

8: Problem Situations

Occasionally, special problems enter the teaching arena. Among these are teacher-student conflict, sexual harassment, and academic misconduct. Preventing problems from occurring, being aware of university and departmental policies, behaving in accordance with them, and knowing how to find support services to assist are the keys to action under problem circumstances.

Managing Conflict between Teachers and Students

Given the range of personal issues that are present in college settings, conflicts between teachers and students are likely to occur from time to time. Here are some suggestions for handling such situations:

- ❖ If the situation is occurring in class, it is wise to suggest to the disruptive student that the matter be handled outside class, if at all possible. Both the teacher and the student are apt to be affected by the presence of other students.
- ❖ In talking with a student about a problem, instructors should try to avoid immediate emotional responses. If the situation seems out of control, it is best to suggest a cooling-off period before trying to resolve the issue.
- ❖ One piece of advice that is frequently given in conflict situations is for instructors to mentally put themselves in the other person's shoes so that they can understand what seems to be motivating the behavior and what feelings are involved.
- ❖ It is important to define the reasons for the conflict as clearly as possible (e.g., Is the student disputing the grade or the format of the test? Is the problem really deeper than the issue or incident that is being raised?). Listening carefully and asking clarifying questions will help greatly in defining the issue.
- ❖ It helps for instructors to check to see that they have a good definition of the issues and understanding of the feelings by paraphrasing what the student has said and asking if the summary is correct. Distinguishing between major and minor points of disagreement is also important.
- ❖ Thinking of win-win solutions that will make both parties happy can be fostered if the student is asked to help generate ideas so that the problem is viewed as a shared issue. Some ideas will involve creative solutions that will meet both the student's and instructor's needs (e.g., free choice of lab partners rather than assignments). Sometimes the solutions will involve mutual compromise, such as partial credit for an answer or an agreement that the instructor will end class on time if the student promises not to start noisily packing up her things five minutes early.
- ❖ It is important that the instructor make sure reasons for taking stands are defensible. "Because I'm the teacher and I said so!" is not a good position.
- ❖ An instructor can go a long way toward reaching resolution by trying to explain his or her reasoning in a way that shows caring for the student.
- ❖ It is important to avoid side issues and stick to the main point of the disagreement.
- ❖ It is helpful to write down the agreement to enhance clarity and commitment. If writing is too formal for the situation, the student can be asked to feed back her or his understanding of the issue.
- ❖ Consistency is important after a decision has been reached. An instructor should avoid being pressured to renege or relent just to make peace. If a new solution occurs, however, the instructor can suggest reopening the conversation.
- ❖ If the instructor or the student are still dissatisfied, some campus offices can be involved to help resolve the issue. The Student Advocacy Center (292-1111; see Appendix) is an excellent resource for such situations.

- ❖ Ultimately, instructors have the right to ask a disruptive student to leave class on the grounds that the disruption is preventing the other students from learning. If the student refuses to leave and continues to disrupt, the instructor should ask another student to call the University Police (292-2121; see Appendix) for help.
- ❖ If the student appears violent or mentally unbalanced, instructors should not try to handle the situation but should refer the student to a support person (Counseling and Consultation, 292-5766; see Appendix). If the situation is immediately threatening, it is important to seek help from the University Police.
- ❖ Students who appear to have serious or complicated personal issues – such as paranoia or physical aggression – should be carefully and sensitively referred to professional help at Counseling and Consultation. Please refer to the following section for guidelines on how to do this.

Helping Students in Distress

University life can be stressful and at times overwhelming for undergraduate and graduate students. Instructors and staff often play critical roles in identifying and interacting with students in distress. The information that follows is designed to assist in the identification of emotionally distressed students and their referral to appropriate resources on and off campus.

General Guidelines for Assisting Students in Distress

Observe. Look for emotional and behavioral changes. Take note of behavior that appears strange, inappropriate, or unusual. Pay attention to both verbal and nonverbal communication.

Trust your gut. If you sense that something is wrong there is a good likelihood something is.

Reach out. Ask to talk with the student in private at a time when you can both focus on the problem and do not feel rushed. Be direct in expressing your concerns in a nonjudgmental manner based on your observations and perceptions. You do not need to have answers to student problems to reach out to them.

