am still a teacher, and I feel extremely insulted that Lisa thinks otherwise.

Lisa says: I feel bad that Katie is stuck in such a terrible situation, but my job as her professor is to evaluate her as a teacher. I cannot do that by watching her try to teach in this classroom. But I'm willing to adapt to give Katie a fair chance of passing this class. If I give her a few assignments to replace the observations, I can evaluate her teaching knowledge without her having to teach.

Katie's advisor says: If the instructor feels she cannot make a fair evaluation of the student through observations, she is allowed to give the student a comparable alternate assignment. The instructor and the student should negotiate to come up with a satisfactory alternative.

Options and Outcomes

Decision Point #1

Katie could ask for help. One of the key elements of asking for help is identifying your resources. Who can you look to for help? Who is part of your support network?

Option #1

Katie asks Lisa to reconsider giving her extra work.

Katie says: I have too much to do already and don't have time to talk to her. Besides, I don't want to approach Lisa because she doesn't understand my situation or take me seriously. She doesn't think I'm a "real" teacher.

Lisa says: I can't give Katie a fair evaluation by observing her in this classroom, so she has to do something to demonstrate her teaching knowledge. I'm willing to try anything to help Katie pass this class.

The advisor says: At the end of the day, it's Lisa's call as to how to evaluate Katie. They can certainly negotiate to do it in a way that suits them both, but Lisa has the final say.

Option #2

Katie can ask her advisor for advice about her professor's policy. That way, Katie can gain information about departmental expectations.

Katie says: I'd rather not. I want to keep Lisa's compromise on the down-low because I'm not sure if it's actually allowed. And if it isn't allowed, then I won't be able to pass the class. Besides, I don't want to undermine Lisa by going over her head. She already doesn't like me.

Lisa says: I encourage all students to consult their advisors if they are faced with a difficult situation. Maybe another perspective would be helpful in this situation.

The advisor says: I encourage all students to check with their advisors whenever they have questions about departmental policy. We need to make sure students are fulfilling all their course requirements.

Decision Point #2:
Katie could choose not to consult her professor or advisor. If students believe the potential drawbacks of self-advocating outweigh the potential benefits, they may opt to keep their problems to themselves.

Option #1
Katie says nothing and decides to do the extra work.

Katie says: This is what I'm most comfortable with. I'm angry that I have to do extra work and don't know if I'll be able to get it done, but at the end of the day, I need to pass this class. I'd rather just get through it and not make it a big deal.

Lisa says: If Katie doesn't tell me the arrangement won't work, I won't know she's struggling. If she says nothing, then I'll assume that it's a fair compromise.

The advisor says: I encourage open communication between students and professors. It's the professor's job to help their students, and the student's job to inform the professor of any difficulties they may be having with the course material or expectations.

Option #2
Katie assures Lisa that she can get her room under control and asks Lisa to go forward with the observations.

Katie says: I don't want to antagonize Lisa by refusing her offer. However, if Lisa would just agree to do the observations, I wouldn't have to do any extra work. There should be a way for me to figure this out. Maybe I can get my aide to be a little more active in disciplining the room…

Lisa says: I severely doubt Katie will be able to get any meaningful teaching done in that classroom no matter what she does. I think it's unfair to both Katie and me to continue with the

observations. I can't lie and say Katie is a great teacher because I've barely seen her teaching. I also don't want to evaluate her negatively because I know what she is capable of and she has a lot of potential.

The advisor says: I encourage the students and professors to have an open conversation about any difficult situations and come up with a fair compromise. If it is one that fulfills the course requirements, then it should be an option the student must consider. I can provide a third perspective and offer suggestions as I see fit, but it is still the professor's call at the end of the day, because she will be the one performing the evaluation.

Option #3

Katie withdraws from the class.

Katie says: I do not want to withdraw from this class, especially when I'm so close to graduating. But if I'm not able to do the extra work, I don't see any other option. Either that, or I'll fail. Withdrawing is my last resort.

