DEALING WITH STUDENTS IN CRISIS
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*Crisis – a crucial point or situation; a turning point

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On the cover: In Chinese, two characters depict the word for Crisis. The upper character represents danger, while the lower one conveys hidden opportunity.
Introduction

To succeed in the mission to educate our diverse student body, it is incumbent on us to participate in the personal development along with the academic development of students presenting with emotional and social problems. We anticipate that many students arrive academically under prepared and offer remediation. We similarly need to offer students assistance in overcoming the emotional barriers to achieving educational goals. Although a crisis is usually experienced as a danger, we can seize it as a hidden opportunity to help students become mature learners. The primary purpose of this handbook is to help faculty and staff recognize students who are at risk of failure due to unmediated crises, and to suggest possible interventions.

What is a crisis?
When a person experiences or perceives a threat to self-esteem, significant relationships, or role mastery, anxiety and fear are aroused. When the usual coping strategies do not restore an internal sense of confidence that these feelings can be tolerated and managed, a crisis state ensues.

The person’s usual coping mechanisms are overwhelmed and the anxiety and fear create a heightened tension. It is in this climax of tension that a window of opportunity for growth is opened. The need to relieve the tension increases the motivation to explore alternative resolutions to end the psychological disruption.

A crisis needs to be distinguished from an emergency.

What is an emergency?
An emergency is an event that requires immediate attention and prompt action to establish safety. If someone is hurt, or there is an immediate danger, the Office of Public Safety in the Namm Lobby must be contacted immediately at ext. 5550. The Office of Public Safety is open 24 hours a day.
Recognizing a Student Crisis

A crisis may be related to family, medical, legal, financial or academic stressors. A student who is tearful, agitated, disoriented, withdrawn, hostile, or enraged may be showing warning signs of being in crisis. The following are some behavior patterns to be aware of:

- Excessive absences; indications of poor health.
- Marked decline in performance, sudden or gradual inconsistency between classroom and test performance.
- Very limited participation in class; unusually inhibited or withdrawn behavior.
- Writing samples expressing personal issues about which student is troubled.
- Illogical or confused thinking or writing.
- Clearly inappropriate behavior: outbursts, bizarre speech, constant daydreaming, unprovoked crying, excessive giggling, continuous provocative behavior (sarcasm, hostile remarks, frequent interruptions, etc).
- Signs of alcohol or drug use:
  - drowsiness or sleeping in class
  - vacant, empty stare
  - disoriented response
  - change in speech patterns
- Disorganized grooming and/or unusually poor personal hygiene (not obviously an intentional lifestyle).
- The student tells you s/he is troubled, confused, tense, worried, unable to study, nervous on tests, preoccupied with external difficulties (money, family, friends, lover, religion, job, etc.); or, internal conflicts (career direction, sexuality, academic ability, low self-esteem, etc.).
- Unusually demanding of time or dependent (e.g., requests many conferences without significant content, hangs around after class with no special purpose).
Guidelines for Helpers

The faculty member is usually the first member of the college community to notice a troubled student. It is challenging to help someone who is under significant stress and not coping well. When dealing with someone in crisis, it is important to be sensitive to how the interaction is going. Do you understand what the problem is? Can you meet the person’s expectations in this encounter? Pay attention to your own feelings of safety. Be alert to cues that you may need a professional consultation from the Counseling Center, or, in an emergency, immediate assistance from the Office of Public Safety.