Listen. Encourage the student to respond to your concerns. Listen to both thoughts and feelings. Let the student talk.

Offer support and assistance. Your care, interest, and listening may prove pivotal in encouraging a distressed student to seek assistance. Help the student identify resources to address their concerns (see below). Respect the student's beliefs and values even if they are different from your own. Be candid with students about your limits to assist them.

Instill hope. Let the student know that things can be better.

Consult, consult, consult. The student may present concerns or situations that leaving you feeling “in over your head.” Utilize Counseling and Consultation Service clinical staff to discuss how to best respond to the student and his or her situation. This step is especially critical when a student may need emergency care (violent or disruptive behavior, loss of contact with reality, disturbed or incoherent speech, suicidal or homicidal thoughts or actions). In these situations, it is important to (1) remain calm, (2) contact the appropriate agency and have someone stay with the student while you are doing this, and (3) stay with the student until assistance arrives.

Refer when appropriate. There may be situations where referral is your best option. Circumstances that may indicate referral include:

- ❖ the problem is beyond your expertise or comfort zone
- ❖ you feel too busy or personally stretched to be able or willing to help
- ❖ personal feelings about the student or their situation impair your objectivity or ability to help
- ❖ the student conveys discomfort talking to you about the problem
- ❖ the student asks for information or assistance which you are unable to provide

It is important to help the student understand your reason for referral so they do not feel that they “are too hot to handle” or that their concerns cannot be resolved.

Follow up. It is often helpful to arrange a time to follow up with the student after you make a referral. This helps communicate your concern and interest.

Maintain. Continue to maintain clear and consistent boundaries and expectations with the student in your staff or instructor role.

Scheduling an Appointment

Students can schedule an appointment by calling Counseling and Consultation Service (CCS) at 292-5766. In most cases, it is best for students to schedule their own appointments. Students are initially scheduled for an hour intake appointment to assess their situation and offer treatment recommendations. Many students are referred for individual or group psychotherapy at CCS. Some students are referred to other campus or community resources to better meet their individual needs.

If you are particularly concerned about a student, you may encourage them to use your office phone to schedule an appointment while they are still with you. In more urgent situations, CCS makes every attempt to meet with the student the same day.

Confidentiality

Instructors and staff are often concerned about what happens to students after they refer them to CCS. This certainly is an understandable, caring reaction. However, CCS staff adhere to legal and professional confidentiality parameters. This means that CCS:

- ❖ can answer general questions regarding the referral process
- ❖ can offer information about psychological concerns in general
- ❖ can offer consultation regarding how to approach a student with your concerns
- ❖ can take information from you about a student with whom you are concerned
- ❖ is only able to share information, including appointment attendance, with signed permission from the student
- ❖ *cannot* discuss specifics of the student's situation or treatment recommendations

Emergency Situations

Emergency assistance should be sought when a student is acting in a manner that evidences potential harm to self or others. Contact one of the resources below, note that you are dealing with an emergency situation, and report the specifics of the situation as clearly as possible:

- ❖ University Police (292-2121)

- ❖ OSU/Harding Psychiatric Services (293-9600)
- ❖ NetCare Access (276-2273)

Sexual Harassment

Occasional conflict between students and instructors in the area of sexual harassment is an unfortunate possibility in an instructional setting. Many instructors and students have a difficult time identifying when their behavior is sexual or when it is unwanted by the receiver of the behavior. In the best of all worlds, people who find behavior offensive should tell the offending party immediately, but very often, this does not happen.

Sexual harassment is defined more by its impact on the receiver of the behavior and less by the intention of the individual doing the behavior. Thus, it is important for people to be aware of the possible impacts of their behaviors on those around them. The Office of Human Resources (292-1050; see Appendix) has a full brochure defining these issues and also has prepared some questions and answers that may help. The OSU Procedure Manual for Sexual Harassment is available online (<http://www.ohr.ohio-state.edu/policy/115pol.htm>).

Below are several common questions about sexual harassment and their answers:

- Q: Should instructors ever initiate or be responsive to the prospect of a personal or romantic encounter with one of their students?
- A: Although university policy does not prohibit teaching staff from dating students, most departments discourage it while the teacher-student relationship is ongoing. Instructors are advised to wait until after they have turned in their grades to remove any doubts about whether evaluation procedures are fair.