Lisa says: I don't want to see Katie withdraw. However, she would have a much easier time in this class if her teaching situation were conducive to observations. Observations are an integral part of this class, which Katie knew when she enrolled. I don't see another way to evaluate Katie fairly without giving her extra work.

The advisor says: At the end of the day, if the student feels they cannot meet the course requirements, it's better for them to withdraw than fail.

Scenario #2:
Overwhelmed, Overworked, Over it

Successful students can often feel as though those around them expect them to succeed. However, even the best students can struggle when faced with a difficult semester. During our interviews, we saw that many students were unwilling to self-advocate for fear of disappointing those around them, especially when those people are decision makers in their lives (bosses, teachers, advisors, etc.) This scenario looks at one such student, Jennifer, who doesn't want to disappoint her professor and feels like an imposter in her classes.

The Decision Makers

Jennifer

Jennifer is a junior majoring in Computer Science with a minor in Human-Computer Interaction. She is a former member of student government, head of the Undergraduate Marketing Organization (UMO), and a member of the Buggy Association. Although she has had excellent grades in the past, she is struggling with her course load this semester. Her most difficult class is taught by Dr. Singer, but she is afraid that bringing this up to Dr. Singer will prevent her from landing one of Dr. Singer's coveted undergraduate research positions.

Dr. Singer

One of Jennifer's professors and mentors. Jennifer has taken two classes with Dr. Singer in the past and is currently enrolled in another one. This is a graduate level course, but Dr. Singer gave Jennifer special permission to take it, given her performance in his other classes. Dr. Singer sees Jennifer as one of her 'star students' and has no idea that Jennifer is completely overwhelmed with her material this semester. If all goes well with this class, Dr. Singer is thinking of hiring Jennifer to be a research assistant in her lab.

Nila

Jennifer's friend and roommate. Nila can tell that Jennifer is struggling more this semester, but doesn't want to make her upset by mentioning it to her. She is also in the Buggy Association and spends at least eight hours with Jennifer a week, either studying in their apartment or at buggy practice.

The Scenario

The Setting: Jennifer is up late studying for an exam the next day. The material is much more difficult than she expected it to be, but she's terrified of admitting to her professor (Dr. Singer) that she's falling behind. The stress is clearly catching up to her. Nila walks in and sees Jennifer studying.

Nila: Hey Jennifer, it's getting pretty late. Don't you have a 9 a.m. class tomorrow?

Jennifer: Yeah, I do, and it's an exam for Dr. Singer's class. Ugh, I just am not getting it. Did she even teach this stuff in lecture?

Nila: That sucks. Have you thought about going into office hours and talking to her?

Jennifer: I wanted to, but my club had a general body meeting, plus I was swamped with all my other work. There's no way I'm going to get it all done!

Nila: Well, you did it every other semester. I'm sure you'll get it this time!

Jennifer: Oh my gosh, everyone expects me to do so well. I can't let them all down. What must my parents be thinking! I hope so. I've just got so much to do. Plus, I really want to do well. That way, I can get that research job I wanted.

Nila: Just go to bed. You won't get much more studying done tonight. It's already pretty late.

Jennifer: One more hour, then I'll go to bed.

The Setting: Two weeks after the exam, Dr. Singer calls Jennifer into her office. Jennifer got a failing grade on the exam, and Dr. Singer is concerned for her. Although Jennifer has had the exam back for at least a week, she didn't come in to see Dr. Singer because she was afraid that Dr. Singer would disapprove of Jennifer bringing it up. Jennifer is extremely nervous for this meeting.

Dr. Singer: I noticed you did well below the class average for this exam. Is everything all right? I know you participate in a lot of organizations. Were you too busy to study?

Jennifer: It has nothing to do with how busy I am! I just have no idea what's going on in your class. How did everyone do so well? She can't find out how badly I'm struggling, or she'll never let me be her research assistant! Maybe, I think so...

Dr. Singer: Jennifer is never this quiet; I wonder if something is going on at home. I hope she's okay. Well… maybe you should consider dropping something. You're a senior, so it would be very unfortunate if you failed to graduate when you're so close to being done!

