

Recognizing Emotional Labor in Academia

As institutions fail to meet the needs of minoritized and traumatized students, the faculty members who work to fill the gaps should be acknowledged, argues Julie Shayne.

By [Julie Shayne](#) September 15, 2017

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I ended last academic year on a high induced by the pride from watching my students graduate and the appreciation communicated via hugs, selfies, gifts and cards. Yet while academic accomplishments like graduation are visible to most folks, other acts are seemingly smaller and often only noticed by students and the faculty members who supported them.

It is the structurally and institutionally marginalized students whose successes often require substantial emotional labor on the part of faculty and staff members. Experience shows that these students feel most comfortable with those of us who are also minoritized, as well as those of us who teach about injustice and communicate solidarity in the classroom.

Emotional labor is about supporting students as they experience alienation, marginalization and trauma, which prevent them from working to their full potential. Faculty members who perform emotional labor have open-door policies for our hurting students. When students show up clearly in need of support, even if we are buried in course prep, tomorrow's conference presentation or article deadlines, we take them in, listen and often offer tissues. Through our listening, we hear how our institutions are failing to meet the needs of minoritized and traumatized students. Emotional laborers then work to fill those gaps, ideally through long-term changes so students have more than individual and temporary solutions to structurally embedded problems.

Typically, tasks that fall in the emotional labor category have no clear location on our CVs. The efforts of faculty of color are even further minimized, as people presume that their support of their own communities is natural or self-serving and thus not work. (In contrast, the efforts of white professors are probably at least noticed by those around them.) Although our labor is rewarded by students' gratitude and successes, our institutions largely ignore it.

How do we make our institutions value such emotional labor? As a white cisgender woman, considered senior in some academic circles, I feel compelled to use my white cis privilege and institutional status to try to answer this question.

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Emotional laborers know the work involved in supporting our students so that those students can not only finish college but also thrive during and beyond their college careers. Many students start college feeling entirely entitled to

be in school, oblivious to their unearned privilege, whereas others feel completely alienated. Those alienated students include, for example, first-generation ones who went to high schools with guidance counselors who didn't even mention college. Students who were sexually assaulted by fellow students who remain enrolled and live in their dorms. Undocumented immigrants who worry about their daily security. Muslim women who share public spaces with emboldened white supremacists and Islamophobes. Single mothers without affordable child care. Transgender students who strategize their bathroom breaks because the only gender-neutral bathroom is far from their classrooms. And so on. The social locations of the aforementioned students are the result of intersecting layers of structural injustice, which often intensifies their need for emotional support.

What does this labor look like? This partial list is an amalgam of tasks that I have performed and those that I know my colleagues have. We do this work because institutions are failing our students, so faculty members must ultimately provide the services our campuses should.

- We advocate for our students. When we see people use our students' tragedies and "diversity" to market the campus, we confront them and tell them they must let the featured students vet and approve the materials; they cannot manipulate the students' stories into tearjerkers to inspire donors and others.
- We exert pressure on our administrations to provide resources. Survivors of sexual assault are chronically betrayed and retraumatized by institutions more concerned with lawsuits and damage to their images than with making sure students feel safe on campus. Faculty members empirically document the absence of and need for services and present the data to the administration with demands for more money and infrastructure.
- We support our students in their efforts to create diversity centers. Faculty members use their courses as organizational locales and their ability to communicate in administrations speak to help navigate the long and painful process of establishing campus diversity centers.
- We challenge colleagues who let classroom microaggressions go unchallenged. Doing that requires workshops, trainings and shared resources that we organize and assemble.
- We create spaces that remind our students, especially our immigrant students, of home. We make "their" food, especially because it is "our" food, and eat it together, conversing in the students' first language.

Needless to say, all of this work takes time and emotional energy that ultimately prevents us from doing the academic work that our institutions value more. Furthermore, as my colleague at the University of Washington Bothell [Mira Shimabukuro](#) pointed out in a casual exchange about this topic, "Minoritized faculty are performing all of this labor while navigating both microaggressive assaults and the effects of institutionalized oppressions on themselves." And this labor does not stop. We cannot unlearn our students' pain, especially as we are experiencing our own versions right beside them.

What should institutions do to value emotional labor? I see a three-pronged approach: institutional support, senior faculty calling attention to this invisible labor and junior faculty developing an evidence-based language for tenure and promotion dossiers.

Institutionally: We need money for support resources, diversity centers, victim advocates for survivors of sexual and intimate partner violence, legal advocates for undocumented students, trainings about microaggressions, gender-neutral bathrooms, on-campus child care, and on and on. The money is obviously materially necessary, but it also makes an institutional statement that says, "Marginalized students, we hear, see and respect you. And faculty emotional laborers, we value the work you do, but the burden should not be shouldered by one compassionate professor at a time."

Senior faculty: We need to initiate conversations about tenure and promotion to make this highly hidden labor "count" professionally. For institutions that have faculty awards for teaching and mentoring, this sort of labor must be acknowledged as a form of mentoring. Other institutions could create such an award or other forms of recognition.

Also, when senior faculty members are in the room for personnel reviews, we must speak on behalf of our colleagues. We must remind the people who are unfamiliar with this labor that much of it happens off the clock (as if that is a thing in academe!) and at the expense of our other work. And we need to say this over and over. We need to tell our deans and department chairs that our colleague who is already overburdened with hidden emotional labor cannot be asked to do another service task, that she is already doing much more than her CV communicates.

Junior faculty: When we talk about our teaching, mentoring and service, we need to explain this labor with the assumption that reviewers have no idea that it is happening and how important it is to students' retention and how time-consuming it is. As we know, such claims must be substantiated with evidence: letters of support from students and faculty members, the resources and "tool kits" we provide for our colleagues, and perhaps even photos of our community-building events with students.

As a feminist social justice activist in the academy, I see my primary task as supporting students who inhabit social locations with more closed than open doors. I am deeply [honored that students trust me](#) enough to share the pains they are hiding from most people in their lives. My office door is always open to my hurting students and, for better or worse, I take their pain home with me. But institutions, especially those that claim to be "fostering diversity," must acknowledge this emotional labor.

