

# Working with Students in Need: An Ethical Perspective

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Professor Smith, do you have a minute? I need to talk with you. Dr. Jones, can I see you after class for a few minutes? Professor Miller, are you busy tomorrow?

Faculty members interact with students in many ways. They teach, advise, oversee student clubs and honor societies, do collaborative scholarship, help with career and graduate school aspirations, and many times, simply listen or offer advice.

The fact that students' lives are not always idyllic is no surprise to most faculty. Some students just need a sympathetic ear with whom to talk about everyday problems, stressors, or other difficulties and concerns. Although a rare event for many faculty, meeting with a student in serious need — those acutely stressed; anxious; suicidal; depressed; or experiencing serious struggles with coursework, racial or cultural differences, or parental expectations — is important and challenging work. Sometimes students take the initiative and ask to meet with their teachers, but faculty members also reach out to students, even spelling out in their course syllabi that they are available. A faculty member may be the first or only person who recognizes or knows that a student needs support or assistance. They may notice course performance or attendance falling or receive notes from their Dean of Students about students who are ill or have suffered the death of a loved one. Just asking, "How are you doing?" can be a way of forming a connection with such a student.

Faculty and institutions need to maximize the chances that encounters with students are helpful and grounded in an awareness of ethical obligations. As is true of any interaction between someone in authority and someone seeking assistance, there are rules of morality, values, and professional behavior for those in power so that those seeking help receive the respect and assistance they deserve. There is no national code of ethical behavior to which all faculty subscribe and in our experience some faculty members, unfortunately, see ethics not as guidance and wisdom, but as misguided restraints on their behavior and academic freedom. Only American Psychological Association (APA) members must abide by the association's ethics (APA, 2002), although all faculty would best insure students' welfare and dignity if they followed such codes of conduct.

In no area of faculty work is moral, professional behavior more necessary than when interacting with students in need, regardless of how "hurting" the student is, yet most faculty receive little or no training or guidance in how to do so. It is especially important that faculty strive for appropriate boundaries and integrity, maintaining their roles as educators but not becoming therapists.

## Tips for Ethically Helping Students in Need

### *Prepare*

Read your institution's guidelines and policies on faculty working with students in need, if they exist, especially before meeting a student. Talk with trusted colleagues about their availability and interest

should you need to consult with them, and know the referral agencies available to you (e.g., Counseling Center, Multi-Cultural Center, Dean of Students Office, Provost's Office, University Health Center, Campus Police, University Legal Counsel).

We recommend that departments work with their Counseling Center or other trained staff to help faculty members with their listening skills and professionalism when working with students in need. Such training and discussions, more useful and different than simply distributing a handout, can be especially helpful for new faculty, often closer to students in age and identity, to whom some students may turn first, but who are least experienced in their role as "helper," and more likely to experience inappropriate boundary crossings.

## **Ethical Guidance**

The area of ethics and working with students in need deserves all of the serious thought faculty can give it. We applied the American Psychological Association's five aspirational principles (APA, 2002) to issues that in our experience are related to helping such students. If readers have examples and ideas for us, we would appreciate hearing from you. ([Perlman@uwosh.edu](mailto:Perlman@uwosh.edu)).

### **Beneficence and Nonmaleficence: Do Good, and Avoid Doing Harm**

*Teachers must avoid doing harm, and be helpful, if possible.* They must avoid misusing their influence and power and safeguard the welfare and rights of their students. Faculty need to act with integrity — being honest and truthful with students, but in ways that are not harmful. Total honesty can be inappropriate; for example, advising a student to "dump" an abusive boyfriend. When a student approached one of the authors about pressures to come home on weekends versus academics and studying, he was honest that (a) he did not know her home situation well enough to give her advice with confidence; (b) that, in his experience, students who spent weekends on campus did more studying and seemed to do better in their coursework; (c) that a compromise would be to return home less often; (d) that this was a decision that she had to make for herself (self determination, see below), but one she could revisit; and (e) that he was very interested in what she decided and how it worked out.

Many faculty members are unaware of the power they possess over students. Students may be worried that if a teacher asks them to stop by their office, if they do not do so their course grade could suffer. Students see faculty as knowing a great deal. They may have unspoken high expectations for the help they will receive from this "wise" person teaching their class. Our observation is that psychology faculty may be more likely to have students approach them because of the discipline and course content they teach, and psychology faculty, more than colleagues in other disciplines, also may be more tempted to think they know what to do. Faculty members need to be aware that it is not their responsibility as teachers, even if they are a trained clinician or counselor, to work with students in need. Others in the institution, such as the Counseling Center, have that responsibility, and probably have more relevant training and experience. Faculty need to take themselves off pedestals and be honest with students about their life experiences and abilities to help. They need to learn to say:

*My experience with that is limited, and I am not very knowledgeable about what you are going through. When my son or daughter had trouble with that, this is what helped, but I do not know if it applies to you.*

*That sounds difficult. You are clearly in distress. But I do not know what to advise or what you should do. Do you have any ideas?*

*I have no good advice for you except that you should seek out someone more experienced than I.*

**Faculty members must remain aware of their personal limitations.** For example, faculty have personal experiences with, but probably little professional expertise regarding relationships, medical or legal advice, and so on.