Jennifer: It's fine. I just have to push through. There's another exam coming up. As long as I do well on that one, everything will be okay. You're right. Really, I'm fine. I just had an off day. Thank you so much. I'm really enjoying the class.

Dr. Singer: Jennifer is the best student I've had. I don't know why I had any doubts. She'll be a great lab assistant! Well, okay. Just let me know if you need anything, all right?

Jennifer: Yeah, of course I do, but I just don't know how to say it without coming across as stupid. Definitely. Thank you!

What's the problem here?

The Story Behind the Story
Whose Problem is This - The Student's, the Teacher's, or the School's?

The Student says: Could be my fault. If I wasn't so busy and overwhelmed with so many classes, I'd have more time to study and wouldn't be this stressed. And if the school required professors to post meaningful syllabi for their classes, and if their unit counts were accurate, I could avoid getting into such bad situations!

The Teacher says: It's my fault. I should have paid more attention to the student and realized she was ill-prepared for a graduate level course. I just have so many classes and so many students, I didn't have the time - but that's no excuse. I knew something was going on, and I should have pushed harder for an answer from Jennifer. She would have made a great research assistant as a senior. Perhaps she was not ready to take this class her junior year.

The School Says: It's the student's fault. We have many programs (Academic Development, SI, etc.) to assist students when they are struggling with classes. However, it is their responsibility to use those resources. If they don't reach out, we can't do anything to assist them because we wouldn't know.

Options and Outcomes

CMU students must learn how to balance school work, extracurricular activities, and a healthy amount of relaxation time on their own. Although services exist to support students, students must be the ones who deal with the consequences of failing to use them. Teachers or their TAs are required to have one-on-one meetings with all of their students throughout the semester to ensure the student is performing well.

Option #1
The Student says: I guess this is okay. Though I'm pretty busy, and am not sure I have the time to meet, at least I could use this time to go over material. And if I really am struggling, this could be a life saver.

The Teacher says: I love to help my students in any way I can, but the school year is already very busy and there's no room in my budget to pay for extra TAs. Either I need less to do, or the university needs to give me more resources.

The School says: This seems like a great idea. Not only will it help students bond with professors, but it may help to reduce stress and raise grades on campus. I think this is a great solution!

Decision Point #1
Students who are struggling in classes feel afraid of asking for help. Many don't want to appear stupid or slow in front of their teachers or peers.

Option #1
Use weekly surveys to gauge how difficult students feel the course material is. If the difficulty is too high above an expected baseline, teachers would be expected to slow down the rate of new material.

The Student says: I guess this is okay. Filling out surveys every week seems pretty annoying. But if they're short enough, and end up with my tough classes actually getting easier, I'm okay with this!

The Teacher says: This just increases my workload, and how do we know the students are being honest? It would only take a few students to lie on the survey to force me to slow down. I think this is just a hassle, and won't really help. Besides, my classes are designed to be hard. We shouldn't tailor them all to the student struggling the most.

The School says: I'm not sure if this is practical. Getting students to take surveys is hard enough, and then having them happen on a weekly basis? There would definitely be a lot of bias, and I'm not sure if we would get good, or accurate enough results. However, it would seem to be very helpful if we got it to work.

Option #2
Whatever happens, happens. Let the consequences of not asking for help teach students to speak up and advocate. The onus is on them, after all, to get a good education.

The Student says: This is a terrible idea! Some teachers are really unresponsive when students ask for help, or so intimidating that doing so can be really stressful. Plus, I don't want to fail a class just to learn that self-advocating is good or how to self-advocate! I'd rather be taught in better way.

The Teacher says: I'm not sure I like this. I'd rather positively encourage students to speak up, instead of leaving them to flounder on their own.

The School says: This is basically what we do now, and it seems to work pretty well. The resources are there for students, but life is hard. Students need to learn to self-advocate and speak up on their own. They need to be prepared for real-life situations they would face in the future.

Scenario #3:
Professional Conflict

The post-graduation transition to a professional workplace is a difficult yet necessary change. Depending on the workplace, individuals may have a steep learning curve adjusting to the norms and rules of their new environment.

