

Dealing with the Emotional Needs of Students Tips for Faculty & Staff

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The college years can be an exciting time, as students seek opportunity for academic and personal growth. However, along with this excitement come challenges that can become taxing and difficult for students. Stressors may be academic, personal, or social in nature, and can range from situational or unexpected events to chronic problems. Many students cope successfully with the pressures placed on their time and energy while in college. However, others become overwhelmed and find their stress to be unmanageable, which frequently interferes with their ability to learn. And, in some cases, these students may even disrupt the learning of others.

Sources of Stress for Students

Academic/Vocational

- Worry about grades
- Test or performance anxiety
- Difficulty w/instructors, academic advisors, and/or peers
- Poor time management skills
- Inadequate study skills
- Lack of academic motivation, interest, and/or effort
- Uncertainty about academic major and/or vocational goals
- Parental pressures and expectations to succeed

Personal/Interpersonal

- Homesickness and difficulty adjusting to college
- Financial and/or legal concerns
- Conflicts with friends, roommates, and/or romantic partners
- Perfectionist standards and/or unrealistic expectations
- Concerns regarding sexuality
- Personal identity and/or cultural adjustment issues
- Lack of support system
- Unbalanced life style (i.e. work, school, leisure)
- Alcohol and/or substance abuse
- History of psychological and/or medical problems

Situational/Unexpected Events

- Death of family member or close friend
- Relationship or family difficulties
- Academic disappointment
- Chronic or serious injury and/or illness
- Sexual and/or physical assault

Many students initially seek assistance from faculty and staff members because they have frequent contact and may find comfort in going to someone they know. This affords you the opportunity to become aware of students' needs and concerns, and direct them to the necessary campus support services. Also, because emotional distress typically interferes with a student's academic performance and/or social interactions, you are often in a good position to be alert to changes in behavior and recognize when students may be in trouble and in need of assistance. Many of these students have not sought help and may be unaware of the resources available to them. You will not be able to spot every distressed student, nor will every student you approach be willing to accept your assistance. However, communicating your interest and concern to such a student may play an important role in helping the student resolve problems that may be interfering with academic and personal success.

According to the National College Health Assessment (2007), the number of students entering college with a prior psychiatric history or documented disability continues to increase. Also, many chronic psychiatric disorders present themselves for the first time in late adolescence and early adulthood (aka the college years). Thus, it is important for the Florida Tech community to adequately deal with the rising needs of our students. However, often times, faculty and staff wonder how to offer their support and struggle with finding the balance between when intervening may be too much or not enough. The following information is provided with the intention of assisting you in finding a suitable balance.

How can I take a proactive stance?

National trends have shown an increase in suicidal, disruptive, and even violent student behavior on campuses, which interferes with the quality of student life. Florida Tech is not an exception to these national trends, and the number of reported incidents of disturbing behavior has increased in recent years. As faculty and staff members, you are obligated to establish appropriate academic and behavioral standards, as well as encouraged to provide a first-level response to problem student behavior unless you feel threatened or the behavior warrants more serious attention by the university. Therefore, it is important for us to be able to identify problem behaviors and determine the appropriate course of action. The primary goal should be to help prevent problems from occurring. However, if prevention fails, then we should be prepared to identify and make attempts to resolve the problems. Furthermore, while the university environment provides a place for the free exchange of ideas and an atmosphere that allows for debate and disagreement, all classroom behavior and discourse should reflect the values of respect and civility. Thus, students, faculty, and staff, share the responsibility to maintain an appropriate learning environment that should reflect these values. There are a number of ways you can influence how individual student behavior impacts the learning environment. Some strategies that might prove helpful include:

