

Student Concerns

Tips for Dealing with Student Concerns for Instructors

Sometimes the most difficult conversations can become the most constructive conversations.



There will be times when students will seek you out for clarification, questions, and concerns they are having with the course. These conversations can be difficult and challenging, but in allowing a student to speak and share their experiences, you are opening the door to support, learn, and adapt.

Approaching these conversations by being defensive or in making a judgement before hearing the context, does not help facilitate a relationship between you and your student.

Concerns and complaints are opportunities to allow student to make a connection with you and to help them to problem-solve and advocate.

Consider the tips below to help guide your conversation with a student and in managing their concern. These tips are not exhaustive, but can help enhance your current approach.



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Campus Services @ Halifax Campus
[LINK TO SERVICES](#)



Campus Services @ Agricultural Campus
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Talk to your students about your expectations early

- Provide a clear course syllabus on your expectations and about consequences
- Make an early investment in clearly setting out your expectations from the first class
- We all have a responsibility to help prevent misunderstandings
- We're in a stronger place when we understand our roles, rights, and responsibilities
- Hold regular meeting with honour/graduate students to provide opportunities for timely feedback and build upon their understanding of expectations

Discuss concerns in person

- Better communication can occur when we can discuss our concerns face-to-face
- If a student brings a concern forward, encourage the student to attend your office hours or book an appointment with you to discuss the concern
- When the concerns involve issues of safety, meeting face-to-face may not be an appropriate option

Be aware to the power imbalance in the conversation

- You may not feel as though you are in a position of power, but the student-instructor or student-administrator relationship is one that has power differential

Manage and measure your reactions

- If a student becomes frustrated, aggressive or challenging, manage and measure your reactions to minimize a situation escalating
- Manage your own safety and end the conversation if the student disengages from the topic
- If the conversation begins become personalized, attempt to re-direct the student and if that is not possible politely end the conversation with the student

Seek to understand the "why"

- Instead of trying to understand "what" students are asking for, seek to understand "why" they are asking for something
- When seeking to understand "why", you will have a better context and be able to advise and support with a large array of options rather than limiting the options when we only focus on "what" a request is

Focus on making fair decisions

- Fair decisions do not mean a person receives the decision they want, but it does require your decision making is transparent and balances consistency with consideration for individual circumstances
- Making fair decisions should be timely and if delays occur, the student should be notified
- Students should have the opportunity to share their side of the story and respond

Delay your decision/judgment

- You may hear the same types of requests from students. For example it may be extension requests, test/exams deferrals requests, or requests for a grade change
- While these requests may appear common and standard, delay your decision/judgment until you hear what a student has to share as there may be extenuating circumstances that merit your consideration before making a decision/judgment

Referrals to campus resources

- Sometimes the concern a student is bringing to your attention is only a small part of a much larger and complex issue
- In seeking to understand “why” and in delaying your decision/judgment, you may become aware of other issues and challenges the student is experiencing
- Refer students to the wide array of campus services that can support them and help to explore their options

Follow-up after the conversation

- Following your conversation with a student, send an email outlining your understanding of what was discussed
- If a decision/judgment was delayed, let the student know the next steps and timeline for a decision/judgment
- If a decision/judgment was made, outline with terms that were agreed upon
- Encourage the student to contact you immediately if there is a disagreement or concern with your written communication so that any confusion can be minimized

Help students to understand the end goal

- Students who are overwhelmed can lose sight of their end goal, impacting their health and well-being
- Help students focus on their end goal by reminding them to focus on what is important, what they can control and where they need to focus their time and energy