Responding to Students in Distress

As a person who works closely with students, you know firsthand the stresses students face balancing school, work, relationships, and personal development. You also know that students sometimes become overwhelmed by their life circumstances. Students often come to faculty members for help with these issues, and faculty members may see students’ problems reflected in their behavior or their work.

At Counseling Services, we often receive requests from faculty for assistance in responding to students in distress. Although each situation is different, there are some general guidelines that may help you handle these difficult times.

The hallmark indicator of students experiencing trouble is a change in their routine. Generally, the suddenness, extent, and amount of change reflects the severity of the difficulty. Specific behavioral changes that may be of concern and may merit a referral to Counseling Services include:

- Assignments not being turned in
- Numerous absences
- Reduced participation
- Uncooperative or conflicted interactions
- Behaviors that attract attention (e.g., disruptiveness, fidgetiness, sleeping in class)
- Requesting extensions and being uncomfortable when asked for a reason
- Disregarding class rules
- Excessive emotional content in discussing or writing course material
- Severe communication difficulties
- Mention of suicide or homicide in the content of coursework

General Suggestions

- Talk with the student in private. Allow enough time to attend to the student’s concerns.
- Listen to and understand the student’s concerns before giving an opinion or advice.
- If the issue is a student’s conduct in class, use non-judgmental descriptions of the behavior you observed. Let the student know what concerns you have and what your expectations are about classroom conduct.
- Ask the student what he or she expects from you and be clear about what you are, and are not, willing to do in the situation.
- Help the student identify options for action and explore the probable consequences.
- If a student appears to be in imminent danger of hurting self or others, consult WSU Counseling Services or the police immediately. Do not promise to keep threats to self or others secret.

Referral to Other Resources

When to Refer:

- When you feel uncomfortable dealing with a situation personally.
- When your involvement would conflict with your role as a teacher.
- When you believe that a situation is beyond your capacity to help or that the student’s problems can best be handled by another agency or person.

How to Refer:

- Before you refer, let the student know you care about his or her concerns and are referring because you want to be of help.
- When referring to Counseling Services, suggest it as a possible resource rather than telling a student to go because he or she “needs help” or is “causing problems” for others.
- With students reluctant to use Counseling Services, it may help to inform them that counselors are a confidential resource and are available to them for dealing with many different kinds of problems.
- Depending upon circumstances, you may with to obtain the student’s permission to call and make a direct referral; in severe situation, you can offer to walk the student to Counseling Services to be seen immediately.
- As noted above, if there is imminent danger to the student or to others, take an active role in getting immediate help for the student.
Who We Are & What We Do

Counseling Services provides individual, couple, and group counseling, as well as consultation and outreach programming. We encourage faculty to consult with our staff regarding any issues of concern about students. All consultations are confidential; the student’s name need not be given to talk with a counselor about how you may best respond to a situation. Our office, located on the second floor of the Lighty Student Services Building, is open Monday through Friday from 8-5 throughout the year. Students may reach on-call counselors during evenings, weekends, and on holidays, by dialing 335-2159.

Faculty on our staff include licensed psychologists and counselors, as well as a substance abuse specialist. Counseling Services is a nationally accredited psychology internship site. Also among staff are graduate students from the clinical and counseling psychology programs who work under the supervision of our faculty. The composition of our staff reflects the diversity on campus.

Counseling Services designates three to six hours each weekday as “walk-in” times, when students can be seen almost immediately. In emergency situations, on-call counselors are available 24-hours a day. In an initial session, the counselor will try to gain an understanding of the student’s immediate concerns and other relevant issues in his or her life. The counselor and the student will decide if further counseling is needed and will arrange for follow-up. If the student has been talking with you, any information you have may be helpful to us in fully understanding the student’s concerns and resources for dealing with them. Because all counseling and consultation with Counseling Services are confidential, the counselor will be able to give you information about the student only with the student’s written permission.

Reaching a Counselor

Monday-Friday 8:00-5:00
335-4511

After hours, weekends, holidays:
335-2159

Counseling & Testing Services

Lighty Student Services Building
Room 280
509-335-4511
www.counsel.wsu.edu

Revised 1/2012