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- **Set and communicate standards for appropriate behavior.**
 - Familiarize yourself with the policies indicated in the student handbook: <http://www.fit.edu/studenthandbook/StudentHandbook.pdf>.
 - Establish expectations for appropriate behavior and spend time discussing them through verbal and written methods on the first day of class. Expectations may include setting high standards of personal and academic integrity, and respecting rights, privileges, and property of other people.
 - Model the attitude and behavior you expect students to exhibit, such as coming to class on time and prepared, as well as utilizing good stress management skills.
 - Enforce the standards for all students and hold them accountable for their actions.
 - **Treat students firmly, but with fairness and respect. Understand that some students lack basic life skills and are playing catch up in many areas.**
 - **Connect with students.**
 - Learn the names of your students.
 - Encourage them to talk to you before or after class, or during office hours.
 - Arrange seating so that you can move among the class.
 - Check in with them regularly and create a climate where it is safe for students to come to you if they are getting “overwhelmed.”
 - Provide help sessions.
 - **Create opportunities for interpersonal connections and work to engage the withdrawn or socially isolated students, such as in group discussions and projects. Also, encourage student involvement in campus events and clubs/organizations.**
 - **Elicit feedback from students and offer consistent, continuous feedback to students. Phrase feedback positively whenever possible.**
 - **Encourage students to seek assistance.**
 - Utilize the Academic Support Center (ASC) for individual/group tutoring.
 - Utilize Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) for academic coaching and/or personal counseling.
 - Consider adding a class service opportunity as a requirement, or for extra credit, to further build community connections.
 - Encourage students with disabilities to self-identify and utilize accommodations.
 - **Consult support services, as we are here to support you and the students.**

Preventative measures are simple tools you can utilize to provide clear communication, as well as impress upon students the importance of respectful behavior and their responsibility for making the campus community a meaningful and productive place. Being proactive and directly, but appropriately, confronting disturbing or disruptive behavior will better support students in their intellectual and personal growth, while contributing to your own sense of safety and well-being.

What are the early warning signs?

At one time or another, everyone feels upset or down. So, chances are high that sometime during the course of students' academic careers, they will feel this way. However, if you notice that a student's academic performance suddenly changes, or the student begins to appear or act in an unusual or atypical fashion, this may be a signal for individual attention. The following may help to identify some early warning signs which, when present over a period of time, suggest the problems may be more than "normal" ones.

Changes in Academic Performance

- Poor preparation and performance, especially if inconsistent with previous work
- Infrequent class attendance or excessive absences and/or tardiness
- Listlessness, lack of energy, or frequently falling asleep in class
- Repeated requests for special consideration, especially when this represents a change from previous functioning
- Avoiding participation, or excessively anxious or agitated when called upon
- Exaggerated emotional response obviously inappropriate to the situation
- Verbal and/or written statements making references to suicide, homicide, death, or other disturbing or threatening remarks, as well as feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, or severe agitation/aggression

Changes in Appearance

- Poor hygiene (i.e. body odor, dirty clothes, etc)
- Dramatic weight loss or weight gain
- Overly nervous, tense, tearful
- Depressed or lethargic mood

Changes in Behavior

- Withdrawal from typical social interactions with family, friends, and peers
- Expressed suicidal thoughts or homicidal threats to others
- Unable to make decisions despite your repeated efforts to clarify or encourage
- Unexplained crying or outbursts of anger or aggressiveness
- Excessive talking or extreme restlessness and irritability
- Impaired or incoherent speech, and/or disjointed or disturbed thoughts
- Destructive behaviors, such as vandalism, criminal activity, and acting out aggressively

It is important to note that the presence of any single indicator by itself may not suggest the student is experiencing unmanageable stress. Ask yourself, "Is it beyond the norm?" Also, look for intense and/or multiple displays of what is described above or overall patterns of behavior, so to prevent misinterpretations or overreactions to a student's change in appearance or behavior. The more indicators present, the more likely it is that the student needs help.

Also, a student may disclose to you significant life events and/or stressors that have resulted in distress for the student and possibly a sudden decrease in academic performance. To help support the student during these difficult times, it may be useful to set aside regular “check-in” times, make accommodations/considerations, and/or assist in referrals to campus programs such as CAPS, ASC, Campus Ministry, or the Health Center.

How can I help a student if I am concerned?

A student may elicit a need for assistance either directly or indirectly. If it is a direct request, make a call to the support service that is indicated (i.e. ASC, CAPS, Health Center) and have the student establish an appointment. Indirect requests for assistance may become apparent by some of the signs listed above. In these situations, it may be helpful for you to step out of the role of evaluator and become a “concerned mentor.” It is important to recognize that some students may be uncomfortable with communicating vulnerability or emotional factors to their faculty, particularly students from another culture. In addition, it is generally helpful to follow-up with the student at a later date to check-in with them and determine if they made contact with the support service.