- **Always seek counseling consultation when a student expresses suicidal thoughts.**
- Be aware of your own tolerance limits.
- Fear can be contagious, monitor your ability to stay calm.
- Crying generally indicates the person is upset, but not necessarily in crisis.
- Anxious, tense, fearful students are responsive to reduced stimulation, moving to a quiet space, being calm, understanding and reassuring.
- Be respectful, but do not pretend to understand a student with confused thoughts who is out of touch with reality. Do not agree or disagree with delusions or hallucinations.
- When dealing with a student who is agitated or frustrated with you, be mindful that you are seen as the person with power. Express empathy, and paraphrase what has been said to be clear that you understand.
- Remain calm and keep a safe distance from someone who is angry, hostile or demanding. Talking quietly and calmly yourself is more effective than telling the student to “calm down.”
- Inquire whether the student has a relationship with any of the counseling professionals in the college and suggest utilizing the available services.
It is not necessary to wait for a crisis to refer a student to counseling. A student whose behavior in class, peer relationships, or relationship to authority is interfering with success can benefit from a referral to counseling. Counselors have the professional training to understand emotional communications. They can help students understand the nature of various problems and conflicts, clarify how the problems affect behavior and academic success, explore alternatives and make referrals for on-going assistance.

Faculty and staff work with a large and diverse student body and it would be impossible to understand and respond to all of the needs and frustrations presented. Additionally, the faculty member is limited by the reality of the student teacher relationship, which includes enforcing standards and does not automatically include the privilege of confidentiality. Therefore, an important role of the faculty member is to recognize that a student is in trouble, to help the student recognize that the problem is an obstacle to academic productivity, and to make a referral to the Counseling Department.

**Step One:** Request meeting with the student privately after class (or determine a mutually agreeable time).

**Step Two:** Give your reason for seeing the student, e.g.: “I’m concerned about your progress in this class.” Indicate what you have observed that makes you concerned without interpretation. For example, “I notice that you do not work with your group members on assigned projects,” or, “you often complain about the assignments and do not submit them on time.”

**Step Three:** Allow the student to talk and help the student elaborate. Ask the student if s(he) is aware of the behavior and how they understand it. Remain calm, listen respectfully without
judgement or advice giving, paraphrase to indicate understanding, and do not pretend to understand what you do not understand.

**Step Four:** Recommend professional counseling. Validate that difficult circumstances or feelings interfere with performance or concentration. Inquire if the student has seen a counselor in the counseling center, student support or SEEK office. If yes, ask if it might be helpful to discuss the problem together. If not, suggest that meeting with a counselor can help a student get on track. Talking to a counselor can relieve some of the worry, counselors can help negotiate academic accommodations if needed, and make referrals for various services or resources. **Emphasize that services are free and confidential.**
Students Who Decline Counseling Referral

Counseling is offered to students as a voluntary support service. It is inappropriate and ineffective to use counseling for disciplinary or enforcement purposes. However, students whose behavior causes serious concern or otherwise interferes with the functioning of the class, should be brought to the attention of the Office of the Dean of Students and Academic Services (x5430). The Dean’s office will determine if such student requires supportive outreach, monitoring for safety, academic disciplinary proceedings or accommodations.

Additionally, the Counseling Center offers assistance to faculty members in the form of consultations. The consultant is a counseling staff member who acts as a partner to the instructor in developing strategies to manage the emotional climate in the classroom. This is useful when an instructor is overburdened by worries about a fragile student, or when the deleterious effects that a problematic student has on the functioning of the class frustrate the instructor.

Counselors have the professional training to understand emotional communications behind difficult or acting out behaviors. Although utilizing this service requires that the instructor allocate time beyond the classroom, it is often less demanding than struggling alone to counteract the negative effects on the class. Both the Departments of Academic and Student Affairs encourage instructor utilization of counseling consultation.

Follow the procedures listed below when dealing with students unwilling to accept counseling referral:

- Submit documentation on the student’s behavior to the Dean of Students and Academic Services. The dean decides whether it is appropriate to send a “concerned behavior letter” to the student requesting that he/she see a crisis intervention specialist or wait until there is additional documentation.
The instructor may directly initiate a consultation or a classroom observation from the Crisis Intervention Specialist.

