



University of Pittsburgh

Division of Student Affairs

738 William Pitt Union
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15260
412-648-1006

TO: Faculty

FROM: Kathy Humphrey, Vice Provost and Dean of Students

DATE: October 30, 2013

SUBJECT: Guide for Helping Distressed Students

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kathy Humphrey".

Institutions of higher education strive to maintain an environment that is safe and conducive to learning. As faculty, we play an important role in promoting the safety and well-being of our students as well as each other. At the University of Pittsburgh, student violence on campus has been relatively rare; nonetheless, we need to be prepared to recognize potential threats and take appropriate action when necessary. We have all seen that tragedies at schools and universities are often sad lessons if the possible consequences of mental health and behavioral problems are left unaddressed. The information below provides basic advice to faculty for appropriate responses to students with mental health and behavioral problems. Additional information is contained in the *Faculty and Staff Guide for Helping Distressed Students*, which can be accessed at <http://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/distressedstudentguide>

Faculty or staff members are often the first to observe or hear of student distress or inappropriate behavior that may indicate the need for professional help or require disciplinary measures. We must proactively address potential problems before they escalate, and this may require consultation with mental health professionals or others. There is no one psychological profile of students capable of acting violently against themselves or others; we should therefore treat every problem as potentially significant.

Of course, it is important that the University has a protocol for dealing with student mental health difficulties and aggressive or disruptive behavior. The centerpiece of Pitt's protocol is coordination between campus constituencies. Coordination between your school, the University Counseling Center, University of Pittsburgh Police Department, Student Health Service, Office of Student Conduct, and Disability Resources and Services is imperative. Our focus should be on prevention as well as effective response. Our aim is to identify and help troubled students before they reach a point of doing harm to themselves or others. And our most effective tool is communication.

General Guidelines for Response

Each case of student behavioral or mental health problems will vary in complexity and may require intervention in different ways. Sensitivity to multicultural issues is important. Remember, you have several offices at your disposal for consultation. It is best to share information with the professional offices at Pitt to help you come to a successful resolution. The following are general recommendations.

What if I have a general concern about a student's welfare?

When a mental health or behavioral problem is reported or observed, the student should be approached discreetly and sensitively by the class instructor and the student's advisor should be notified. The student may be encouraged to seek assistance from the University Counseling Center, but if the student refuses help, the advisor or instructor may seek advice from staff at the University Counseling Center, or a meeting may be scheduled with the director of the Office of Student Conduct in the Division of Student Affairs.

If a student's behavior is inappropriate, the class instructor should inform the student that his or her classroom conduct or interpersonal behavior is disruptive. The class instructor also should notify the student of the expectations set forth in the Student Code of Conduct (see <http://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/studentconduct/>). If there have been violations of the code, then the student's department chair, advisor, and University Conduct Officer should be notified.

What about confidentiality?

In accordance with our obligations to students under University policy and federal and state law, faculty and staff must treat behavioral issues with sensitivity and operate within standards of confidentiality. Information about the student should be communicated only to those with a legitimate need to know and must not be shared with colleagues who are not associated with the issues at stake or with other students, unless the student has given permission or such communication is necessary to protect the health and safety of the student or others. In many situations, information may be shared with family members. As faculty, know that you have resources in the Division of Student Affairs, Office of the Provost, Office of General Counsel, the University Counseling Center, and University police to make this determination. When a student's emotional problem or inappropriate behavior affects academic performance, interferes with class instruction, or involves other students, faculty, or staff, the student's advisor, department chair, and the University Conduct Officer should be notified immediately. Nothing prevents you from sharing information with relevant University administrators.

What if there is an unusual event or the student's condition appears to be deteriorating?

When an unusual event occurs that impacts the student or the student's condition appears to be worsening, it is even more important that you seek advice from the appropriate qualified

professionals, either from the University Counseling Center, the director of the Office of Student Conduct, or Disability Resources and Services (if a student has claimed a disability and registered with that office). Threats of harm or serious breaches of discipline must be taken seriously at all times. The student's advisor, department chair, and the school's student affairs leadership also should be notified. In cases in which a student persists in behavior that violates the rights or welfare of others, University police should be notified, and the director of the Office of Student Conduct should be contacted.

What do I do in an emergency?

There are situations in which strict observation of confidentiality may be waived, including in the event of actual or imminent danger, a threat being posed by the student, or significant disruptive behavior. Behavior itself is not an "educational record" and thus is not subject to the confidentiality provisions of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. This may include behavior by which students threaten themselves or others. In the event of an emergency, we must not allow students to compromise their own welfare or that of other persons. If there is a present threat to the safety or well-being of the student or others, appropriate emergency services should be summoned immediately, and the staff or faculty who are first responders to the threat should take every reasonable precaution to avoid putting themselves or others in danger. This should entail calling University police at 811. Responders should seek professional assistance immediately and not allow a situation to develop in which their safety or others' safety is compromised. Eventually, the director of the Office of Student Conduct should be notified of any violations of the Student Code of Conduct.

Conclusion

I would like to thank the staff of the University Counseling Center and the Graduate School of Public Health for assisting in compiling this information and the online guide. I hope you find the enclosed information useful and I wish you a safe, productive school year. Please, when in doubt, consult.