

STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

THE FACULTY ROLE: A GUIDE FOR UNIVERSITY COUNSELING CENTER SERVICES

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.

When we look back, college years seem to have been the best years of our lives. When we take a more critical look, the reality is that it was often a more stressful and difficult time than we would like to remember. Although college students manage to have fun, college is also a time of vast developmental changes that are not always easily handled.

For most, it is the first time away from home and family. It is also the first time they need to learn to manage time, money, relationships, academics and personal freedom, and the first time they need to make decisions regarding alcohol and other drug use, as well as plan for their future. The majority of students deal with the many transitions college brings successfully. However, for some students the pressures can seem unmanageable. With the many resources available on campus specifically for these purposes, why a brochure for faculty on students in distress?

Students who are becoming overwhelmed by the pressures they experience will not leave their reactions in the residence hall room or at home. Their confusion, anger, hurt, frustration and anxiety come to class with them. That's where you come in. Faculty are often the first point of contact for students in emotional difficulty. As a faculty member; your expression of interest and concern may mean the difference for college being the *best years* — in reality or memory — for a student.

It is not, of course, the responsibility of any faculty member to deal one-on-one with a student's emotional difficulties. Faculty can, however, play an extremely important role in referring students for help — not only because they are often in a position to first notice a student's upset condition, but because a student's respect and regard for a professor can play a role in his or her willingness to accept a referral.

We hope this information will help you if you encounter troubled students in your classes and need to know how to help get them to the resources they need.

RECOGNIZING STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

Everyone, at one time or another, has experienced unhappiness or depression. The "blues" are common and usually don't last long, but certain patterns of behavior over a period of time can indicate that something is wrong and professional help may be needed.

Behaviors that indicate emotional distress are not always disruptive to the classroom. However, faculty are in a unique position to observe the patterns a student's actions suggest.

TYPES OF STUDENT PROBLEMS

Types of student problems the University Counseling Center is familiar with include the following:

- Abusive behavior — physical, sexual, emotional
- Academic Stress — lack of motivation, test anxiety, performance anxiety, inability to concentrate
- Adjustment — loneliness, shyness, homesickness
- Adult student issues — family conflict, single parent adjustment
- Aggressive/hostile behaviors and acting out
- Change in goals, plans or programs
- Confusion or lack of direction
- Depression
- Eating disorders — anorexia nervosa, bulimia
- Grief reactions
- Personal loss
- Problem drinking or drug abuse
- Relationships — roommate, parental, spouse, dating, family
- Self-confidence issues
- Stress management — academic, emotional, physical
- Student-parent problems
- Suicidal thoughts and feelings

Some behaviors which may not be disruptive, but may indicate a need for help, are:

- A change from consistently good grades to unaccountably poor performance, or serious problems with grades.
- Excessive absences, especially if the student has previously demonstrated good attendance.
- Markedly changed or unusual patterns of interaction with classmates or instructor such as completely dominating a discussion, or avoiding any discussion whatsoever.
- Other signs of emotional distress may include: depressed or lethargic behavior patterns, excessive activity or talking (rapid, pressured speech), red or swollen eyes, marked change in dress or personal hygiene, sweating when the room is not hot or falling asleep in class.

Sometimes students, even those in significant distress, are reluctant or unable to acknowledge a need for help.

Behaviors which may indicate severe distress include:

- Repeated requests for special consideration such as deadline extensions, especially if the student seems uncomfortable or highly emotional disclosing the reasons for the request.
- Behavior, new or regularly occurring, that is vastly out of place and interferes with the effective management of the classroom.
- Unusual or exaggerated emotional response that is inappropriate to the situation such as needing to leave the room upon presentation of certain material.

THE DISRUPTIVE STUDENT

Although it is fairly rare, some students are so disturbed that they become disruptive in class. Many faculty members make efforts to contain the situation and deal with it directly by speaking with the student after class about his or her behavior when the student may reveal personal problems and a referral to the University Counseling Center can be made. Often, however, the first effort may not get results. Calling the Counseling Center for a consultation might prove to be helpful. Together, we can develop a strategy to deal with the disruptive behavior and get the student some help if possible. Discussing the disruptive student with your department chair or dean could also prove helpful. In the case of a dangerous or threatening student, call the University Police at 607-777-2393 or 911 (on-campus phones only) as well as the University Counseling Center at 607-777-2772.

