

Purchase College Counseling Center

Crisis Manual

for Faculty and Staff

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The Counseling Center

The Counseling Center's role on campus is to help students who are having personal problems. Though many students visit us on their own, others need prompting before they take what seems like a frightening step. That is where you as faculty and staff can come in. You know students through both personal acquaintance and their academic work and are often the first to sense their troubles. Therefore you are in an ideal position to refer them for help.

Faculty and staff generally want to help, but they are often afraid of doing the wrong thing, of becoming too deeply involved in students' problems, or of substituting for a professional counselor. This booklet explains how you can help without taking on more responsibility than you should. We discuss how to interpret students' problems, identify issues, approach students and make referrals to the Counseling Center. When you finish reading this booklet, you'll see that neither special training nor unreasonable time is required, just sensitivity and good judgment. By identifying problems and referring students to the Counseling Center you can provide an invaluable service to our community while clearly remaining in your role as faculty and staff.

Student Problems

At every stage of life people have problems. College students, who have the pressures of college and the challenging developmental issues of late adolescence and young adulthood are no exception. Their problems do not fall into a few categories, but range over dozens of areas. Some examples are poor academic performance, substance abuse, family problems, sleep disturbances, eating problems, antisocial behavior, shyness and sexual concerns.

More important than the type is the severity of a student's problem. If the student is able to cope in general in spite of the specific problem, and if the overall history tends to be healthy, then the problem is probably mild. On the other hand, if the student is experiencing a crisis or if the student's life has evidenced trouble over a long period of time, then the problem is serious. Problems are most serious when a student is failing courses, uses drugs often, has been tearful every day for a period of weeks, or reported ideas about suicide. (Any reference to suicide should be taken seriously and you should immediately arrange a referral to the Counseling Center or contact University Police to discuss appropriate action).

Though it can be difficult to make the judgment, usually a sensitive adult who patiently listens to a student gets an accurate sense of the severity of the

problem. There are three steps in helping a student with a problem: 1) identifying the problem, 2) approaching the student about it, and 3) making a referral.

Step One: Identifying Problems

The following signals indicate a student's need for assistance:

1. Major changes or extremes in behavior, such as excessive absences, marked decline in performance, odd or irrelevant speech, or the inability to pay attention. In particular look for:
 - A. aggressive or hostile behavior
 - B. signs of withdrawal
 - C. unusual dependence
 - D. changes in eating or sleeping habits, weight, grooming or appearance
2. A student's expression of concern, anxiety or confusion. The expression may be direct or indirect, an explicit confession or a hint.
3. Classroom writing samples that indicate personal concerns.
4. Another student's report that a student needs help.
5. Any other signs that concern you. Use your personal knowledge of the student to alert you to difficulties.

Step Two: Approaching the Student

Once you suspect a problem, it's important that you talk to the student about it. Take the initiative and arrange to see the student privately in your office. At this meeting, point out the behaviors you have observed that have caused you concern. For example, "I notice that you rarely speak in class" or "Your paper implied that you are having a rough time." Be careful to sound nonjudgmental; explain that your purpose is to understand what is wrong. Helpful comments include "I'd like to know if something is troubling you to see if I can help" or "Sometimes it helps if you tell someone else what's bothering you."

The outcome of this approach depends upon the student. Wary, embarrassed, or frightened students will say little without further encouragement, while others will share lengthy histories. Some will be calm, others emotional; some will be reasonable, others irrational. However the student responds, your main objective is to have the student trust you and talk freely. Accordingly:

1. You don't need to offer advice, solve the problem, correct irrational thinking or provide reassurance that everything will turn out okay.
2. You should listen, try to understand, and be patient. An occasional comment or question is sufficient.

At the close of the conversation, students typically feel grateful for your concern and very often they feel relieved and encouraged. Even if the student reports feeling much better, you still may want to suggest an appointment at the Counseling Center, and in some instances you should insist on it.

Step Three: Making Referrals

Not everyone needs to see a professional counselor or psychologist. Often a conversation with a friend or family member - or faculty or staff - provides the perspective and support an unhappy student needs. However, many students who are generally coping well, whose problem is mild, welcome and benefit from discussions with a trained professional. Therefore, you can suggest the Counseling Center to any student who admits to having personal problems. Whether or not the student follows through, you have introduced a helpful idea and given proof of your concern.

On occasion it will be necessary to do more than suggest; you will need to make sure that the student receives help. This happens when you discover during your conversation that the student's problem is serious, especially when there is a crisis. In these situations you should insist, gently but firmly, that the student make an appointment at the Counseling Center. Have him or her call extension 6390 from your office or make the call in the student's presence. If necessary, escort the student to the Center. If the student refuses, as some do, allow the student to leave. Consult with the Director of Counseling, Residence Life or University Police about the best way to proceed.

In helping a student make an appointment at the Counseling Center, it is better not to suggest a particular member of the staff. The counselor you have in mind may not be available as quickly as someone else. Every member of the Center is trained to work with the full range of student concerns.

Crisis Situations

Crisis situations require quick thinking and efficient, coordinated intervention. This portion of the guide presents a framework to direct faculty and staff in responding to a crisis situation. The first section outlines general crisis intervention principles. The second lists response strategies for specific critical situations when Public Safety cannot be immediately contacted.

Part I

General Crisis Intervention Principles

Student Confidentiality

It is important to keep in mind that students have a right to privacy and that, in some instances, they may wish to have information related to a crisis remain private. However, in situations where a student presents a danger to himself/herself or others, it is legal and necessary to disclose information to those who have a need to know. In some cases, the need to violate confidentiality is less clear and it is best to obtain the student's permission before releasing pertinent information.

