Assisting Students in Distress

As faculty and staff members, you may find yourself responding to a student who is experiencing difficulty or is in crisis or distress. If you need assistance in assessing the seriousness of the situation or in determining how to best proceed, there are a number of support services available to assist you and the student. Initially, you may choose to utilize your department resources. In addition, there are other staff members in the College who, although not trained counselors can provide initial assistance, help identify issues, and refer students to appropriate resources. Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) and the Cornell Police are additional resources.

While some staff has responsibilities with specific populations, anyone can be contacted for any reason.

Fran Shumway, Director  Engineering Advising  (607) 255-7414
Beth Howland, Associate Director  Engineering Advising  (607) 255-7414
Melissa Hutson Bazley  Engineering Advising  (607) 255-7414
Sara Hernandez, Director  Diversity Programs  (607) 255-6403
Jaime Joyner, Assistant Director  Diversity Programs  (607) 255-6403
Betsy East, Assistant Dean  Undergraduate Student Services  (607) 255-8240
Counseling & Psych. Services (CAPS)  Gannett Health Services  (607) 255-5208
Cornell Police  911 or (607) 255-1111

Indicators of Students in Distress

Often there are indicators that a student is experiencing difficulty long before a situation escalates to crisis proportions. If there is general knowledge and awareness of these indicators, you may be able to respond earlier in the situation. Be alert to signs of difficulty, some of which are listed below:

**Academic Indicators:**
- Deterioration in quality/quantity of work
- Missed assignments or exams
- Repeated absences from class or from research lab
- Disorganized or erratic performance
- Continual seeking of special provisions (late papers, extensions, postponed examinations, and projects)
- Essays or creative work that indicates extremes of hopelessness, social isolation, rage, fear, or despair

**Emotional Indicators:**
- Direct statements indicating distress, family problems, or other difficulties
- Unprovoked anger or hostility
- Exaggerated personality traits; more withdrawn or more animated than usual
- Excessive dependency
- Excessive tearfulness or tears seemingly unrelated to a specific problem
- Expressions of hopelessness, fear, or worthlessness
- Expressions of concern about a student in the class or lab by his/her peers
- A hunch or gut-level reaction that something is wrong

**Physical Indicators:**
- Deterioration in physical appearance
- Lack of personal hygiene
- Excessive fatigue
- Visible changes in weight
- Coming to class bleary-eyed, hung over, or smelling of alcohol
**Emergency Safety Risk Indicators**

- Any statement (written or oral) that conveys a sense of finality or a suicidal tone
- Essays or papers, which focus on despair, rage, suicide, or death
- Statements indicating harmful intentions toward others
- Giving away prized possessions
- Self-injuring or self-destructive behaviors
- Threats or aggressive actions towards you or others around you
- Any other behavior, which seems out of control

**How to Proceed - Make Contact**

- Talk to the student, in person. Express your concern. Tell the student you are concerned and why.
- Listen attentively. You need not be scared off by an intense emotional response. Talking about a problem or labeling a crisis does not make it worse. It is the first step toward resolving it.
- Be patient. Don't give up if the student doesn't talk easily.
- Deal directly with the issues, without judgment. Ask questions that relate to the circumstances of the student's life. Allow the student time to tell their story. Allow silences in the conversation, if they occur. Sometimes what follows can be especially productive.
- Offer your support, help with decision-making, and provide referrals. Often times a student will agree to see someone in Engineering Advising when they will not agree to go to a counselor.
- Avoid making sweeping promises of confidentiality, particularly if a student represents a safety risk to him or herself. Students who are suicidal need swift professional intervention, and assurances of absolute confidentiality may get in the way
- You do not have to take on the role of counselor. You only need to care and refer.

**Offering a Referral**

- Explain the limitations of your knowledge and experience. Be clear that your wanting the student to speak with someone else does not mean that you think there is something wrong with the student, or that you are not interested. Another individual may have the resources to assist them in a more appropriate manner.
- Provide name, phone number, and office location of a referral source or walk student to the Engineering Advising Office or your Department Student Services staff if you are concerned they won’t follow up. Try to normalize the need to ask for help as much as possible. It is helpful if you know the names of staff people and can speak highly of them. Convey the spirit of helpfulness; people can and do change.
- Realize that your offer of help may be rejected. People in severe distress sometimes deny their problems because it is difficult to admit they feel out of control. Take time to listen to the student's fears and concerns about seeking help; maybe the student will come around. Try to end the conversation in a way that will allow you, or the student, to come back to the subject at another time.
- Keep the lines of communication open. Invite the student back.
- If you have immediate concerns about a student's safety, stay with the student and notify CAPS (255-5208; after hours 255-5155) or the Cornell Police (255-1111) immediately.

**Referral Sources Outside the College**

- Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS, 255-5208)
- Cornell United Religious Work (CURW, 255-4214)
- Office of the Dean of Students (255-1115 or 255-3608)
- International Students and Scholars Office (255-5243)
- Campus Life crisis coordination (for students who live in residence halls, 255-5511)

*The Help Sheet*, a publication of the Information and Referral Center (254-INFO) is an excellent resource. Make sure you have phone numbers, locations, hours of operation, and, ideally, names of helpful staff people.

*Portions adopted from the brochure titled "Students in Distress: What to look for, What to do" prepared by Counseling and Psychological Services and the Office of the Dean of Students, and the College of Engineering Computer Science graduate school website at [www.cs.cornell.edu/coursewebsite/HelpingStdtsHandleStress.htm](http://www.cs.cornell.edu/coursewebsite/HelpingStdtsHandleStress.htm)*