

What Can I Do?

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What Academic Advisors Can Do to Strengthen the Impact of Utah Girls and Women

UTAH **WOMEN & LEADERSHIP** Project

Utah is full of engaged, passionate individuals who frequently ask the question, “What can I personally and/or professionally do to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women?” To provide specific answers to that question, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP)** hosted a series of “think tank” gatherings to collect best practices for various stakeholders interested in supporting and empowering Utah women.

This idea sheet is based on a 2019 gathering of 25 university academic advisors. Female college students in Utah face unique challenges and have lagged their national peers in terms of college completion. Informed academic advisors are well-positioned to help Utah women gain the many lifelong benefits that come from finishing a college degree.

RAISING AWARENESS

Effective college or university advisors will find ways to raise awareness of both the need for and the benefits of higher education. Research has shown that many women in Utah fail to recognize the broad value of a college degree, and/or do not believe they will be engaged in the labor force. As advisors have a clear understanding of why college is so important, they can spread this message at work and in the broader community:

- Become familiar with and share the many reasons **why women should graduate from college**, including enhanced outcomes in these areas: economics, parenting, health/wellbeing, civic and community engagement, intellectual/cognitive, and self-development.
- Contribute to a larger cultural conversation that values postsecondary education for women, and encourage visible community leaders to share this message; coordinate this outreach through other campus partners, such as recruiting and continuing education.

- Be deliberate in conversations about college aspirations with girls and young women (e.g., “when,” not “if,” you go to college, and include higher education in conversations about life plans and goals).
- Convey confidence in female students by highlighting possibilities, identifying opportunities, setting goals, and raising aspirations.
- Educate students about women’s labor force participation rates and the high likelihood that Utah women will spend many years in paid employment; reinforce the idea of integration (you can be both a “professional” and a “mom”).

CAPACITY BUILDING

The college years can be a powerful window for learning and growth. Yet, because girls’ confidence dips during adolescence, many women may not recognize their own talents, gifts, or potential. Academic advisors can provide a new perspective on students’ strengths and suggest avenues for development, as well as draw attention to the growth opportunities available both on campus and elsewhere:

- Assist students in identifying and gaining proficiency in the fundamental skills and abilities that are essential for college success, including setting and reaching goals, time management, problem solving, facing and overcoming challenges, learning by trial and error, accepting failure, and building resilience.

- Become educated about challenges that are more common for women (e.g., body image issues, perfectionism, gender discrimination, sexual harassment/violence), and provide instruction and tools to help women address them.
- Consider offering life-skills courses focusing on non academic issues of concern to students, including communication, financial literacy, growth versus fixed mindset, conflict resolution, and career planning.
- Be prepared to counterbalance and reframe the negative messages women may hear as they seek to finish their degrees, especially those pursuing fields where women are underrepresented.
- Look for ways to “nudge” or “tap” women for opportunities they may not have considered (e.g., graduate school, stretch employment, leadership roles).
- Teach students about mentoring: how to identify, engage, and learn from mentors, and then how to become mentors themselves.
- Help students to find and build professional networks comprising both men and women.
- Take advantage of relevant training opportunities (e.g., understanding unconscious bias, creating and using inclusive messaging and language, providing support for students with intersectional identities who face increased discrimination).
- Support and mentor other advisors; learn from each other’s challenges and successes.
- Serve as role models for students, especially female advisors who can model excelling in a profession but also managing other life priorities.
- Embrace the opportunity to be an advocate and leader; collaborate with other advisors, lobby for needed resources, and elevate the profession overall.

CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT

Finally, college advisors can engage the entire campus community in their efforts to maximize female students’ success. From enlisting the support of top leaders to identifying specialty programs, advisors can extend their influence as they do the following:

- Push for a strong “tone from the top” by asking department chairs, deans, and top administrators to openly acknowledge the challenges female students face, voice their encouragement, and create and implement effective supports and solutions.
- Work to raise gender awareness among faculty and staff members; offer trainings, identify blind spots, and invite all to commit to improving outcomes for women students.
- Propose the creation of an inclusion committee to devise strategies and facilitate change.
- Become familiar with programs, organizations, and opportunities across campus that will benefit women; be willing to create new initiatives when gaps or deficits become apparent, and build and sustain communities where women are supported.
- Partner with offices that manage campus safety concerns; ensure students know how to report problems.
- Engage male allies (students and employees) to learn, advocate, mentor, advise, and empower women.
- Support programs that address the logistical challenges many women face, including access to childcare, mental health services, and flexible scheduling and remote options.
- Share positive messaging and success stories, highlighting the achievements of female students, employees, and others who are making an impact.

FAMILY SUPPORT

Experienced advisors understand that most students need familial encouragement in order to graduate. Utah has the youngest average marriage age in the nation, meaning that female students will often need the support of spouses, as well as other family members. There are various ways academic advisors can facilitate this type of assistance:

- Welcome engagement from parents and other family members while still emphasizing that the student herself is the key decision-maker (e.g., pose questions and ideas directly to her).
- Assess familial concerns from the earliest conversations with students; provide relevant data for students to share, and instruct them on how to initiate difficult conversations that may increase family support.
- Find ways to educate stakeholders about the importance of women’s college education; invite husbands to be advocates for their wives and to prioritize education for both partners.
- Offer classes/trainings on family dynamics (e.g., healthy relationships, parenting), with the goal of increasing family support for women’s graduation.
- Inform students about the various ways they can continue their schooling when plans change (e.g., marriage, children, partners’ education and career moves), including online classes, distance learning, and part-time options.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Advisors recognize that the guidance they give is only as good as their own competency and expertise. Ongoing professional development for advisors is critical in terms of creating the best possible outcomes for their students:

- Become informed about the additional barriers Utah women face in terms of college completion; gather current data and statistics; stay up-to-date on the [latest research](#) on gender and postsecondary education.

CONCLUSION

Academic advisors play an important role in the lives of female college and university students, and as higher education provides a myriad of benefits that last a lifetime, an advisor’s influence can have a profound, long-lasting impact. This increased commitment to women’s college completion will benefit women themselves, but also their families, workplaces, and our state as a whole.

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