Rethinking Advising for Non-Traditional Students: Advising During a Pandemic

Associated Colleges of the South (ACS)

Summer 2021 Working Group

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Summary of project

This working group consisted of professional advisors and support staff who work primarily with non-traditional students. University of Richmond's School of Professional and Continuing Studies and Rollins College's Hamilton Holt School are evening schools geared towards adult learners, many of whom have different needs and demands on their time compared to the traditional residential students at each institution. The working group's goal was to compile a list of best practices to help advisors transition to post-pandemic advising – keeping some of the strategies we developed during the crisis, and returning to those established practices that better serve students when appropriate.

However, at the time of publication, it's clear that we have not yet reached post-pandemic status. Variants and vaccinations continue to dominate the decision-making process for educational institutions and the rest of the world. Thus, the strategies and findings below should be adapted to comply with your institution's pandemic policies.

A 2020 report by Civitas Learning notes that at least 75% of higher education students are considered non-traditional learners. Choy describes non-traditional undergraduate students as meeting at least one of the following characteristics:

1. Delayed enrollment post high school
2. Attend part time
3. Work full time
4. Considered financially independent
5. Has dependents other than a spouse
6. Is a single parent
7. Does not have a high school diploma

The majority of students served by Holt and SPCS, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, meet more than one of these characteristics. These students have different needs and a different relationship with their institutions than traditional residential students. While conventional advising models and resources may serve these students, additional considerations will certainly make advising more effective and efficient for non-traditional students and adult learners.

Over the past year and a half, we have asked students to adapt to new learning styles, new technology, and new policies. Faculty have offered flexible teaching and grading methods, campus services have increased online support options, and students have balanced school, work, and life in a largely virtual environment. In many cases, the start of the 2021-2022 academic year will see us rolling back some of those modifications and returning to a more traditional educational model.

The role of academic advisor is especially important right now, as policies and processes fluctuate. Advisors are, in large part, in the business of information referral. We make sure students know where to go to find answers and resources, which means we must be experts in knowing who to talk to, even if that changes often.

The changes to higher education, and indeed the world, forced by the COVID-19 pandemic have put us in the unique and fortunate position to implement and maintain significant changes in the ways we work with students. Over a series of meetings and small-group breakouts, the working group identified three key themes to frame the discussion about advising non-traditional students in a post-pandemic environment: managing expectations, creating efficiencies, and rising to the challenge. While some of these approaches may also be useful for working with traditional residential students, our focus is on advisors working with students who live off campus, work full- or part-time, and attend evening classes.

The ultimate conclusion was simple: meet students where they are. However, while our findings did include some strategies for students, the true emphasis was on how to be more efficient, effective advisors.

Advisors and support staff should keep a few things in mind as they consider changes. The answers to these questions will be different for each institution.

- First, what high-impact practices can you implement to do the most good for the most number of students?
- Second, how can you support advisees who are already marginalized, such as first-generation students, students who need disability accommodations, or students who may not have access or funding for the resources they need to succeed?
- Finally, will you need buy-in from supervisors, deans, program faculty, or other approvers? While many changes can be implemented at no or low cost, others will require a financial commitment. Consider what will make the biggest difference to your students before you ask for funding.

Goals and learning objectives

The goal of the project was to identify practical strategies for helping non-traditional students navigate through the pandemic. While traditional residential students have a slew of dedicated resources at their disposal, adult learners and evening school students typically have multiple constraints that keep them from using campus services, including time, location, part-time status, and limited campus engagement by choice or opportunity.

Part of this goal was achieved by recognizing resources and gaps common to institutions with a continuing education division. Additionally, we thought specifically about the work of advising, and how advisors could leverage their own time and resources to work more effectively. Finally, we wanted to put the work of higher ed institutions into context in the larger discussion of returning to work post-pandemic, gathering insight from other fields to inform our research and compile our best practices.

Meetings and structure

The group originally scheduled three meetings for talking through common advising and student support issues. The first meeting was primarily brainstorming and discussion about the biggest concerns and changes we had seen throughout the pandemic. In the second meeting, we narrowed down our focus to three main themes that encompassed most of the discussion points, then broke up into smaller groups to analyze each theme more thoroughly. Small groups continued to work until the final meeting, when each group reported back about their research, findings, and strategies.

