



## Top Tips for Dealing with Student Concerns

Whether we are a staff person, an instructor, coordinator, manager or dean, we inevitably have to deal with student requests or concerns at some time. While each situation may require a unique response, there are some fundamentals that help to ensure a satisfactory outcome.

### 1. Discuss concerns in person

When a student relays a concern, tell the student that the best chance for an early and positive resolution is to make an appointment to meet with the individual closest to the source of the problem. Generally, better communication occurs when concerns are discussed face-to-face and in private.

### 2. Talk about expectations early

Make an early and significant investment in clearly setting out the 'rules of the game'. Talk clearly about expectations and about consequences. When we understand our roles, rights and responsibilities clearly, everyone is in a stronger place. We all have the responsibility to help prevent misunderstandings. Taking such steps as having clear course outlines, marking schemes and providing opportunities for timely feedback can build an understanding of what is expected.

### 3. Be sensitive to the inherent power imbalance

We may not feel we are in a position of power but the student-instructor relationship is characterized by an inherent power differential. Instructors do hold the authority to make a decision that could adversely impact students. Keeping this in mind will help in delivering a measured response.

### 4. Make fair decisions

We all want to get it right the first time. Ensure that our department follows best practices when making decisions that affect students. It is important to follow all the steps to ensure that a fair decision is made. Have a solid process and follow it each time. However this should not dissuade us from being flexible, as many times there are options available if we simply allow ourselves to look for them.

### 5. Delay judgment

We often hear the same types of request from students e.g. an instructor may be approached for a grade change or a retest. Try to delay judgment until hearing what the student has to say. There may be extenuating circumstances that merit accommodation or changing a decision.

## **6. Seek the 'why'**

Students' capacity and competence to communicate clearly and concisely varies. Try to move beyond 'what' students are asking for and seek out 'why' they are asking for it. This inquiry often opens up a larger array of options that could lead to a better outcome for all involved.

## **7. Be empathic**

The way in which we apply a rule, the considerations and good intent we convey during the process and how we help students accept the decision and transition through to the next step make a vital difference to preserving the investment made by the student and the College in each other. The expression and experience of fairness are not limited solely to the outcome.

## **8. Refer students to campus resources**

In some cases, the concern that has been brought to our attention is only a small part of a much larger, more complex issue. As we delay judgment and seek out the "why," we may become aware of signs that indicate that the request itself arises from other issues, struggles and challenges the student is facing. Refer the student to resources on campus that can support them and help to explore options.

## **9. Consult and seek advice**

The same resources for students can also be resources for us. While some concerns may be very straightforward and easy to resolve, others may pose more complex issues for us, our department or the college as a whole. Don't hesitate to seek advice and consult with colleagues. At the same time of course, we need to respect the student's right to privacy.

## **10. Follow up in writing**

After the discussion, send an email to confirm what was discussed. Put in writing the terms that were agreed upon and invite the student to reach out immediately if there is any disagreement.

## **11. Help students keep their eye on the prize**

Overwhelmed students can lose sight of the prize: graduating, maintaining good relationships with the faculty, and sustaining their health and well-being. We help students move forward when we remind them to broaden their view and identify what's important, what they risk and what they might gain.

*We all can turn difficult conversations into constructive discussions.*

For more information, contact:

Kim Morgan, Ombudsperson

Phone: 475-6209

Email: [ombuds@confederationc.on.ca](mailto:ombuds@confederationc.on.ca)