During our interviews, we found that common workplace challenges included interpersonal relationships. In some cases, individuals' values and expectations conflicted with those of their coworkers or supervisors. When deciding to self-advocate, individuals considered both relationship power dynamics and their intended outcomes. Interview participants also noted that the process of self-advocacy required them to identify and access resources in the workplace. Interviewees identified clear and persuasive communication of one's position to another person as one of the most important elements of self-advocacy in the workplace.

The Decision Makers

Claire

Claire is a Marketing Manager at Prestige Worldwide, a small marketing company. She has been working at the company for three months. Her department is small, consisting of four employees and one supervisor, George. Claire reports directly to George and occasionally collaborates with coworkers on projects. Claire prefers working on independent projects and enjoys engaging in creative decision-making in her position.

George

George is Claire's supervisor. George is an older man and a long-time employee of the company. As a supervisor, he holds many responsibilities. George thinks that having a clean workplace increases the productivity of the whole office and can get frustrated when people leave messes throughout the office.

The Scenario

The Setting: Claire is designing a project for her supervisor, George. Claire will need to present her work to George, and from past experience, she knows that visual aids help George comprehend and process information. She decides to move her work from her office to the main conference room, where there is a large cork board on which she can pin her designs to show George. After she arranges the documents on the conference room cork board, Claire leaves for the day without speaking to George. The next morning, Claire is working on the project. While walking through the office, George sees that Claire has covered the conference room cork board with her papers. George calls Claire into his office.

George: [frustrated] Claire, you need to take those papers out of the conference room. That's a communal workspace, and we don't want to clutter it up. She's new here and she's already acting like she owns the office. She needs to be considerate of others and act like a professional!

Claire: Okay. Why is he making such a big deal about this? I put up the papers for his benefit, anyway. I thought I was allowed to be independent.

George: Do you understand? Do you need me to write this down? If I don't emphasize that this is important, she won't remember and won't change her attitude.

Claire: Yes, I'll take them down now. He's being so condescending and demeaning! I was trying to be creative, and he's micromanaging me. He doesn't respect me.

What's the problem here?

The Story Behind the Story

Claire says: George is so rude to me. He's treating me like I'm stupid. I don't understand why the conference room needs to be empty--no one's using it! I was doing this for his benefit, too.

George says: Claire can't just leave documents wherever she wants. She has her own office space and she should use it. Leaving documents everywhere makes our work space look sloppy

and unprofessional. I need to bring this to Claire's attention so that she doesn't continue behaving in this manner. Addressing this issue will improve both Claire's individual development as an employee and the overall workplace environment.

Options and Outcomes

Decision Point #1
Individuals may not understand the behavioral expectations of their environments. Decision makers may choose to access different resources to gain the information necessary to accomplish goals.

Option #1
Claire schedules a meeting with George to clarify workplace policies.

Claire says: I need to understand what George's expectations are in order to succeed under his supervision. Setting up a meeting with him will demonstrate my responsibility, even if I don't agree with how he spoke to me. If I don't make this mistake again, he won't use a disrespectful tone when speaking to me.

George says: This meeting will give me an opportunity to make sure that Claire isn't confused about her responsibilities at work. I have a lot of work to do, but the time spent meeting will be worth it in the long run as I won't have to repeat myself about these small issues.

Option #2
Claire talks to her coworkers about George's management style.

Claire says: By talking to my coworkers, I will gain information about what George wants from his employees. I'd rather do this than talk directly to George so that I don't have to deal the potential of his rude attitude. I might also have the opportunity to vent my frustration with George's tone of voice, if my coworkers have had similar experiences with George.

George says: It's better for Claire to get the facts from "the horse's mouth" than hear a third-hand version of my expectations. I have a hands-on leadership style, and I need to have open communication with all of my team members. Our company is very small, and a lack of communication will impact our business.

Decision Point #2:

Power dynamics can impact decision making when interpersonal conflicts occur. Individuals must consider both the potential costs and benefits of their actions before responding to such an event.

Option #1

Claire meets with George to express her feeling that he used an inappropriate tone.