Value of discussion

The collaboration and networking was very helpful to contextualize issues at our respective institutions, as well as in the higher education industry as a whole. We found many commonalities between our student populations; past and current program offerings; and types of resources available to us as staff, as well as for our students. Hearing about how another institution was handling the pandemic was enlightening, particularly the details of day-to-day operations in the advising and support roles.

Across the board, it seems that a primary goal of academic advisors is moving from transactional advising to intrusive advising. That is, rather than being only information referrers who connect students with the registrar, financial aid, career services, etc., advisors would take on a more holistic support role. Of course, that is with the understanding that some support requires additional education or training. The Creating Efficiencies section of the report and handout aims to address some of the repetitive tasks that take up large parts of the workday, freeing up time to take on work that is more impactful.

Impact of project

This final product aims to offer quick, practical tactics to implement in the short- and long-term as well as a deeper understanding of the issues advisors and non-traditional students face. Combining the two sets of results aligns with the overall goal of more holistic advising; addressing the efficiencies allows room for more substantial thought and support. Worksheets for the Creating Efficiencies and Rising to the Challenge themes are available in the appendix. Because Managing Expectations is more theoretical than practical, we do not provide a tip sheet for that theme. However, the report does address the findings from that working group discussion. We also found that there were overlapping strategies or conclusions between two or even all three themes, further supporting the idea that effective advising integrates a variety of skills and strategies.

Three Themes for Pandemic Advising

1. Managing Expectations
2. Creating Efficiencies
3. Rising to the Challenge

Managing Expectations

One major facet of advising during the pandemic has been managing expectations for students and for advisors. What can we provide and where can we contribute to student learning and experience? How have students' and administrations' expectations of student advising changed as we move towards a post-pandemic student experience?

Student expectations

Students seem to expect that there will be different modes of delivery including hybrid, online and in person. As can be expected, these are institutional decisions, and advisors must simply share the options, or guide the students to where they can view the different delivery mode options on the schedule.

If the institution is not offering multiple teaching modalities, advisors should communicate the institution's policy towards delivery modes. Advisors should also communicate student feedback to the appropriate departments, particularly regarding student concerns about physical and mental health and safety. Transparency is important here, and advisors should be aware of the reasons behind limited delivery modes so they can articulate the appropriate message. Understanding the institution's mission and commitment to student learning may make it easier to have tough conversations – even if you aren't giving students all the background information that went into the decision.

Based on this past year, students have the expectation that flexible deadlines will continue. While it might be realistic to keep some of these changes, some deadlines and policies will revert to stricter pre-pandemic models. Advisors and support staff may want to suggest that messaging come from either a school or departmental level to signal the move back to pre-pandemic expectations.

This suggestion is timeless, but bears repeating: advisors should encourage students to be proactive with their communication and work directly with their professors. While advisors can and do serve as liaisons when necessary, the student's initial outreach should be to the instructor. If students still aren't getting the support they need, then they can turn to advisors. Advisors need to ensure that their students are aware of the proper order to seek assistance.

With the influx of virtual meetings, chats, content management systems, and more, it can be helpful to reach out to students on various platforms, particularly for crucial information. For example, the institution's social media pages, and texts through content management systems, may be unitized in addition to email communications With multiple communication avenues, advisors can proactively inform students of upcoming deadlines throughout the semester. Increase availability in various modes, virtual and in-person, to meet with students during peak times during the semester (registration, add/drop, etc.).

Since much of an advisor's interaction with students moved to remote vs in-person appointments, many students have the expectation that advisors should be available 24/7 online. How do we manage this expectation?

Later in the report we address some specific ideas for providing flexible appointments, but two good things to remember are: use technology (self-scheduling feature, chat bot, FAQ) and establish boundaries (i.e., don't take student appointments at 10 pm or on weekends unless that's part of your regular work schedule).

Students continue to require a high level of assistance from advisors, and with good reason: advising is crucial to student success. Advisors are expected to:

- Connect with students on a personal level
- Offer opportunities in multiple formats (live online, in person, via email) for students to engage with campus resources
- Target and connect with students who are not succeeding as soon as possible
    - This may involve sending outreach emails to faculty to help identify students in need
- Be informed about students' needs and goals
- Use student-centered language, not school jargon, to help students navigate the services and academic journey.