Even though instructors may have cultivated an egalitarian relationship with their students—and especially with the student they are thinking of dating—they are still in a position of power over the student. The temptation to grade unfairly is difficult to resist, and even if it is resisted the perception of favoritism might still exist.

- Q: Should instructors ever touch a student?
- A: This depends on personal style. Some people naturally use a pat on the shoulder to convey

warmth and support. It is perhaps more acceptable if instructors touch all of their students, as opposed to only those from the group of people that they might think of dating, but if they find themselves touching only certain students, their behavior may be unintentionally sexual or perceived as such by some students. It is probably safest to avoid touching.

Another issue to consider is that some people are uncomfortable being touched in any way. Be aware of the students' body language. If a student appears stressed or is continually shifting position when touched, the instructor should move away to make the student more comfortable and not repeat the action.

Q: What are some tests that instructors can use to determine if their actions or those of others are sexual and/or unwanted?

A: Two questions that can be asked are:

1. Would I want this behavior to be made completely public? For example, would I want a television news crew there recording the behavior and showing it on the evening news or at a professional conference?

2. Would I behave this way if my spouse or partner were standing next to me? Would I want someone to behave this way to my child, partner, spouse, or parent?

Handling problem situations in teaching and learning requires tact, caution, and a knowledge of university procedures and resources that can be called upon.

Interstudent Conflict in Diverse Environments

How should instructors respond to interstudent conflict? Jonathan Collett, former Faculty Coordinator at the Teaching and Learning Center at SUNY/College at Old Westbury, suggests the following:

1. Be proactive in trying to avoid such conflicts by setting ground rules in advance for appropriate ways to discuss and argue (see the subsection "Setting the Expectations and Establishing

Ground Rules" in the section "Leading Effective Discussions" in Chapter 5).

2. Deal with conflict immediately when it appears in class. The goal is to educate and change the behavior of all students. More often this will take the form of talking to one or more students outside of class, but occasionally an obvious instance will emerge in class itself. Setting the stage early in the course with an assigned reading on multicultural sensitivity makes the later discussions easier and more natural.
3. Be willing to accept high emotions and conflict as a natural and necessary accompaniment to student-centered learning (see the film *Stand and Deliver*).
4. Be clear about the limits of your role: you are needed and can be effective as a teacher/mentor more than as a friend.

Academic Misconduct

Academic misconduct is defined by Ohio State University Rules as "any activity that tends to compromise the academic integrity of the institution, or subvert the educational process (Rule 3335-31-02)." Examples include violation of program or course rules stated in the syllabus, cheating on tests, plagiarism, dishonesty in reporting research results, and alteration of grades or forms.

Davis (1993) reports that studies show that between 40 and 70 percent of all college students indicate that they have been guilty of academic dishonesty. While it is clear that instructors must promulgate rules clearly and enforce policies on academic misconduct, most scholars emphasize the importance of prevention. All instructors in their role as educators can help students understand how to recognize academic misconduct. One instructor, for example, gives students a simple song lyric line and asks them to paraphrase it. The results are then evaluated in terms of whether they constitute plagiarism or not. Davis recommends the following preventative steps:

- ❖ Make sure that students know how their performance will be evaluated.
- ❖ Develop a climate and group norms that support honesty.

- ❖ Learn to recognize signs of stress in students.
- ❖ Be sure that students have equal access to study materials.
- ❖ Make sure that students feel that they can succeed in class without dishonest behavior.
- ❖ Instructors can adopt such practices as assigning very specific paper topics, scrambling examination questions, having students discuss drafts of papers, and protecting exam security to make it difficult for students to cheat or plagiarize.

Instructors who suspect academic misconduct should document the situation in writing and in detail. The matter should not be discussed openly with others. Depending on unit policy, the chair may be notified or consulted before action is taken.

For more information about academic misconduct and disciplinary action (basic guidelines, procedure, and links), contact the Committee on Academic Misconduct (292-7262; see Appendix) or visit the committee's procedure web site (<http://www.osu.edu/offices/oaa/procedures>).