

STUDENTS IN CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

Professors involved in counselling and advocacy deal with students facing difficult issues which range from depression to assault. The learning curve is very steep and these issues can be overwhelming, personally and professionally. Strategies for coping with a counselling-advocacy position, including identifying existing resources, dealing with legal issues, and knowing your own limits are presented. Ideas for accommodating a counselling-advocacy role while still carrying out regular teaching duties are shared. Several composite case studies are presented to illustrate typical situations and their outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Combining a regular faculty position with a counselling-advocacy role can be a challenge. Engineers are trained, obviously, in matters relating to engineering. Nevertheless, faculty often find themselves acting in a counselling role dealing with student problems which range from simple academic issues to crisis situations. The authors have dealt with students, mostly but not exclusively female, with problems such as: depression, family conflict; harassment, illegal drug use; sexual assault, stalking, suicidal behaviour, rape and unexpected pregnancy. Students find their way to us through a variety of channels including referrals from staff and professors who will not or cannot deal with students in crisis. Some are brought by friends. The faculty who are prepared to deal with counselling-advocacy are an obvious first line of defence within engineering.

ON-CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES

For those in a counselling-advocacy role it is essential to identify and use existing university resources. It is important to establish a rapport with these groups and find out what each is able to do and under what circumstances. You will then be able to redirect a student or obtain immediate help to deal with a student in crisis. Resources likely to be

found on campus include groups such as: Equity Services (Status of Women, Mediation Centre, Aboriginal Centre, Human Rights Educator, Race Relations Officer); Student Counselling Services; University Legal Counsel; Student-Run Legal Advisory Services, Dean's Office; Registrarial Services; Medical Services; Awards Office; Housing Office; and Campus Police.

Equity Services understand existing university policies and may have brochures related to issues such as sexual harassment. They are often prepared to give advice over the phone and are knowledgeable in legal matters. Student Counselling Services have the expertise to deal with very difficult situations. Be prepared to intervene on the student's behalf by identifying the situation as a crisis. Both groups may offer workshops on understanding counselling-related issues such as recognizing suicidal behaviour. A student-run, but faculty supervised, legal advice service is an excellent place for students to find legal advice for a nominal fee.

University Legal Counsel is critical. A professor cannot normally pick up the phone and speak to university lawyers. Find out, in advance, who the contact person is for your university. You may encounter illegal activities such as drug use or you may be dealing with a threat to life. Your liability in these cases should be discussed with the university. For example, to what extent will the university support you if you act as a counsellor and are sued as a result of your actions? Also, what activities must be reported to an officer of the university?

Deans are typically considered officers of the university. It may be essential to inform your Dean of your actions in certain cases. Deans are able to affect high-level inter-university and intra-university actions such as an emergency transfer from one university to another or arranging emergency shelter in residence. Registrarial Services have the advantage of knowing every academic rule in the institution. There is often some sort of academic fallout associated with a student in crisis. Registrarial Services are in a position to suggest course substitutions and to provide guidance in writing letters of appeal.

Medical Services provide a useful connection particularly if a student has a medical/emotional difficulty. Examples of these issues include clinical depression and unexpected pregnancy. On several occasions we have successfully teamed with Medical Services in developing an academic approach which serves the student's medical needs.

The Awards and Housing Offices are also important areas. The Awards Office may be able to assist with an emergency bursary although it may take up to 24 hours to make the funds available. The Housing Office may be in a position to provide a room in residence on an emergency basis.

The Campus Police or security office may be the only place on campus that is open 24-hours a day and has access to the home phone numbers of senior administrators. It may be best place to get help in a serious situation such as an imminent suicide or assault. Campus Police or security may also be helpful in obtaining evidence such as photographs or in accompanying students to difficult situations. You will need to determine the mandate and capabilities of your on-campus police or security. The more difficult cases may need to be referred to city police.