Claire says: My instinct is telling me to directly address George's choice of tone. If I don't say anything now, he will just keeping talking to me like this, and I can't be productive with that kind of supervisor. I use an unemotional tone so that I sound professional. If I am obviously emotional, my statement won't persuade him to change.

George says: I appreciate that Claire was direct enough to tell me if she was feeling uncomfortable or upset. I didn't mean to make her feel like she wasn't capable, and I don't want to have poor relationships with my supervisees.

Option #2

Claire doesn't follow up with George about their interaction and removes the papers from the conference room.

Claire says: If I bring up George's tone as a problem, I don't know how he will react. He might not understand where I'm coming from or get angry. Our meeting will just become a confrontation and will only have a negative outcome. I could get reprimanded or even fired. It's better if I just do what he says and try to figure out other possible issues on my own.

George says: I think our meeting helped clarify my expectations for Claire. I'm glad that I was direct with her and quickly addressed the problem. If I hadn't said anything, she wouldn't have known that the papers were even a problem.

CMU Student Resources
https://www.cmu.edu/current-students/

<u>Have you accessed any of these resources?</u>

- ❏ Academic Development (https://www.cmu.edu/acadev/)
- ❏ The Bridge: Student Organizations and Events (https://thebridge.cmu.edu)
- ❏ Career and Professional Development Center (https://www.cmu.edu/career/)
- ❏ Center for Student Diversity and Inclusion (https://www.cmu.edu/student-diversity/index.html)
- ❏ CMU-Alert Emergency Notification System (https://www.cmu.edu/alert/)
- ❏ CMU University Policies (https://www.cmu.edu/policies/index.html)
- ❏ Computing Services (https://www.cmu.edu/computing/start/students.html)
- ❏ Counseling and Psychological Services (https://www.cmu.edu/counseling/)
- ❏ Division of Student Affairs (https://www.cmu.edu/student-affairs/)
- ❏ Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence (https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/)
- ❏ Fellowships and Scholarships Ofiice (https://www.cmu.edu/fso/)
- ❏ Gelfand Center (https://www.cmu.edu/gelfand/)
- ❏ Global Communication Center (https://www.cmu.edu/gcc/)
- ❏ The Hub: Division of Enrollment Services (https://www.cmu.edu/hub/index.html)
- ❏ Intercultural Communication Center (https://www.cmu.edu/icc/)
- ❏ Office of Disability Resources (https://www.cmu.edu/disability-resources/index.html)
- ❏ Parking and Transportation Services (https://www.cmu.edu/parking/)
- ❏ Spirituality and Interfaith Initiatives (https://www.cmu.edu/student-affairs/spirituality/)
- ❏ Student Financial Services (https://www.cmu.edu/sfs/)
- ❏ Student Government (https://www.cmu.edu/stugov/)
- ❏ Student Leadership, Involvement, and Civic Engagement (SLICE) (https://www.cmu.edu/student-affairs/slice/)
- ❏ Undergraduate Research Office (https://www.cmu.edu/uro/)
- ❏ University Health Services (https://www.cmu.edu/health-services/)

Interview and Think Tank Participants

Theresa Abalos - Student, CMU

Laurence Ales - Head of Undergraduate Research for Economics

Jorge Alvarez - Junior, Professional Writing

Kathleen Conway - Counselor for Economics students at CMU

Barbara Coyne - Childcare Specialist

Hadrian Demaioribus - Student, CMU

Riva Fouzdar - Junior, Business

Elizabeth Fulton - Sophomore, Computational Neuroscience

Sarah Gallagher - Social Media Director

Chanelle Greene - MA, Literary and Cultural Studies

Michael Jacobs - Junior, Material Science

Elizabeth Koch - Associate Director of SLICE

Manuel Lopez - Senior, Information Systems

Kody Manke - Psychology Professor at CMU

McKenzie Melvin - Sophomore at Bridgewater College, International Relations and Public Policy

Liz Morneault - MA, Sociology

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Maria Poznahovska - PhD student, Rhetoric, CMU

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Annie Rucker - MA Professional Writing, CMU

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