Some behaviors which students will exhibit that indicate they are in crisis and need emergency attention include:

- Highly disruptive behaviors, hostility, aggressiveness, violence, etc.
- Inability to communicate clearly (garbled, slurred speech; unconnected or disjointed thoughts).
- Loss of contact with reality such as seeing or hearing things that aren't there, beliefs or actions that are greatly at odds with reality or probability.
- Suicidal thoughts that are immediate, including plans and/or methods.
- Homicidal thoughts.

RESOURCES ON CAMPUS

Academic Advising Offices:

EOP, SW-233.....777-2791
Harpur, AB-G18.....777-6305
DSO, AB-114777-4954
CCPA, UDC-333777-5572
SOE, AB-133.....777-7329
SOM, AA-142.....777-2316
Watson, LSG-552.....777-6203
Graduate, AD-134777-2151
Non-Degree, LN-1326A. 777-4866

Center for Learning and Teaching

CIW Library (CIW-110).. 777-6376
www.binghamton.edu/clt

HELPING THE DISTRESSED STUDENT NOT NEEDING EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE

Some crisis or overwhelming situations are not as obvious, yet you may know that something needs to be done. We hope the information in this section will help you deal with those less clear-cut situations.

You have a variety of choices for dealing with behavior that indicates to you a student may be troubled, but is not in crisis. You may choose to ignore it, handle it in a “strictly business” way, that is, only with respect to the classroom, or you may handle it more personally. Calling the University Counseling Center may be helpful in deciding which course of action you would like to take.

If you decide to approach the student or the student approaches you directly and you decide to handle the problem personally:

- Give the student your undivided attention by discussing the matter privately. Just a few minutes of effective listening by faculty can make a large difference in a student’s perception of a problem, and often of college.
- Express your concern in behavioral, non-judgmental terms. For example, “I’ve noticed you’ve had some absences lately, and I’m concerned.”
- Let the student talk. Try to communicate to the student that you have listened to what was said. Try to repeat back or paraphrase the “gist” of what was said.
- Help the student clarify advantages and disadvantages of various courses of action for handling what the student perceives the problem to be.
- Avoid judgments, evaluations and criticisms as they may make the student less inclined to talk with you. Even if you don’t agree with the student’s value system, try to respect it. It is important to identify your opinions clearly as yours, not what you think the student should think.

WHAT YOU CAN DO IN AN EMERGENCY

Crises are the easiest form of student distress to identify and, in some ways, the easiest to handle. Assistance and emergency referral procedures are outlined here for your convenience:

- Stay calm. Try not to leave the student alone. Find someone to stay with him or her while calls are made to helping resources.
- If a student directly threatens himself or herself or someone else, or otherwise behaves bizarrely, immediate attention is needed.

Call:

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- 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.

Stay with the student, or have someone stay with the student until help arrives.

MAKING A REFERRAL

There are times when it is clearly not in anyone’s best interest for you to try to handle a student’s distress personally. You may not be able to give enough time, you may know that your personality differences will get in the way or you may genuinely dislike the student. Whatever the reason or reasons, there are times it is best to turn the problem over to someone else.

Some students will accept a referral for help more readily than others. How you make the referral can make all the difference in whether it is accepted, and how the student perceives your need to do it.

Be frank with the student about your limitations and ability to help. Most will understand that you don’t have the time or training, or simply that this is not what your job is. It means a lot to them,