Community resources should also be identified. These local services can be helpful especially for students who are uncomfortable with on-campus services. Unfortunately there is little feedback as to the success of the contact. Several resources to which the authors have referred students include: sexual assault support lines; immigrant and visible minority support groups; distress centres; centres of faith who offer counselling; family physicians; and city police.

DOCUMENTATION

Our interactions with trained counsellors stress the importance of documentation. Since your actions could be questioned, it is important to keep a diary or journal of your activities. The authors tend to use initials to protect the student's privacy. In the event that case records are subpoenaed, you may be required to identify the individuals referred to in the diary. A standard Case Information Form, such as is shown in Appendix I, can be helpful in documenting complex situations.

YOUR LIMITS AS A COUNSELLOR

As an engineer it is important to know your own personal limits as well as your limits in the counselling sense. Since engineering professors are not trained counsellors, there is a tendency to take problems home or to become too personally involved. Sharing your experiences with a colleague, or someone from the on-campus resources, may be helpful in putting problems in perspective without violating student confidentiality.

When dealing with students, it is important to be clear about your advisory limits. We use these guidelines: always tell the student you are not a trained counsellor; do not promise complete confidentiality; warn the student that you may, by law, be required to report to others¹; always involve the student by explaining each step, series of steps or options you are suggesting; ask the student's age since a minor should be referred to an outside agency; do not to promise to fix the problem for the student in crisis; be aware that your personal beliefs may conflict with the student's beliefs in sensitive areas such as culture and religion; since your safety may be at risk, colleagues, staff or security should be reachable by phone and should respond quickly to any request for help; avoid working in an isolated office.

TEACHING, RESEARCH AND ADMINISTRATIVE LOAD

Counselling and advocacy are very time consuming. If possible, obtain teaching relief. In times of limited budgets teaching relief is hard to come by and alternative strategies need to be pursued. For example, teaching multiple sections of the same course reduces class

¹ For us, confidentiality cannot be maintained when there is an indication of child sexual abuse, when someone intends to kill him or herself, and when there is an imminent danger to others. Our instructions are to contact Children's Aid in the former case and the police in the latter cases.

preparation time and exam setting time; teaching small senior elective courses with no labs or tutorials reduces student contact hours.

It may also be possible to reduce the supervision of honours and graduate students. Seek the advice of your Dean or Departmental Chair concerning your future as a professor if you plan to take this step. If tenure and promotion are based largely on the 'publish or perish' philosophy, you may put your career at risk if you become too involved in counselling at the expense of your research program.

Faculty are often required to carry an administrative load typically through committee work. There is a tendency to want a 'woman on every committee'. It may be possible to control your involvement in committees by having your counselling-advocacy role identified as an administrative load.

COMPOSITE CASE STUDIES

Three composite case studies, drawn from the authors' home university and other Canadian universities with which the NSERC/Nortel Chair has been involved, illustrate how we have dealt with serious issues.

I -- Family Conflict

Background: An 18-year old female student, recipient of a prestigious scholarship, wished to study on-campus in the evening. She was thrown out of her home on a winter night with no coat or glasses after an argument with her parents who forbade her to stay on-campus after classes were over. The student called a professor who suggested she stay with friends for the night. The professor contacted one of the authors by phone.

Interim action: The student was given warm clothing and taken to get prescription lenses by friends and professors. Subsequently we have been advised to be very cautious in lending money to students or to actively assist in this way since giving money to a student or having a student stay in your home is a potential conflict of interest. An emergency bursary was given to the student. She repaid all debts. Mediation between the parents and the student was suggested and a suitable arrangement was made so that she could live at home. Permission to study on-campus or with friends in the evenings was given although a curfew was required. A few days later, her parents withdrew her from the program using her university PIN. She was told she would be flown to the parents' homeland the next day. The female student ran away from home and again requested help.

This was a difficult situation. The student had little hope of continuing her studies. Her summer earnings and scholarship were in her parents' bank account. She was very young and inexperienced. Emergency shelter was arranged. Mediation was tried, this time unsuccessfully. The family physician was contacted. His attempt to resolve the situation was also unsuccessful.