In a nutshell, students expect advisors to be the first stop for all information and questions, and they may need more outreach from and connection to their advisors than they needed in the past. Karmelita writes, "It is imperative that the advising relationship move from simply helping students schedule classes to helping adult learners utilize available resources and make sense of their educational journeys."

To set advisees up to succeed, then, advisors must state their own expectations. Chief among them is the expectation that students take an active role in their own success. Early on in the advising relationship, give the students the information they need – then make sure they know it's in their best interest to come prepared. Ask them to review those details before you meet. Some helpful tutorials you might include are how to check the course schedule, how to read and interpret the degree audit, how to register for classes, or even how to make or cancel an advising appointment.

When possible, use already-established links and resources to populate an FAQ page or student success page. Integrating with campus partners such as the library, registrar, financial aid, IT help desk, and other offices means you're not reinventing the wheel. Instead, you're serving as an information referrer, and freeing up time for more substantial advising work.

<u>Administration's expectations</u>

In addition to students' expectations of advisors during and after the pandemic, we must also be aware of our own institutions' expectations. Administrations can reasonably expect advisors to take a student-driven approach to their work and to be up to date on school policies, industry standards, and best practices for their field.

If possible, even just within your team, take time to assess how things have been working during the pandemic. Lovelace suggests an AAR – an after-action report – but, as noted, we're not quite after the action. That doesn't mean we can't think about how things are going, what's working and what isn't, and how we can improve. It may be helpful to think specifically about individual or team goals, and whether those are still realistic and reasonable.

If goals or processes do need to change, Solomon suggests a few tips for moving forward. First, reimagine what success looks like – it may be different now. Keep patience and understanding at the forefront of discussions. Moreover, be willing to be flexible, like we have asked of our advisees. There is an opportunity here for a better way of working. Although we might not necessarily be in decision-maker roles at an institutional level, we may be able to help shape our own teams' futures.

Part of the challenge is the administration's desire to move back to pre-pandemic standard in person office hours to match the rest of the university. Yet we have found that remote advising during non-traditional hours for our non-traditional students has been really effective and does not require advisors to physically be in the office from 9 to 5. If possible, work with administration to adjust scheduling availability to meet students where they are.

Creating Efficiencies

During the pandemic, students and employees alike were asked to be flexible and accommodating while institutions figured out how to provide quality instruction and support. One of the biggest and best changes to emerge from the past 16 months is the increase in access to and adoption of key technological resources.

Many of those platforms and resources need institutional buy-in and/or support. Rather than recommend specific platforms, the working group focused on strategies that advisors may be able to implement to maximize efficiency and ease the advisor workload while serving students at the same level – or better – than before the pandemic hit.

The worksheet (see appendix) provides short- and long-term solutions we found particularly effective. These tactics fall into two general categories: automating processes and leveraging technology. They may require an initial investment of time and planning, but should save time in the end.

Developing and documenting processes upfront provides several benefits, the most obvious being that it eliminates guesswork about what steps to follow, allowing you to focus on other work. Process documentation also ensures a consistent and equitable approach to dealing with issues; allows the work to be done by someone other than the primary task owner; and provides a template for later automating the process, which can help save additional time.

Specific processes and procedures that may be useful to automate or digitize include degree audits (particularly through specialized, integrated platforms your institution may use); forms and approval pathways; scheduling appointments; and resource access including FAQ pages, auto-responses via email or chat bot, and templates for any communications that are sent regularly.

When thinking about what you might be able to automate, Deshpande's considerations may be relevant. Can you improve on any of these areas?

- Redundancy/repetition (e.g. the same information being entered multiple times)
- Manual tasks (e.g. copying and pasting information, formatting and reformatting, sorting information)
- Wasted resources (e.g. paper forms where digital could be used, space taken up by physical storage)
- Employee satisfaction with current workflow (e.g. complaints, recommendations)
- Communication issues (e.g. scheduling, notifications, channels used to communicate)
- Barriers to success (e.g. avoidable bottlenecks and delays)
- Overall efficiency

Do be mindful, though, of how automation can lead to depersonalization. This may undo some of the positive, time-saving effects you gain from streamlining. Ensuring that your message shows concern for the students' wellbeing or encourages a growth mindset can help you connect with the student even when you use a template or automated communication (*Playbook*, 2020). In fact, a 2020 study showed that twice as many students preferred messaging that incorporated a growth mindset over simply an appreciative advising model.