### **Fidelity and Responsibility**

**Faculty members must keep their promises to students.** Faculty are role models for students and are more important to students than teachers may realize. As role models, faculty members need to follow through on promises they make to students: *you can take the exam early, you can turn in your term paper a day or two late, I will bring you a book or two about that topic for your reading.* A colleague spent some time talking with a student who was going overseas for the first time. The student was both excited and anxious. The faculty member told the student he would bring some travel books that might prove useful, but got busy and never did. The student felt let down and unimportant, and the teacher heard from other students that his relationship with this student was harmed.

**Faculty must act responsibly, value consultation, and refer students when appropriate.** One of the authors, a clinical psychologist, was approached by a student about treatment decisions for a client living at a residentially based facility where the student worked. The author listened, and referred the student back to the agency's director. Despite the fact the faculty member had expertise in this area, the student needed to talk with the person who had legal and moral responsibility for the client and the student's clinical work. Going too far with advice raises the risk for faculty members that students, their parents, administrators, and in this case, the student's supervisor and boss may complain.

**Listen closely.** The process of listening can be as important as whether teachers really understand what their students are saying. Students need to feel valued and attended to in such situations. Do not answer the telephone or respond to e-mail signals while talking to a student. Often, all students want and need is for someone to listen to what they are saying, so learn to listen with silence. Simply listen. Then faculty need the ability to respond, to become practiced with language such as:

*Let me see if I am hearing you accurately. Are you saying that \_\_\_\_ is the problem?*

*It sounds like you are really in distress. Is that so?*

*You sound worried.*

*I'm not sure I understand. Can you tell me more?*

Part of listening well — something rare in our society — is to look at someone without interruption. Eye contact in a quiet setting can be helpful in its own right.

**Give students the time they need.** Part of helping is the time to be patient and explore what is troubling a student. Let students know how much time you have to meet with them (30 – 45 minutes may be needed), and let them know how much time is left: *I want to let you know we have about 20 minutes left.* Knowing how much longer they can meet with you helps students decide what to talk about and focus the meeting. Diagnostically, students who require a lot of time or who ask for multiple meetings are communicating that they need expert assistance. Refer them to a designated agency so that a trained professional can deal with their needs and dependency. They always can report back to you about how things are going. The issue of time is difficult because some students simply see no boundaries and their

problem can be (or seem) trivial to the faculty with whom they are talking. Also, colleagues may resent students who take up too much time and may, consciously or unconsciously, work against the student when it comes to grading or, especially, letters of recommendation later.

### **Integrity (Trust)**

***Be respectful and treat all students with dignity.*** Students must never feel as if they are bothering faculty members or taking up their time unduly, although some need limits. Regardless of how the student “presents”— whether articulately or with great emotion, organized or disorganized — faculty members must be respectful and never diminish or demean what the student is presenting. Teachers can be caring and at the same time communicate to a student that they are not available right now. If faculty members are having a stressful day and have a scheduled meeting with a student, they need to take a deep breath before the meeting. If students have been difficult in the past (demanding, making excuses for poor course work), separate this fact from the problem at hand. Faculty members should never humiliate students or discount their problems as trivial even when they feel that way; total honesty and truthfulness (see beneficence and nonmaleficence above) is not always ethical intervention. One colleague tells the story of a sobbing, devastated coed who came to talk about a young man who did not call her for a third date. One faculty member told her that “Men come, men go. Get used to it.” That same young woman went to see another faculty member, even more upset. This second teacher let her talk for a while, and that is what she needed.

### **Justice**

***Be equally helpful to all students.*** Take whatever problems students bring you as important to them. An embarrassing moment at a party can seem like the end of the world to an 18-year-old. Students with roommate problems may be experiencing the most difficult times they have ever had and such situations not only can be stressful, but also offer potential for learning life-long skills (problem solving, confronting others appropriately, standing up for oneself, etc.). One of the authors greatly contributed to a student’s life quality and commitment to college by providing her information on how she could obtain a different dorm room and separate from a difficult roommate.

