Reconsidering Approaches to Advising Male Engineering Students and Implications for Inclusivity

The intention of this GIFTS paper is to encourage engineering advising professionals to reflect upon their practice with engineering students who are not from unrepresented groups and consider how we might better advise this population. Although this topic may seem counter to the conference theme of diversity and inclusion, this paper will demonstrate how reframing our advising practice with students from the majority population in engineering education has the potential to contribute to more inclusive advising practices overall.

Understanding the importance of diversity among engineering students, advising professionals are generally mindful to consider the unique challenges faced by students from underrepresented groups and how students’ backgrounds and identities affect their academic experiences. However, because the majority of our students are straight, white, cisgender males, advisors may be less aware of how their backgrounds and identities affect their academic experiences. Although unintentional, treating white male engineering students as our “standard” students and students from underrepresented groups as our “special” students further normalizes the white male standard in engineering education.

This complex subject should be explored from a variety of perspectives. However, with the goal of improving advising practices this GIFTS paper will focus on three main concepts. The overarching framework will emphasize the importance of adviser self-awareness of the tendency to categorize students into groups of “standard” engineering students and “special”
engineering students. This is not to suggest a “colorblind” approach to engineering advising, but rather to actively shift our expectations of the characteristics of a “typical” engineering student.

Secondly, it will introduce the concept of heteronormative masculinity and examine how restrictive gender role expectations have the potential to negatively impact a student’s academic success in engineering education. Examples of advising conversations with students will illustrate this point.

Finally, this GIFTS paper will present strategies for engaging this student population in more meaningful advising conversations. Techniques will be shared to help advisors self-identify advising practices that stem from traditional gender stereotypes. It will recommend ways that advisers can take students’ unique backgrounds and identities into consideration and how that practice may lead to more robust advising relationships and increased student support. It will conclude by suggesting how these advising practices may be applied to students from various backgrounds to support a goal of diversity and inclusion in engineering education.

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