

Steps for Meaningful Conversations with Students of Concern

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Sometimes we push away gut feelings of concern for fear that we are overanalyzing, or even out of discomfort about what to do with our concerns. Moreover, sometimes we worry that if we reach out, we might be wrong, make things worse, or make the student defensive. So, step one is to reassure yourself, and take stock of the observations that have led you to be concerned.

Most people appreciate being checked-in on and will not be insulted if you approach them nonjudgmentally. If they are in fact doing alright, they will still appreciate that you care, and know that if something comes up in the future, that you will be there for them.

PREPARE

Review some direct observations and warning signs that have led you to be concerned. Some examples:

- Chronic absenteeism or tardiness
- Missing or late assignments, frequent requests for extensions
- Appearing tired or even falling asleep in class
- Change in affect, for example, they used to participate frequently, but have stopped
- Struggling academically (can be consistently struggling or experience a sudden change in performance)

REACH OUT

LET'S TAKE TWO STUDENT SCENARIOS TO WALK THROUGH:



***Megan** has been doing well in your class so far this semester, but her performance on the midterm exam was a sharp downturn. Though she is still coming to class, she often appears tired and withdrawn, and no longer asks questions or participates in class discussions. On her way out of class one day, you ask how she's been. She quickly says "fine", avoids eye contact, and rushes out of the door saying she has to get to another class.*



Kevin has always been a lively presence in your classes, cracking jokes and supporting his classmates. He says he broke his ankle a couple of weeks ago while playing on his intramural team. Lately he's asked for a lot of extensions on assignments and explains his frequent absences as doctor's appointments. Although he's still his friendly self when he does show up for class, he's often late and appears tired.



WHERE AND WHEN TO CHECK IN

The most important thing is to find a discreet but direct way to start the conversation. This could be in-person or online.

An email to Megan could start with: *"I've always appreciated your thoughtful contributions in class and have noticed lately that you've been quieter during class discussions. I care about how you're doing and I'd like to just check in and also talk through your plans for the final project. Would you prefer to talk sometime after class this week or during office hours?"*

(Giving a choice communicates that their comfort is important to you, and makes it a little more difficult for them to opt-out by asking a more open question vs. a close-ended question, such as "do you want to talk about it?")

A conversation with Kevin after class could start with: *"Kevin I've been meaning to ask you how your ankle's been healing up! Do you have a few minutes to catch-up?"*



Think about the student and how they might like to be reached out to. If the student might be embarrassed by a more "in the moment" sort of gesture, a kindly worded email could be a good place to start. If you already have a more familiar relationship with them, casually striking up a conversation will feel natural, and you can transition into talking more seriously about what you've noticed. No matter what, it's always better to reach out, even if you're unsure of the best way.

EXPLORE WHAT'S GOING ON

It's important that if at all possible, they do most of the talking so that you can better understand what's going on and how to respond or refer. If they are reluctant to share, asking open-ended questions in a kind and thoughtful manner can be comforting.

Some ways to learn more, affirm, and offer support:

"How's the semester been going for you?"



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“This time of the semester can be really stressful. How are you feeling about your course load?”

“You always have such valuable things to share. How have you been feeling with the class discussions lately?”

“Walking to classes with crutches must be hard. Remind me again, how’d you break it?”

AFFIRM AND REFLECT

Letting the student know that you hear them is important so that they feel comfortable sharing more about what is going on with them, which makes any referrals you provide more effective. Affirming them is also an effective and encouraging strategy, as long as it is meant genuinely.

Some examples of reflections:

Simple: “You have a lot on your plate right now.”

More Complex: “I hear that you’re worried about your grades, and at the same time, your stress and lack of rest is making it hard to study.”

Some examples of affirmations:

“I think you are doing your best, and I am thankful for you sharing with me today. That can be really hard to do.”

“You’ve come up with a lot of creative ways to address the situation.”



SUMMARIZE AND REFER

While a “summary” sounds very formal, it can easily be conversational. In essence, you would review the key points that you both talked about, with an emphasis on what *they* have shared with *you*. If you understood something incorrectly, they have a chance to clarify, as well as add to the conversation if there are other concerns they did not get a chance to share.



It also provides a great opportunity for you to transition to the resource referral portion of the conversation. It is very important to share a resource with them that you think might be able to help, and/or brainstorm with the person about a resource they would feel comfortable accessing. You have played an incredibly important role in identifying and supporting the student, and it’s time to find them a campus (or off-campus) professional.

Summary example from Megan’s conversation:



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Megan’s scenario: *“I did notice that, and it seemed unusual for you. I’ve been feeling concerned, so I really appreciate you talking to me about all that’s going on. Caring about your family while being far away at school must be hard, and I know that pledging is very time consuming. I’m hearing that lack of rest and anxiety about getting everything done has been really hard on you. Would it be okay if I shared a resource that I think might help?”*

Referral example from Kevin’s conversation:

“I know that over in the Counseling Center, they have people to talk to that actually specialize in helping people with cutting back on drinking, and they’d probably be great to talk to in general while you’re feeling off your game right now.”



Some phrases to consider using when beginning your summary or offering a referral:

“If it’s alright, I wanted to share what I’ve heard so far to make sure I am understanding.”
“Thank you so much for talking with me today and sharing what’s been going on. It sounds like...”
“I have an idea for a resource that could be helpful in this situation.”

FOLLOW-UP



Making a plan to follow-up and communicating that with the student further demonstrates your care by committing to talking or at least touching base again in the future. It also encourages the student to explore the resource you referred them to, knowing you may talk about it when you check in next time. Most importantly, it increases the likelihood that if the student continues to struggle, they know they can talk to you.

When you share your plan to follow-up, say it in a kind and comfortable way, such as:

“Talking to a counselor is a lot more common than a lot of people think. I’m glad we talked, and I’ll check in again soon. If at any time you feel like school is becoming unmanageable, let me know. Your well-being is what’s most important, even more so than grades and assignments.”

No matter what the situation, checking in with a student as a faculty member is very impactful. While you likely can’t completely solve the problem at hand, you play an incredibly important role in linking them to a resource that will meet their needs and creating a more supportive campus community.
