



FOR TEACHING



From the desk of the Teaching and Learning Scholar

“What can I do to pass your class?”

“I need to pass your class to keep my financial aid!”

“Can I do extra credit?”

During the week before final exams, I will likely have similar conversations as anxious students request office appointments. Can you relate? Although I can offer encouragement and provide specific strategies for preparing for my comprehensive final exam, at this point in the semester, I cannot work miracles. To be clear, I do provide extra time for individual appointments and will lead a review prior to the final exam. However, the students' stress is palpable over these next two weeks. The University even schedules therapy dogs to be on campus and provides cookies for study breaks.

Over the years, I have observed that students seem to fall into several distinct categories related to final course grades. The first group is students who understand it is mathematically impossible or highly unlikely that they can earn enough points to pass the course on the final exam. These students have often accepted their fate and can articulate a realistic 'plan B.' Other students are currently sitting 'on the fence' and could pass or fail the course based on their final exam score. Most of these students seem to be hopeful as they prepare but some are unrealistic about their chances. Occasionally, a student who was passing the course performs so poorly on the final exam or assignment that he/she ends up failing. This outcome often comes as a complete shock and is devastating. Finally, there are students who even though they passed the course, are very disappointed, upset, or even angry that they did not earn their desired course grade.

Regardless of the reasons for poor performance, if the outcome is a course failure or a lower than expected course grade, the students' angst is very real. Because most students are emerging adults, I am always concerned about how they will handle this disappointment. Counseling and Consultation Services at NMU offers the following strategies to assist distressed students. First, initiate a meeting to talk to the student in private when both parties are not rushed. Express your concern using behavioral, non-judgmental words. For example, "I'm concerned about you. How are you doing?" Use open-ended statements to help facilitate communication. Avoid judging, evaluating, and criticizing even if the student asks for your opinion. Students may offer implausible excuses and may blame others for their poor performance including their peers or you as the teacher for the rigor of your exams or grading of their assignments. Try to offer hope that things will get better. Suggest that they talk about the failure to their friends, family, the campus-counseling professionals, or career planning staff. It is also important for the student to know that they have options; their academic adviser should be consulted to make course registration changes. Finally, be sure to maintain clear and consistent boundaries and expectations. Faculty must keep their relationship with students professional and adhere to academic expectations, regulations, and schedules.



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Faculty should consult the Academic and Career Counseling Center, Counseling and Consultation Services, or the Dean of Students Office for assistance with unusual student concerns or circumstances. Counseling Services has identified the following signs/symptoms that suggest a student could use some assistance. Faculty should look for signs of unusual behavior or appearance including depressed, lethargic, or hyperactive moods, and changes in personal hygiene or dress. In particular, the following signs may indicate a serious level of distress and may require an immediate Counseling Services appointment or a call to campus police. Signs of serious emotional distress include failure to complete activities of daily living (eating, bathing, sleeping), feelings of helplessness or hopelessness, isolation from friends and family, references to suicide or violence, and any strange or bizarre behavior indicating loss of contact with reality.

During the next few weeks, students will need our support and guidance when an undesirable or unexpected final grade or course failure occurs. Faculty should offer support and seek appropriate professional help to keep students and staff safe. On a positive note, we should celebrate with the students who have excelled in our courses and the 'fence riders' who were successful. I love to hear about seniors receiving job offers and share their excitement as dreams come true. College graduation and new careers are indeed worthy of our celebration!

References

- Academic and Career Counseling Center (n.d.). Northern Michigan University, Retrieved December 2, 2019, from <https://www.nmu.edu/acac/home-page>
- Counseling and Consultation Services (n.d.). Northern Michigan University, Retrieved November 25, 2019, from <https://www.nmu.edu/counselingandconsultation/>
- Dean of Students (n.d.). Northern Michigan University, Retrieved November 25, 2019, from <https://www.nmu.edu/dso/home-page>