



Fairness Toolkit: Top Tips for Dealing with Student Concerns

Discuss concerns in person

- When a student brings a concern to you, 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
- Better communication occurs when we discuss our concerns face-to-face. You can email or phone to make the appointment to meet.
- However, where the concern involves an issue of safety, dealing directly with the person involved may not be appropriate.

Talk about expectations early

- Make an early and significant investment in clearly setting out the “rules of the game”
- Talk clearly about your expectations and about consequences
- We’re in a stronger place when we understand our roles, rights and responsibilities clearly
- We all have the responsibility to help prevent misunderstandings
- Clear course outlines, holding regular meetings with graduate students, and providing opportunities for timely feedback can build understanding of what is expected

Be sensitive to the inherent power imbalance

- You may not feel as though you are in a position of power, but the student-instructor or student-administrator relationship is characterized by a power differential
- Even where students might become frustrated, aggressive or challenging, you still hold the authority to make a decision that could adversely impact them
- Keep this in mind to help deliver a measured response

Make Fair Decisions

- You want to get it right the first time
- Ensuring your department follows best practices when making decisions affecting students
- Creating an ad hoc process for every case can lead to inconsistent decisions
- Inconsistency increases the chance of missing important steps and making unfair decisions
- Have a solid process and follow it each time (See Fairness Checklist for Decision Makers)



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Delay Judgment

- We often hear the same types of requests from students
- For example, an instructor may hear requests for a grade change many times in a semester.
- Try to delay judgment until you have heard what the student has to say
- There may be extenuating circumstances that merit accommodation or a change in your decision

Seek the “why”

- Students’ capacity and competence to communicate clearly and concisely vary widely
- Always better to try and move beyond “what” students are asking for and seek out “why” they are asking for it
- Inquiry can open up a larger array of options that could lead to a better outcome for all involved

Refer students to campus resources

- Sometimes, the concern brought to your attention is only a small part of a much larger, more complex issue
- As you delay judgment and seek out the “why”, you may become aware of signs that indicate that the request itself comes from other issues, struggles and challenges the student is facing
- Refer students to the various resources on campus that can support them and help to explore options (Please visit our Helpful Links to discover more)

Follow up in writing

- After the discussion with the student, send an email confirming your understanding of what was discussed
- Put in writing the terms that were agreed upon
- Invite the student to contact you immediately if there is any disagreement or concern

NEED MORE HELP?



The same resources for students can also be resources for you. Some concerns are direct and easy to resolve. Others may pose some complex issues for you, your department or the university as a whole. Don't hesitate to seek advice and to consult with your colleagues and with units like:

**Office of the
Ombudsperson for
Students**

Equity Office

**Office of the University
Counsel**

Access & Diversity

At the same time, of course, you will need to respect the student's privacy. Visit our Resources for Faculty and



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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
- You can help students move forward when you 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.