If the student continues to decline services and the behavior is still of concern, the dean has the following options:

- recommend that the instructor have a counseling consultation to obtain support in his/her efforts to maintain a positive learning environment.
- refer the case to a hearing officer.
- refer the case to the Faculty Student Disciplinary Committee.
- temporarily suspend the student and then initiate other options.
Special Circumstances

Suicidal students

- All suicide threats or gestures should be taken seriously. If a student is **imminently in danger** (e.g.: carrying a weapon, or informing you of an immediate plan) contact the **Office of Public Safety at ext. 5550** in the Namm Lobby adjacent to the elevators.

- If **no immediate danger**, the student should be escorted to the **Counseling Center (Namm 108, ext. 5030)** to speak with a counselor (if this occurs after counseling hours, proceed to the Office of Public Safety).

- If the student **refuses to go to the Counseling Center**, immediately file an incident report at the Office of Public Safety and advise the Counseling Center Director (Namm 108, ext. 5030).

Violent Students

- It may be possible to **avert out of control behavior** by removing a student who is about to erupt. If you feel safe, you can ask the student to accompany you to discuss the problem in the department office or other place where help is available.

- **If you do not feel safe** during a class meeting, contact the **Office of Public Safety at ext. 5550** or send a student there for assistance (Namm Lobby adjacent to the elevators).

- If violence has occurred or seems imminent, the university peace officer will restrain the student, contact the police, issue a citation to the student and inform the Dean of Students and Academic Services.

- Use your discretion to determine whether or not to dismiss the class until the next session. The Dean has the
discretion to refer the matter to a hearing officer, the Faculty Student Disciplinary Committee, or suspend the student, pending outcome of disciplinary hearing.

- If the suspension is not warranted, the Dean of Students and Academic Services can request that the instructor consult with a Crisis Intervention Specialist. The purpose of the consult is to formulate a plan to re-enter the student into the class, and re-establish a safe learning environment.

**Threatening Students**

- If a student behaves inappropriately, but there is no immediate threat of physical violence to anyone, it is important to **identify the specific behaviors that feel menacing or troubling**. The student may stand too close, speak in a raised voice, mutter incoherently, be discourteous, refuse to comply with reasonable directives, submit work with bizarre or threatening content, make veiled or overt threats to you or others in the class.

- If you suspect mental illness, inquire if the student is known to student support services and request a consultation with the student’s counselor. The counselor can intercede or suggest interventions most likely to be well received and effective.

- Do not be coerced by aggressive or pushy behavior in order to feel safe. **Ask the student to change the behavior.** Setting a limit (denying a request for good reasons, asking the student to behave appropriately) at the beginning can avoid a more serious situation later.
Do not meet the student in an isolated place such as behind the closed door of your office. Use a public or semi-public area, a room with an open door adjacent to others. You can request someone else to be present with you, or for public safety to monitor an interaction.

If you do not feel safe setting a limit, this is an indication that you need help. **Speak with your department chair to determine what additional support may be helpful** (academic authority, disciplinary, counseling, security).

If a student cannot or will not change his/her behavior after clear and repeated requests to do so, you should **initiate disciplinary action**. Write a memo to the Office of the Dean of Student Affairs and Academic Services detailing the specific behaviors and steps taken to address the situation. They will determine if the problem also occurs in other classes. Whenever reasonable, they will make an effort to mediate the problem. If warranted, they will impose sanctions on the student including exclusion from class or campus.
Important Contacts

To report an emergency:
Office of Public Safety
Namm Lobby (adjacent to elevators)
718.260-5550
OPEN 24 HOURS A DAY

To make a counseling referral for a student – or,
To request a counseling consultation or classroom observation:
Counseling Services Center
Namm 108
718.260-5030
Ms. Cynthia Bink, M.A., Director
Crisis Intervention Specialists:
Paul Schwartz, LCSW
Debbie Waksbaum, LCSW

To initiate a student disciplinary action:
Office of the Dean of Students and Academic Services
Namm 300
718.260-5430
Faithe Gomez, MSW
Executive Assistant to the Vice President of Enrollment and Student Affairs

To negotiate accommodations for students with disabilities:
Student Support Services
Atrium 237
718.260-5143
Faith Fogelman, Director