- Talk in a private setting, when you and the student have time and are not preoccupied.
- Listen actively and carefully, with interest and concern, and display openness.
- Express concern and be specific in sharing your observations and reasons for concern.
- Respect the student’s right to his/her own values and avoid making judgmental, demoralizing, or criticizing remarks.
- Repeat the essence of what the student has told you, by paraphrasing or briefly summarizing what you see as the main point, so your attempts to understand are communicated.
- Involve yourself to the extent you are comfortable. Extending oneself can be a gratifying experience when kept within realistic limits. Be clear about the limits of your ability to help. It is not your role or responsibility to counsel students, but you can help them get the support they need.
- Inform the student of CAPS, ASC, or the Health Center as a resource and discuss a possible referral.
- Suggest, rather than telling or ordering, that the student seek help. In your discussion, help to normalize the situation, stating that many students visit support services for a variety of reasons during their college years. This may reduce the fear and stigma associated with seeking help.
- If the student is receptive to seeing a counselor, provide him/her with CAPS’ phone number, offer them access to your phone so they can make an appointment or accompany them to CAPS.
- If the student resists help and you remain concerned and/or uncomfortable with the situation, contact CAPS to discuss your concerns.

Examples of how you can express your concern may include statements such as:

- “Sounds like you are really struggling with this issue. Many people find it helpful to talk to someone in confidence that is outside of the situation.”
- “I want to help you get the help you need and deserve.”
- “Meeting with a counselor is confidential and will not go on your academic records.”
- “The support services are part of your tuition and are set up to assist you in reaching your goals here at Florida Tech. So, take advantage of them.”

What do we know about the risk for campus violence?

The United States Secret Service and Department of Education found no accurate or consistent psychological profile for individuals who commit violent acts. As a result, any screening instrument purporting to assess for violence may have limited utility on a college campus. However, the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress identifies early warning signs of students who may need intervention. Some of these signs include art, poems, or writings with violent themes, a preoccupation with weapons, making threatening statements, destructive behavior with a failure to take responsibility for their actions (i.e. alcohol/substance abuse, disciplinary/legal problems), and significant changes in mood or behavior (i.e. withdrawn, poor impulse control, low frustration tolerance). In addition, a prior history of depression, suicide gestures, or destructive behavior, past trauma or abuse, or a history of being tormented or teased by others where revenge may be sought may also be risk factors.

Because targeted violence is rarely impulsive and other people typically know something about the potential violent act, building a campus environment and sense of campus community where students, faculty, and staff look out for and are concerned about each other is not only valuable, but also essential. Therefore, a focus on primary prevention, such as activities that reduce risk and enhance communication, is useful in the reduction of violence on a college campus.

How can I address problematic behavior that interferes with academic learning?

Sometimes a student's problems interfere with others' learning. Classroom disruption by students constitutes a significant breach of the behavioral expectations by the university. Thus, you should respond directly to these problematic behaviors and resolve them in an appropriate and professional manner. Experience indicates that despite the common fear that responding to problem behaviors will escalate the behavior, the opposite is true. Concurrently, other students have expressed gratitude when faculty members respond quickly and effectively to problem behaviors. However, if you feel threatened, seek assistance immediately from other faculty and staff, campus security, and/or university personnel.

The following may be some helpful tips to keep in mind when dealing with such situations:

- Ask yourself if you have done anything to contribute to the conflict with a student, such as not making certain expectations clear in your syllabus.
- Attack the behavior and never the student, and address your concerns in a private conversation. Provide a clear description of the problem behavior, why it is a problem, expectations of future behavior, and the specific consequence(s) of continued problems.
- Consult with other instructors and/or university personnel about possible solutions if disruptive behavior exists, such as the Department Chairperson, College Dean's Office, Dean of Students, ASC, or CAPS staff.
- Ask the student to leave the class, if desired, until the concerns are resolved.
- Document all problem behaviors in writing, including the dates, a clear description of the behavior, and the actions taken.
- Follow through on all stated consequences, as failure to do this encourages the continuation of undesirable behavior.
- Keep all interactions with the student calm and respectful.

When should I refer a student for additional help?

Even though you may be genuinely concerned about students and interested in helping them, you may find yourself in situations where it would be better to refer the student to other resources. A referral is usually indicated in the following:

- The problem is more serious than you feel comfortable or capable of dealing with.
- You are extremely busy or experiencing stress in your own life and are unable or unwilling to handle other requests for help.
- You have talked to the student and helped as much as you can, but further assistance is needed.
- You think your personal feelings about the student will interfere with your objectivity.
- The student admits that there is a problem but does not want to talk to you about it.
- The student asks for information or assistance which you are unable to provide.