Faculty Judgment

Individuals involved in dealing with a crisis situation must use their best judgment in deciding how to respond. The four questions to consider are:

1. What immediate action is required?
2. Who else is affected, and what support is available for him/her?
3. Who should be notified?
4. What additional action is required?

When the course of action to be taken in a crisis is unclear, it is critical to consult with colleagues, the Counseling Center or University Police as soon as possible.

Coordination of Response

It may be the case that a single staff or faculty member will be confronted with an immediate crisis situation. However, in most instances the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs will coordinate notification and intervention services following a crisis. Questions regarding this process may be directed to extension 6030.

Support

Support may be provided to a student in crisis in a variety of ways. Some general suggestions for dealing with students in crisis include the following:

1. **Stay Calm.** Since a person in a crisis may lose perspective, it is important that you stay calm so that the situation can be assessed and an intervention can be planned.
2. **Make contact at a feeling level rather than at a factual level.** Because crises often involve loss or grief, it is important to try to identify feelings that the student may have without arriving at a judgment about the situation.

3. **Explore the current problem.** Focus on the past six weeks and identify what may have occurred to precipitate the onset of the crisis. Ask open-ended questions and encourage the student to be specific.
4. **Summarize the problem** so that you and the student are in agreement regarding the salient features.
5. **Focus on amelioration and explore resources.** Questions can focus on the nature of the student's support system, the positive things in his/her life, and his/her willingness to seek appropriate assistance.
6. **Set up a contract,** preferably written and signed, containing the steps that the student will take to help him/herself through the period of crisis.
7. **Consult.** If there are any questions, please contact the Counseling Center at extension 6390.

Part II

Response Strategies for Specific Crisis Situations

The following sections offer guidelines for addressing specific types of crisis situations.

Student Death

1. **Call 6911 immediately and report your exact location.**
2. **Do not disturb the death scene.** The police will need to investigate an uncontaminated scene in order to determine the nature of the death. Keep possible onlookers away from the scene and enlist others to assist in this.

Attempted Suicide in Progress

1. **Call 6911 immediately and report the student's exact location.**
2. **If possible, apply first aid and wait the arrival of University Police.**
3. **Enlist the aid of others in the vicinity to go to the nearest entrance to direct police and emergency personnel to the exact location.**
4. **University Police will follow up with further notification procedures.** At times, it may be necessary for a police officer to take a student into custody to ensure the safety of the student or others in the campus community.

Threats of Harm to Self or Others

All threats of harm must be taken seriously, whether the threat is assault, homicide or suicide. In these situations, safety always takes precedence over privacy. Professional consultation should be sought as soon as possible.

1. **Seek consultation immediately. The Counseling Center should be contacted to assess the situation Monday through Friday 8:30am through 5pm. At other times, contact University Police at extension 6911.**
2. **In all situations of imminent danger, call extension 6911 for immediate Public Safety response.**

Student Arrest

1. **Any faculty or staff who becomes aware of a student arrest should notify University Police. An arrest is public information.**
2. **Public safety will coordinate with the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs and formulate an appropriate response to the arrest.**
3. **Because an arrest can precipitate a mental health crisis for some individuals, further intervention may become necessary. Contact the Counseling Center at extension 6390 for consultation.**

Disruptive Behavior

Although disruptive behavior may be related to a mental health or medical condition, it is important to focus on the student's behavior and its consequences in order to ensure that an individual's due process rights are protected.

1. **The Counseling Center should be contacted for consultation at extension 6390. Center staff will facilitate support and intervention.**
2. **The Chief Judicial Officer should be consulted regarding the appropriateness of judicial action.**
3. **If the student's behavior becomes potentially damaging to property or is a threat to other students, University Police should be notified by calling extension 6911.**
4. **Further notifications will be made as necessary through the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs.**

Other Crises

Because it is not possible to predict all types of crisis situations, the following general guidelines may be helpful in responding to a number of critical events.

1. **Contact University Police at extension 6911. University Police will provide assistance or make appropriate referrals.**
2. **Contact the Counseling Center at extension 6390 Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 5pm. A psychologist will respond promptly to provide consultation or other psychological services.**

3. Contact the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs at extension 6030 for additional support and assistance as needed.

The Counseling Center

The Counseling Center's staff consists of five psychologists, a consulting psychiatrist and psychology graduate students. The center offers students approximately ten free sessions of individual psychotherapy per year. Students are generally seen within a week of requesting an appointment; in emergencies they are seen immediately. In addition to offering individual psychotherapy and counseling, the Center offers groups on topics such as assertiveness, eating disorders and children of divorced parents. The Center also makes referrals to private clinicians and to agencies in the Westchester community.

For students with minor problems, it is unnecessary for faculty or staff to personally contact the Counseling Center. In serious cases, however, whatever information faculty or staff can provide is helpful. Identify yourself and ask to speak with Dr. Robin Kaufman, the Director.

The Counseling Center also offers Supported Education, a service for students who already have private therapists and/or psychiatrists. Often times these students need extra assistance remaining organized with their coursework and coordinating their outside psychological and psychiatric treatment. The staff of the Supported Education Office is available to assist students with these types of needs.

Confidentiality is an essential part of the therapeutic relationship and therefore the Counseling Center cannot convey information about clients. However, you are entitled to know whether a student you referred in fact had an appointment and is being helped. We generally ask the student's permission to tell you that the appointment took place.

The outcome of counseling is variable. Some students improve almost immediately, some with time, while for others the problems continue or temporarily worsen. A key decision in very serious cases is whether the student should remain in school. For the few students whose malfunctioning and distress continue to be extreme despite receiving professional help, the best course is to leave school, receive therapy, while living in a less stressful environment, and return in a semester or two to resume a college education. The decision regarding psychiatric leaves of absence ultimately rests with the Vice President for Student Affairs.