RESOURCES ON CAMPUS

Alcohol and Drug Counseling
IN — 777-2081
smartchoices.binghamton.edu

Career Development Center
LS-G-500 — 777-2400
cdc.binghamton.edu

Decker Student Health Services Center
IN — 777-2221
health.binghamton.edu

Discovery Program
CIW Library — 777-5985
discovery.binghamton.edu

Employee Assistance Program
LS-673 — 777-6655
eap.binghamton.edu

English as a Second Language (ESL) Program
LN-2412 — 777-6725
esl.binghamton.edu

Financial Aid
SW-119 — 777-2428
bingfa.binghamton.edu

Off Campus College
UUW-204 — 777-2768
occ.binghamton.edu

International Student and Scholar Services
NAR-G1 — 777-2510
iss.binghamton.edu

Services for Students with Disabilities
UU-119 — 777-2686
ssd.binghamton.edu

University Counseling Center
LN-1202 — 777-2772
counseling.binghamton.edu

Writing Initiative
LN-2412 — 777-6725
binghamton.edu/writing

though, that you care enough to try to help them. You can also be invaluable in dispelling some of the stereotypes that surround the idea of counseling.

Students may feel that they have to be severely disturbed or, at the very least, know exactly what is wrong with them in order to seek counseling. It can be very comforting for them to know that many students seek counseling, and that often they do so because they are confused about what they are feeling or thinking.

There are three ways in which you can make a referral to the Counseling Center:

1. You can tell the student about the Counseling Center. This tends to be least likely to succeed, as the student may procrastinate following up on the information.
2. You can call and make an appointment for the student. This is usually best done while the student is still with you and you can work out a mutually agreeable time for an appointment.
3. You can come to the Counseling Center with the student, while he or she sets up the appointment. This tends to be the most successful type of referral, in which the student is most likely to follow up. You may even sit in on the first session if you like, with the student's permission.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU REFER TO THE COUNSELING CENTER

If you contact the Counseling Center in a crisis situation, someone will talk with you immediately. We may come to the scene or we may determine that the University Police should respond as soon as possible. From that point on, the situation is usually handled exclusively by Counseling Center staff or the University Police. Once students have dealt with us, we consider them clients, and we are bound by confidentiality regarding our conversations with them. With their written permission, we may fill you in on limited details.

WHAT STUDENTS CAN EXPECT WHEN THEY GO TO THE COUNSELING CENTER

Some students are reluctant to go to the Counseling Center because they don't know what to expect. Upon arrival, all students are asked to fill out an intake form, which is a basic information form. This is kept as part of the student's confidential file. Many students wonder if counseling appointments or information will somehow end up on their "permanent record." It will not. All sessions are free, private and confidential. Only with the student's written permission or when the student is a danger to self or others is the Counseling Center free to share information with anyone.

Students will meet with a member of the counseling staff for about an hour, or perhaps less. Emergencies may require more time.

Students will usually see whoever has the first available appointment when the call is made. However, students may request to speak with a specific member of the staff, if they prefer. During busy times, this may cause a delay in being seen.

During the first session, the counselor will usually try to determine what the problem or issue is and will try to see if counseling is the best approach. The counselor will give a brief explanation of the counseling process and will usually conclude by asking the student if he or she wishes to make another appointment, wait and call if he or she needs to talk more or would like a referral to another person or agency.

Students often feel better when they find that counseling is voluntary. The Counseling Center does not accept "mandated" referrals for counseling.

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THE STUDENT WHO ASKS FOR EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE (INCOMPLETES, EXTENSIONS, ETC.)

Often the students’ problems are disruptive of their academic work and they find it difficult to follow through on their academic responsibilities. They come to faculty with involved tales of interpersonal or family difficulties which they hope will elicit sympathy and an incomplete/extension from the faculty member. To spare the faculty member the problems involved in separating a legitimate excuse (“beyond the student’s control”) from one that is more manipulative, the University Counseling Center will make a recommendation to you after meeting with the student. The student’s confidentiality will be maintained and we will simply indicate to you whether there is enough evidence to warrant a deviation from the rules. This serves two useful purposes: It helps the faculty member who does not want to intrude or have to make an assessment about a student’s personal life; and it facilitates the student’s contact with a source of potential help.

UNIVERSITY COUNSELING CENTER LOCATION AND HOURS

The University Counseling Center is located on the first floor of the Glenn G. Bartle Library in LN-1202. The phone number is 607-777-2772. Hours are weekdays from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. when classes are in session. Counseling staff (on call) may be reached after hours by calling the University Police at 607-777-2393.



University Counseling
Center