When you have determined that a student might benefit from professional counseling, it is usually best to present your suggestion for counseling in a non-threatening, but direct manner. Be specific regarding the behaviors that have raised your concerns, and avoid making generalizations about the student. It is not advisable to mislead the student into seeking counseling. For many students, there is a stigma attached to seeking help from a professional, so reassure them that counselors work with people who have a wide range of concerns. Seeking such help is a sign of strength and courage, rather than a sign of weakness or failure.

If you have questions about a student's behavior or the appropriateness of a referral for counseling, you may call CAPS (321-674-8050). Please note that CAPS is not in a position to make judgment concerning the validity of concerns without a thorough assessment of the student, as we may only see the student for a single appointment. However, if we have seen a student for individual counseling over an extended period of time, or have the opportunity to thoroughly assess the student, we may be able to make recommendations.

How do I refer a student for counseling?

As a faculty/staff member, your role in facilitating initiation of services may vary based on the situation.

- **In some instances, it is appropriate simply to direct the student to CAPS.**
 - Suggest the student call or come in to make an appointment.
 - Give them the telephone number and location.
 - Offer to assist the student by calling for an appointment with the student present.
 - Write down the appointment date, time, location, and person with whom the student will be meeting.
- **If you judge the situation to be of an urgent nature...**
 - Call CAPS (321-674-8050) and inform the administrative secretary that you are referring a student who needs to speak with a counselor immediately.
 - Ask to speak to an available counselor to provide further information about your concerns.
 - Sometimes it may be useful or necessary for you to walk the student over to CAPS.
 - Suicidal intent, acute risk of violent behavior, severe loss of emotional control and gross impairment in thinking ability are examples of emergencies.

-If after-hours, utilize the on-call counselor for urgent concerns via Campus Security (321-674-8111).

-Call 911 if you ever feel unsafe or unsure of how to respond.

- **After you have referred the student, follow-up with him/her to show your continued support.** All contacts/visits with CAPS are confidential, therefore information regarding a student cannot be released to you without a student's written permission. However, we can listen to your concerns.
- **If you are concerned about a student but are unsure about the appropriateness of a referral, feel free to consult with someone by:**
 - Submitting a "Student of Concern" report form through the CAPS website
 - Calling the Dean of Students office, CAPS, Health Center, ASC, or Campus Security
- **What about your own distress?** While CAPS does not provide ongoing counseling services for Florida Tech employees, counselors will meet with faculty/staff on a single session basis to assist in making a referral to other sources of help.

It may be helpful to point out that seeking professional help for other problems (i.e. medical, legal, financial problems) is considered good judgment and an appropriate use of resources. It may also help them to know that they do not have to be able to pinpoint what is wrong before they seek assistance. Except in urgent or emergency situations, the option must be left open for the student to accept or refuse counseling. If the student is skeptical or reluctant to pursue counseling for whatever reason, simply express your acceptance of those feelings so that your own relationship with the student is not jeopardized. Give the student an opportunity to consider other alternatives by suggesting that he or she might need some time to think it over. If the student still refuses to seek counseling, then respect that decision, and again leave the door open for possible reconsideration at a later time.

Students may access our services by coming to CAPS (corner of Babcock and Country Club, beside Health Center, Bldg 264), calling 674-8050, or emailing at caps@fit.edu and scheduling an initial appointment. Students, as well as faculty and staff are also welcome to visit CAPS' website (www.fit.edu/caps/) for more information about our services and other helpful resource information. Through ULifeline, Screening for Mental Health, Inc, and Campusblues.com, CAPS offers free and anonymous online screening for depression, alcohol use, eating disorders, and anxiety. The online screenings are informational, not diagnostic, and treatment recommendations are not provided. Online screening is made so that Florida Tech students may find out whether consultation with a CAPS counselor or off campus mental health professional may be helpful.

What policies are in place at Florida Tech to address students who are exhibiting significant emotional or behavioral difficulties?

As a small campus, Florida Tech is in a unique position to become aware of students who are having difficulties at an early point during any given semester. Representatives from Campus Security, CAPS, the Dean of Students Office, Residence Life, the Health Center, and ASC, as well as a Risk Management representative and a liaison to the Provost's Office meet biweekly, at a minimum, during the Fall and Spring semesters to discuss students that may be of concern. During these meetings, decisions are made regarding how best to intervene with these students to assure their success at Florida

Tech, as well as exploring what safety issues for themselves and others may need to be addressed. This committee also participates in continuing education activities related to current trends, policy and procedure developments, and best practices and standards to follow as it relates to college students in distress.