Also recognize that for some students, the hands-off approach is preferable. Particularly in programs with a clear path to graduation, there will always be students who don't demand much of your time. Continue to check in and offer support, but understand that limited contact doesn't always signify a problem.

With many folks returning to in-person education or work, consider how you can remain efficient while occasionally eliminating screens. Advising appointments don't have to be held in your office during regular business hours. In fact, non-traditional students are often working during the day, so coming to campus for an advising meeting means time off, travel, and other inconveniences. Phone calls and virtual meetings certainly help, but there are other options as well. Meet the students where they are – literally – by holding appointments in academic buildings just before classes start for the evening. Or, try a group advising approach to cut down on repeating information – and build relationships among students in the same major or course path.

Another way to increase efficiency is to identify in advance what decisions need additional approval, and have those conversations before the issue arises when possible. For example, if you expect a course to reach capacity, can the program chair or instructor authorize you in advance to issue overrides for a student or two? In their report on lessons learned from COVID, the Lumina Foundation notes:

> As higher education institutions scrambled to move rapidly from face-to-face to online education and remote work, many leaders saw value in increasing efforts to decentralize decision-making. By trusting and empowering administrators and instructors, allowing them to find practical and innovative solutions to challenges, progress often came more quickly.

Overall, understanding your students and your institution will allow you to make the most meaningful changes. Again, focusing on both short-term solutions and long-term gains will allow you to continue to evolve and improve, and to prepare for the next crisis.

Rising to the Challenge

Non-traditional students often engage differently with their institutions than residential students. Evening classes, part-time schedules, and being removed from day-to-day campus life means these students may not feel as connected to or valued by the school. The lack of community, plus confusion over what resources are available to them, can result in these students feeling isolated or disinterested, which may in turn make it harder to advance through their programs.

Two ways to combat this and set students up to succeed are building community and identifying resources. (See appendix for a handy worksheet.)

Laura Marcus argues that “Educational community is the very best thing that the residential college offers,” essential to a student’s holistic growth. It makes sense that extending that community to non-traditional students can only improve their collegiate experience. Marcus outlines a framework for developing an educational community, including: cohorts; shared intellectual experience; experiential opportunities; diversity (most of the time); and a shared background (the rest of the time). She also touts the benefits of shared meals, or even shared living spaces – which is great for residential students, but what about adult learners?

The working group’s strategies for building community fall along those same lines. One particular recommendation is a designated space on campus for commuter students to work and network with their classmates in an informal setting. Peer mentoring programs and student representative opportunities on school committees, such as a student government association, allow students to make personal connections across campus. Holding events at practical times, open house-style and open to the family, shows that you see the whole person, not just the student.

Open communication is fundamental to building community. There is value in transparency, but students don’t always need to know what is going on behind the scenes. Along those lines, while sometimes it’s easier just to point students exactly where they need to go to find information – as noted in the Creating Efficiencies section – in some cases you’re better off simply guiding students to the answer rather than handing it over. Holistic advising comes into play again here: encouraging the student to find information on their own builds skills that go beyond the classroom. However, it’s always good to confirm that the students’ interpretation is correct; you don’t want to send them off with a misunderstanding of what they need to do next.

Another part of the communication pipeline is frequent opportunities for student feedback on class content, learning modalities, availability of resources, and the work of the advisor. Much like faculty will implement regular surveys over the course of the semester, asking for feedback allows you to tweak your approach and offer dynamic advising for different students. When students feel heard, they are more likely to remain engaged.

Identifying resources is also critical for the non-traditional student population, and the best way to do that is to be deliberate and intentional when communicating.

Encourage your advisees to take advantage of events and resources that are open to them. Lecture series, lunchtime discussion groups, certain student organizations, even sporting events may feel like they are for a different kind of student. When appropriate, remind non-traditional students that they are a valued part of the institution and that these campus activities are for them as well.

Students might also need a nudge to take advantage of academic services such as peer tutors or writing consultants, especially when traditional-age students staff those positions. It can be uncomfortable taking direction or feedback from someone younger. When possible, work with these campus partners to identify or develop a service specifically for non-traditional students. Career advising is another area where students benefit from having a dedicated representative; adult learners are typically in a different phase of their career and will need specialized guidance.