### **Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity**

***Treat the content of discussions with students-in-need in confidence.*** Faculty are not to disclose student information unless they have serious concerns about students’ personal safety or their risk to others (see below). Never walk down the hall to talk with a colleague about a student and disclose that student’s identity or disclose information from a meeting with a student to anyone (spouse, best friend, or colleagues) unless you can so camouflage students that identifying them is impossible. When a student approached one of the authors about her shyness and her growing tiredness with this part of her personality, he listened, and recommended she see someone at the Counseling Center and keep in touch with him about how she was coping with her shyness if she felt comfortable doing so. Even though she was enrolled in two of his colleagues’ classes, he spoke to neither about his interaction with her.

***Meet with students in private.*** Often students walk with teachers back to their offices. Avoid talking with students about substantive issues until the office door is closed or ajar. If you share an office or have a cubical you must find a private place to meet. Hang a *do not disturb* sign on your door during such meetings. Typically, faculty members leave their door ajar to avoid a false harassment claim. However, students-in-need may not talk with a faculty member unless the door is closed. Our advice would be to close the door if the student requests it and if your judgment and experience tells you doing

so is okay. (P. Keith-Spiegel, personal communication, March 1, 2005). On occasion, students self disclose personal issues to everyone in class. Sometimes these self-disclosures add to the depth and relevancy of course content and are beneficial for students and teacher alike. At other times students go too far, potentially embarrassing their classmates with personal information or problems best discussed in private. Teachers must monitor students' statements, making decisions as to whether the self disclosure is appropriate and moving the class discussion and content on to other students and other topics. A simple, *Talk with me after class about that when I can give you more attention and time* often is an appropriate intervention.

**Allow self-determination.** Faculty members must allow students to make their own decisions. It is the student's life, even if at times, youth appears to be wasted on the young. Faculty members meeting with and working with students-in-need must allow them to proceed as they decide. Faculty members can lay out a smorgasbord of choices and point out the pluses and minuses of each, but the student chooses. A faculty member would not openly agree with a student, for example, that an abortion is what she needed or that they should move out of the house despite their parent's strong objections.

Faculty need to be sensitive to the fact that how they frame and describe various courses of action can make some choices more attractive than others, thus undermining students' self-determination. Students are free to not choose — that is a choice. Sometimes, situations heal themselves; sometimes, they must worsen before they get better.

## **Students With the Most Serious Problems**

Faculty members are probably most concerned about how to respond to students who are seriously in need (e.g., suicidal or talk about suicidal thoughts and feelings, appear severely depressed, or seem psychologically disorganized). Other students may be dealing with serious grief and loss, alcohol and drug problems, severe distress or anxiety caused by career decisions, or be in abusive relationships, struggling with sexual identity or orientation, or facing what they perceive as unsolvable problems (e.g., dropping out of school and disappointing parents versus staying in school when they know it is not a good time to do so).

Our advice is simple and direct: Never be the primary helper for students with serious problems. Listen, express concern and a sense of caring, and refer them to professionals (Nilson, 2003). Simply tell students: *Your problem is beyond the scope of what I can ethically do for you. I respect you for trusting me enough to share this problem with me and it is because of my concern and respect that we need to find someone professionally trained with whom you can meet.* One of the authors teaches Abnormal Psychology and has students do some writing, applying course content to their own lives. He refers at least five to seven students a semester to the Counseling Center.

If a student threatens to commit suicide or to harm another individual, teachers are obligated to breach confidentiality and call the police or some emergency intervention office and not leave the student alone. Err on the side of their safety. One would simply tell a student, if the circumstances are appropriate for it, *I know you have not directly asked for help and what I am about to do may seem intrusive, but I am extremely concerned about what I have heard and I think it would be best for both of us for me to \_\_\_\_\_*. If a student is extremely angry or agitated in a faculty member's office, you may choose to call someone from the office next door or down the hall. Another piece of direct advice: If the

student's problems worry you, refer them to someone. Be honest and clear with students that support services exist for their well-being and that although students may not know any of the professionals who work there, these are the settings in which they will get the help they need and you will assist them in getting this help. Exact rules for how faculty members are to behave in such a situation are impossible to delineate.

## Conclusion

Students-in-need are best served if faculty members have a framework that guides professional and ethical behavior. We have suggested that the aspirational principles of the APA's Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct can provide that framework. Even if a referral is the desired and typical outcome of an interaction with a student in serious need, a lot goes on in such interactions. Society entrusts faculty to effectively navigate these difficult interactions, and they need to uphold that trust in their abilities and judgment. Faculty members can suggest options for students that are directly related to a course, school-related activity, academics, and career advising. Faculty members meeting with students with day-to-day problems can listen and lay out some alternative courses of action. When students have serious needs, professional and ethical practice calls for faculty to refer them to those with the expertise and responsibility to help them. ?

## Note

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