At times, addressing these issues require a delicate balance between individual rights, federal laws, such as the American Disabilities Act, and the need for licensed professionals to comply with professional standards and state laws regarding confidentiality and its limits. However, there are no barriers, including FERPA, which would prevent faculty and staff from communicating information to this committee regarding a student of concern. FERPA was not designed to prevent communication between Deans or professors, who may share student's academic records, nor was it designed to block communication between students' parents and the university. It only restricts a discussion of a student's academic record, not interactions, or observations of unusual behavior or some form of mental health issue. Additionally under FERPA, members of the committee described above would fall under a category of having a legitimate educational interest, as well as being classified as appropriate parties who "need to know" in cases of health and safety emergencies when it is necessary to protect the health and safety of the campus community. A briefing paper from the National Association of College and University Attorneys, released August 6, 2007, addresses in a Q & A format concerns you may have about communicating critical student information in an emergency. The paper is available at the CAPS website (www.fit.edu/caps/), under the link for "Resources for Faculty and Staff."

Admittedly, it may at times seem frustrating that you are in turn not provided with tangible information, such as whether a student is a client, the diagnosis of a student, if a student is currently taking medication, etc., if you were to call CAPS. However, other members of the committee, such as Rodney Bowers, the Dean of Students, may be able to communicate more broadly about a student's behavior and discuss your concerns. Florida Tech's system of managing students of concern has been significantly revised and improved over the past several years, and does serve as a model for other universities. Additionally, our policies and programs are consistent with guidelines developed by many of the committees formed following the Virginia Tech tragedy to address these issues.

We all want our campus to be healthy, safe environments where students, faculty, and staff feel welcomed and able to work toward their goals. When students encounter difficulties and barriers to these goals, the committee, as well as other support services mentioned earlier may serve as a helpful resource.

Quick Reminders to Remember

- Display openness to the student.
- Listen actively, with interest and concern, for requests and intentions.
- Avoid alarm reactions/emotionality and promising secrecy.
- Talk in a calm, even voice, despite the student's level of emotionality.
- Repeat back the essence of what the student has told you.
- Avoid making judgmental and/or moralizing remarks.
- Involve yourself to the extent that you are comfortable.

Overall, having a positive interaction with the students you work with can be the best form of early identification and intervention. Once you observe and identify early warning signs of distress, act on them by consulting with someone or referring the student to the appropriate sources of help.

Helpful Contact Information...

You may find it helpful to consult with any of the offices below prior to confronting problem behaviors. These offices all serve on the Student of Concern committee, which convenes bi-weekly to discuss and address student behavior that may be of concern.

- If you need to consult with someone about a student who is disruptive in any educational setting or have questions about whether a student's disruptive behavior can be addressed through the university judicial system, contact the **Dean of Students**, so they can assess the situation and make appropriate referrals.

Rodney Bowers **Dean of Students**
rbowers@fit.edu **x8080**

- If you need to consult with someone about a student who is showing signs of emotional distress, mental illness, or difficulty in adjusting to college life. Or, if you don't know whether to be concerned about a behavior, contact **CAPS** for guidance and referrals. If after hours, contact Campus Security, who can have the on-call counselor contact you.

James R. Oelschlager **Director** **Robyn Coombs** **Assistant Director**
joelschl@fit.edu **x8050** rcoombs@fit.edu **x8050**

- If you need to consult with someone about a student who is prone to leave the University for any number of issues not addressed by other units in this document, contact the **VP for Enrollment Management** who is accountable for the overall student retention efforts.

Gary Hamme **Vice Provost for Enrollment Management**
Gary@fit.edu **x8832**

- If you need to consult with someone about a student who is showing signs of academic difficulty, where extra assistance may be indicated, such as tutoring or academic accommodations, contact the **Academic Support Center**.

Rodd Newcombe **Director**
newcombe@fit.edu **x7110**

- If you need immediate assistance in responding to a threat to your own safety or the safety of others, contact **Campus Security** or 911. The department is staffed 24 hours per day and can dispatch law enforcement personnel to assist you at your campus location. **Off campus and satellite locations should dial 911.**

Kevin Graham **Director**
kgraham@fit.edu **x8111**

Previous Beyond the Classrooms including Recognizing Students At Risk, Alcohol and College Life, Suicide and College Students, Managing Disruptive Student Behavior on Campus Unraveling the Mystery of Retention, and Retention Part II: The Freshman Class of 2006 are available at the CAPS website www.fit.edu/caps/