Also, consider what resources students may need, but may be reluctant to pursue. Financial anxiety, food insecurity, lack of technology, and limited access to mental health services are all sensitive issues that may have developed or increased during the pandemic. If your institution has systems in place to address these issues, make sure advisees are aware of how to get help. Confidentiality will be key here, so creating any easily accessible resource webpage will allow students to seek assistance while maintaining anonymity.

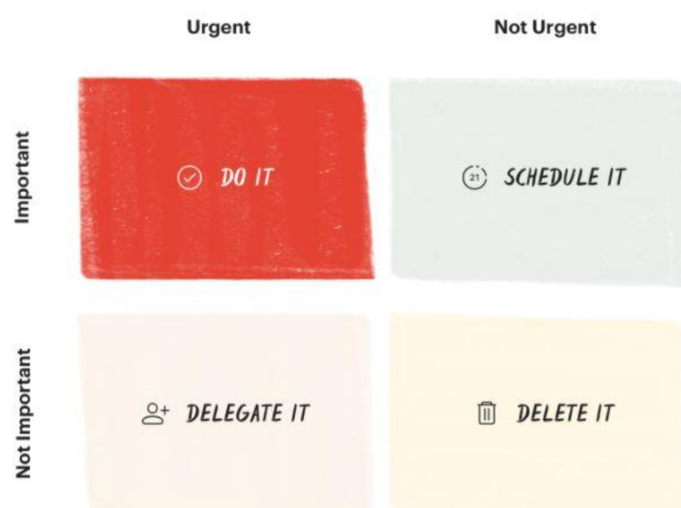
As these are fundamental needs for the student, you can be direct with your information referral. You will want to avoid creating any additional barriers to students getting the support they need.

One final consideration in helping students rise to the challenge is how advisors themselves can be prepared to succeed post-pandemic. We’ve all heard the clichés: put on your own oxygen mask first, before helping others. You can't pour from an empty cup. But clichés exist for a reason, because they're usually true.

Self-care is part of this, of course, and the internet is awash with articles and ideas on how to take time for yourself. But the job is still there, the work is not going away, and there are steps you can take to get things done without sacrificing yourself.

The work-life balance shifted for many of us during the pandemic; sometimes that resulted in increased productivity, but sometimes it meant feeling as though we lived at work rather than working from home. Establishing or re-negotiating boundaries will be essential to leaving work at work, particularly as advisors continue to offer more flexible meeting times and locations. While we always want to maintain our focus around the student experience, we must retain those boundaries that make it possible to do our jobs well.

Prioritizing tasks is another key element of maintaining balance. Determine what must be done, and when, to plan your day, week, semester and beyond. The Eisenhower Matrix is a great tool for this practice, dividing tasks into urgent/not urgent and important/not important.



Additionally, consider whether there are avenues for staff to share thoughts and concerns – perhaps confidentially – with supervisors as well as the administration. In the same way that student feedback is valuable as we do our jobs, having a way to communicate with decision-makers on campus allows advisors and support staff to share priorities and roadblocks. It empowers staff to have a voice in campus operations where appropriate.

Modeling these strategies in our own work environment helps us relate to the students we advise. When you meet with a struggling student, think about how you have handled a similar situation; not enough time in the day, competing demands, virtual fatigue, and overall burnout are common problems for everyone now, and drawing from our own experience can help us become better advisors.

Next steps

For advisors and support staff reading this document, we encourage you to review the worksheets in the appendix and consider how you might implement some of these strategies into your work. Use what tips you can to support the students you advise, understanding that not every suggestion will apply to every situation.

The working group plans to continue to meet into the 2021-2022 academic year for continued collaboration. As previously noted, the landscape of post-pandemic education is shifting all the time. The hope is that our future discussions will continue to inform us on how best to serve the students and organizations, maintaining what flexibility we can and highlighting areas for improvement as well as our successes.

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Appendix

CREATING EFFICIENCIES

EASING ADVISOR WORKLOAD WHILE IMPROVING CONVENIENCE FOR STUDENTS

The pandemic has necessitated that students become more comfortable with technology. How can academic advisors take advantage of this to create efficiencies and ease workload? What practices are taking up advisor time that could be automated? How could these changes also benefit adult and non-traditional students by making it more convenient for them to access services and advising on their own terms?

