



Most faculty have dreaded meeting with a student when the conversation is related to poor academic performance. This month's Teaching Tip will address these challenging conversations by providing a guiding framework, related resources, and campus referral information. Teaching Tips are designed to provide ideas, share educational resources, and promote faculty discussion within disciplines and across campus.

Throughout the semester, faculty are required to help students evaluate their progress which includes addressing poor academic performance. These conversations can be uncomfortable because when confronted, students may display a wide range of emotions from being upset with themselves, blaming others, citing personal circumstances, or exhibiting frustration and anger at you as the professor. At mid-semester, these discussions are relevant because students may still have time to make necessary changes to be successful. Also, the final day to drop a full-semester course with a "W" is March 25, 2022.

When meeting with a student to address an academic concern, faculty may wish to use the following four questions to navigate difficult discussions: 1) What happened? 2) What is the consequence? 3) What changes need to be made? and 4) What help is needed to make these changes? (Baldwin, n.d.).

1. What happened? The first step is to determine the cause by talking with the student to understand what hindered their performance on your exam, paper, or other course assignment (Schwebel, 2019). Upon reflection, often the student will have some idea. They may admit to **insufficient preparation** or they may share information about **personal life stressors** which impeded their ability such as relationship issues, parenting responsibilities, or financial needs forcing them to work extra hours (Schwebel, 2019). Traditional college-age students may also be facing their first experience with death due to the loss of a grandparent, parent, or a peer. During the last two years, **physical illness**, even minor cold symptoms, have prevented class attendance. For some students, COVID related isolation/quarantine contributed to decreases in performance. Finally, **mental health** struggles can certainly hinder learning (Schwebel, 2019). Current world events, such as the war in Ukraine, also have the potential to affect performance.

If a student states, that they have "**no idea**" how they failed, they will need your assistance to explore possible causes. This student may not understand the time commitment required for higher level learning or how to prepare for your exams. The student may have underestimated the time needed to research and write a scholarly paper or required to create a

group presentation/project. Perhaps, the student simply did not understand your assignment instructions or grading criteria. The student, who clearly does not understand what contributed to their underperformance, will need assistance to identify specific cause(s).

However, if the student is in denial stating, *"I'm just a poor test-taker,"* faculty might want to discuss this 'bad test-taker' mentality. Holmes (2021) found more than half of students (56%) believed they were bad test-takers and more than one third indicated someone had told them they were bad test-takers (35%). Dweck's (2006) growth versus fixed mindset might be helpful to frame this discussion. Although everyone has a mixture of both mindsets, persons with greater growth mindsets believe their abilities can be developed through hard work, trying different strategies, and learning from setbacks (Dweck, 2018). Students with more of a fixed mindset mentality, may need coaching to recognize learning is hard work and to reframe failure as an opportunity. For additional insight into noncognitive factors, Henry et al. (2019) offers a model that explores how students' respond to challenges and failures in STEM courses.

2. What is/are the consequence(s)? By mid- semester, students should know their status in your course. If you are using EduCat, be sure the gradebook displays an accurate projection of your students' progress. If students are 'on the fence' in your course, now is the time for an honest conversation. Some students may need your help to calculate their grade in order to make the tough decision whether or not to drop the course. Others may require gentle coaching to understand the likelihood of earning an "A" on the final exam is not realistic. If the student has legitimate extenuating circumstances such as a severe illness, that prohibits completion of the course and meets NMU's other criteria, faculty might consider issuing an ['incomplete' grade](#). Faculty should consult with their department head or the Dean of Students before issuing an "I" grade.

If the student has failed a single exam or assignment, they may still have time to make-up for the low score. Some faculty allow for a single poor performance by dropping the lowest quiz or test score. If a student clearly misunderstood an assignment, the faculty could consider allowing the student to submit a revision with a limit on the maximum score or letter grade.

At the end of the semester, if you are meeting with a student who has failed your course, please note, the consequences might not be obvious. The student will often need your support to process their feelings. Some will need assistance to understand the academic impact such as failure to progress or continue within a major. Most will need assistance to adjust their schedule for the next semester especially if the failed class was a pre-requisite in a major or if it met a General Education or graduation requirement.

3. What changes need to be made? If there's still a chance they could pass the course, what changes need to be immediately made? I think you will be surprised at your students' answers.

- **Insufficient preparation:** Is the student spending enough **'time on task'** to learn the material (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Ask the student how much time they spend studying. The general rule is for every hour a student spends in class, they should spend 2 hour learning outside of class which equates to 8 hours per week for a 4 credit course.
- **Poor time management/organization:** Does the student need help to organize a daily/weekly study plan to allow for regular, distributed learning rather than all-night cramming before an exam (Weimer, 2022)? I encourage students to create a personalized study plan. [Purdue University's Academic Success Center](#) has several forms to assist students. Some students have found the [Study Cycle](#) useful which includes pre/post class suggestions and directions for intense study sessions (Christ, 1997).
- **Lack of study skills:** After an exam, I ask my entire class to discuss which study methods were most effective. When reviewing an exam with an individual, I reassure them that a failure or poor score doesn't mean they cannot be successful in my course (Wherley & Sutterlin, 2022). I help them to identify concepts or areas needing more practice. I also ask the student to describe how they prepared. We review the study suggestions in the syllabus, and I ask the student to identify at least two new strategies to try. The student leaves with hope, motivation, and a new study plan.

4. What help is needed to make these changes? NMU provides [tutoring](#) services for most programs including specialty labs (computer science, math, languages, and writing). The University plans to launch a new partnership this semester with [Knack](#) to offer in-person or online tutoring. Did you know that peer tutors can be granted student access to your course materials in EduCat? Contact the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) to arrange EduCat access for a tutor.

A failed course could mean the student is unable to progress in a major and will likely need a referral to their faculty advisor or embedded success specialist. They also should be encouraged to talk to a [financial aid counselor](#) to determine the impact of repeating a course. If the student is struggling psychologically, they may need a referral to the [Counseling and Consultation Center](#) which offers a variety of services including after-hours care. When making referrals, provide specific contact information such as: names, addresses, phone numbers, and websites for campus resources (Baldwin, n.d.).

In conclusion, don't underestimate the impact of having uncomfortable conversations. This Teaching Tip was inspired by a recent email from a former student who graduated 16 years ago. He wrote to tell me about his "vivid" recollection of an office meeting during which I was honest about his future in nursing and how as a result of that "reality check" he changed his priorities. He became a registered nurse, earned a graduate degree, and is now a certified nurse anesthetist. Although not all students will be grateful or experience positive outcomes, faculty can help to facilitate academic success by engaging in difficult discussions, promoting reflective learning, and facilitating campus referrals.

Please note, the CTL staff and I are available to assist with all of your course design and instructional technology needs. To schedule an appointment, go to [CTL appointments](#) or email ctl@nmu.edu.

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