Resolution: The student gave up any hope of continuing in her university program and found a low level job to support herself. She was given a home with a friend's family until she had the resources to live on her own. Her parents left the city. We understand she may have gone on to another college at some point. The following resources were involved: Equity Services, Children's Aid Society, Awards Office, local religious group, volunteer social worker, family physician.

II -- Harassment/Stalking

Background: For several weeks, obscene messages about a female student appeared on lockers, walls and desks. The female student suspected a male student with whom there was some personal history but had no proof. She had also been subjected to verbal abuse and veiled hints about her safety. The student was identified by two male friends who were anxious that she seek help.

Interim Action: The student was advised about safety and given a package of taxi chits to use for travel to and from campus. She agreed to never be alone on campus. She declined to inform her family of her situation. The student was advised on a number of choices as to how she might respond. She began with another verbal request that he stop. Campus police then contacted him to suggest that whoever was writing the obscenities ought to stop. She then wrote a letter requesting that he stop talking to her and writing things about her on lockers and so on. Obscene messages continued to appear for several weeks. At each occurrence, photographs were taken and then the offending material was removed. The female student's academic work began to suffer. Arrangements were made to support her need for deferred exams.

Resolution: The female student reached the point where she made a formal complaint of sexual harassment. The male student was confronted, by the Dean, with the photographs and the formal complaint of sexual harassment. There was an admission of guilt. The male student apologized in writing and agreed to counselling. The following resources were involved: Dean's Office, Equity Services, Campus Police, Registrarial Services, Student Counselling Services.

III -- Stalking/Assault

Background: A female student was being followed about campus and near her home by a male student who kept making suggestions about a personal relationship. The female student became increasingly uncomfortable when the male student did not respond to her verbal requests that he leave her alone. The student identified herself after the male student had grabbed her around the neck and pulled her down a hall backwards. He had been laughing at the time. There were no witnesses to this assault.

Interim action: The female student was given taxi chits for her travel and advised to protect herself at all times. She began to travel in a group. Several other female students came forward to indicate that the male student had behaved similarly to them in the past but they had ignored him and he had eventually stopped.

Resolution: The complainant wrote a letter to the male student asking that he not call her, follow her, sit next to her or come to her home. She gave the letter to the male student while accompanied by campus police. The Departmental Chair agreed to be present at the beginning of the next class in the event that the male student continued to follow her. However, in this case the male student complied immediately and the two students continued in the program with no further incidents. The following resources were involved: Equity Services, Departmental Chair, Campus Police.

CLOSING REMARKS

Few professors in engineering are trained to provide counselling. Nevertheless, students appear at our doors with problems that need resolution. We use on- and off-campus resources to deal with these situations. We document the problems we encounter and use some guidelines when working with students. When possible, it is helpful to reduce teaching, research and administrative loads. We hope that our experiences will help others in similar roles.

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APPENDIX I - CARLETON UNIVERSITY EQUITY SERVICES CASE INFORMATION FORM

Name	Date	
Initials	Age	M F
Type	harassment, sexual assault, other	
Address		
Phone(s)		
University Status/Position		
Department		
Alleged respondent		
Initials	Age	M F
Relationship to complainant		
Alleged Incident (describe)		
Provided the above with information (check)		

- Review of university policy/procedure
- Gave copy of relevant policy
- Gave copy of information brochures
 - sexual harassment
 - neutral language
 - mediation centre
 - other
- Advised to seek help from union or other
- Advised of informal resolution options
 - writing a letter
 - face-to-face discussion
 - mediation centre
 - other
- Advised of formal resolution options
 - relevant human rights commission
 - report to city police
 - report to campus police
 - civil court options
- Explained
 - keeping of records
 - my role
 - possibility of files being subpoenaed
 - encouraged complainant be discreet/tactful
- Complainant wanted
 - no action at this time
 - specific agreed on actions (describe)
 - formal complaint lodged