Overhauling practice takes time. Use the assessment below to identify new areas your institution might be able to create efficiencies , along with potential short- and long-term solutions.

		QUICK WINS:	LONGER-TERM SOLUTIONS:
AUTOMATE DEGREE AUDITS Can your advisees access their degree audit on demand?	**NO** →	Create a shared document that is updated at each advising session.	Explore systems that integrate with records system/catalogs to provide real-time data and minimize maintenance.
DITCH THE PAPER FORM Have you eliminated forms or processes that require non-residential students to physically come to the office, obtain signatures, or print/scan for submission?	**NO** →	Adobe Acrobat offers robust form functionality, including digital signatures.	Create automated workflows that route approvals and trigger system updates upon completion.
ELIMINATE THE EMAIL CHAIN Can students schedule advising appointments online? Are different modalities and a wide range of times available?	**NO** →	Free services are available online that offer basic scheduling and Outlook integration.	Use a system that can allow you to track and analyze appointment trends and enter appointment notes.
UTILIZE COMM PLANS Are routine advising communications automated to free up advisor time for targeted, proactive advising?	**NO** →	Build templates for reoccuring emails. Consider sending through a web service that can track open rates.	Use CRM software that allows you to build automated campaigns by population and track metrics.
24/7 RESOURCE ACCESS Do students have access to on-demand resources that can answer routine advising questions or walk them through common tasks, such as registration?	**NO** →	Create a FAQ webpage or document that is easily accessible to students.	Develop a series of short videos or tutorials and/or launch a website chatbot.
THINK OUTSIDE 1:1 ADVISING Have you explored ways to reach students outside of the hour-long, 1:1 advising appointment?	**NO** →	Offer drop-in registration advising in a heavily trafficked part of campus.	Develop group advising programming by major or program. Partner with faculty. Offer in multiple modalities.

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

The diverse and specific needs of non-traditional students can be difficult to meet. What are ways academic advisors can rise to the challenge to support and better connect this unique student population to the campus community and resources?

BUILDING COMMUNITY

- [ ] Do you have peer mentors available to work with your non-traditional students?
- [ ] Is there a space on campus designated for commuter students?
- [ ] Are your campus events offered at a variety of times?
- [ ] Do students have avenues to get involved with the larger campus community?

TRY THIS

- Peer mentors can engage with new or struggling students, sharing advice on how to utilize campus resources and inviting them to campus events.
- Create a lounge or shared space for commuter students to relax, network, do homework, or attend class. Be intentional about inviting students to use the space for community and as a resource.
- Consider establishing family-friendly events, and schedule events around work hours and class times. Drop-in or open house events may make it easier for students to participate.
- Create opportunities for students to connect outside of class. Explicitly share the message "you belong here" when promoting campus events, lectures, reading groups, etc.

IDENTIFYING RESOURCES

- [ ] Does your institution have dedicated staff to work with non-traditional or otherwise marginalized students?
- [ ] Is there a possibility of integrating existing campus resources?
- [ ] Do you have a system in place to support non-traditional students who are homeless, have financial insecurity, or or need help accessing technology and resources?

TRY THIS

- Consider having a dedicated career advisor for your non-traditional students, who are likely in a different phase of their career and have different needs than traditional students.
- Create partnerships with other departments on campus to help non-traditional students gain access to the writing center, peer tutors, counseling services, career services, etc.
- Establish a Student Support Fund where students may request funds for food, books, and other necessary items. Consider developing a FAQ/Resource page that helps students access resources while maintaining anonymity.

THE ADVISOR ROLE

- [ ] Are your advising sessions designed to holistically support students?
- [ ] Do you have tools in place to measure success for yourself and your advisees?
- [ ] Do you have a system or opportunities in place to support your advising staff—especially during times of transition and turmoil?

TRY THIS

- Go beyond logistics. Strive for a holistic advising approach that takes into account the many facets of the student's experience. Include a life skills component.
- Give your students opportunities to provide feedback at multiple points throughout the semester. Frequent touchpoints can allow students to share thoughts and concerns.
- Find the things that make you happy within your job, and take time to focus on your self-care. Determine what tasks can be delegated, or triage what is most salient to address during the workday. Set boundaries for yourself, and consider what you would tell an advisee in this situation.