

RESPONDING TO DISTURBING CONTENT IN STUDENTS' WORK

COMMON QUESTIONS • INDICATIONS • CONSULTATION • SUGGESTIONS • OTHER RESOURCES

IN AN EMERGENCY

If a student directly threatens himself or herself or someone else, or otherwise behaves bizarrely, immediate attention is needed. Call:

- University Police at 607-777-2393 or 911 (from an on-campus phone).
- University Counseling Center at 607-777-2772
Call the University Police to reach a counselor if it is after 5 p.m.
- Decker Student Health Services Center at 607-777-2221.

Faculty and teaching assistants often seek consultation regarding disturbing comments or revelations in student writings or artwork. Such content often includes self-disclosure about abuse or trauma, bizarre content in e-mail messages, dangerous threats or pronouncements, or art work reflective of traumatic events or violence. Students in question may or may not also exhibit bizarre or disruptive classroom behavior.

COMMON QUESTIONS ARE:

- How do we address the student's work from an academic standpoint?
- Are there ways of reducing the incidents by instituting prohibitive guidelines in the syllabus?
- Should a student be required to see a counselor before a grade is given?
- Should anything be done at all?
- Are students just being dramatic or artistic?

This information can help faculty and teaching assistants identify and act on such matters as necessary.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE INDICATIONS OF DISTURBED CONTENT?

- The organization of written material may exhibit a bizarre, incoherent or dreamy quality. Often the written content moves from item to item in an associative rather than a linear

fashion, exhibiting more of a symbolic rather than a logical thought process.

- A preponderance of dark, negative, or jarring themes and images. Sexual themes, violence and death may be eerily but unskillfully portrayed.
- Frequent use of profanity.
- The work is a dramatic departure from the student's social demeanor or apparent affect.

We realize there are many ways in which an individual expresses him/herself; however, the presence of such features in student work may indicate an effort, albeit distorted and unconscious, to communicate something of deep personal importance. The recommendation is that the educator seek consultation with appropriate department supervisors and the University Counseling Center before confronting the student directly.

CONSULTATION WITH THE UNIVERSITY COUNSELING CENTER

The University Counseling Center provides an on-call counselor on a daily basis. The on-call counselor will either take your call immediately or will call you back as soon as possible. If you

OTHER RESOURCES

Dean of Students

Dr. Elizabeth Droz
UUW-205
607-777-2804
dos@binghamton.edu

University Ombudsman

Dawn Osborne-Adams
UU-259
607-777-2388
ombudsman.binghamton.edu

Other Faculty Guides

Amanda, G. (1994) *Coping with the Disruptive College Student: A Practical Model*. College Administration Publications, Inc.

Amanda, G. (1999) *Coping with Misconduct In the College Classroom: A Practical Model*. College Administration Publications, Inc.

believe it may be an emergency situation, let the secretary know this and either the director or clinical director will take your call.

The number is 777-2772 and the website is counseling.binghamton.edu; you may e-mail the director or other staff member.

There may be occasions when it is appropriate to obtain additional information about the student in question, or have him/her come to the Counseling Center for an evaluation. In such cases, the necessary steps will be taken to arrange this. In accordance with the requirements of confidentiality, it will not be possible for the Counseling Center to reveal any clinical data that may exist regarding the student — or even if the student is a Counseling Center client. We will, however, consult with you and provide some suggestions for follow-up.

The central question will be to determine if the student's expressions are evidence of severe mental illness, if the student is a danger to self or others, or if some type of treatment or intervention is warranted. Whenever appropriate, the Counseling Center will work closely and consult with the dean of students and University Police.

In the past, consultation and/or assessment in such cases has revealed the existence of an emotional problem. At other times, however, we have found that some students were unaware that they had created a problem for others, or were unintentionally violating cultural or social norms. Irrespective of the student's understanding of the impact his or her work has on others, it is important and appropriate to evaluate aberrant or potentially dangerous student expression and, if necessary, intervene.

SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO RESPOND

- The worst response is no response. However, you do not need to respond immediately to e-mail, notes or calls from the student if you do not feel comfortable doing so. It is suggested that you consult with your department chair and/or Counseling Center before responding to the student. Often faculty or teaching assistants respond to students in an enabling way, sometimes in an effort to let the student down easy. It is recommended that you refrain from making promises, commitments or personal comments in your response to the student.
- If the appropriate opportunity presents itself, you should express your concern about the content of the work to the student. You might suggest to the student that you would like to delay grading the assignment until you and the student can discuss things further — this also provides you with time to consult as necessary. The student's reaction to this form of intervention may explain the nature of the student's motivation and increase his or her awareness of the behavior. It will also help you determine if the student was merely unaware or insensitive to appropriate socio-cultural or University norms.
- Keep copies of all communication with the student. Factual feedback to the student will depend on having an accurate record of agreements, comments, e-mails, etc.

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