Lessons Learned: Dealing with Issues, Part 2

by Mary Owens, Ph.D.

As noted last time, an important aspect of my job as chair was to address issues that interfered with our primary goal as an academic department: educating our students, many of whom were brand new to college and/or the culture of U.S. higher education.

In these situations, not only did I need to prepare myself mentally, I also had to gather information about what happened, determine if the situation was fixable, facilitate a resolution, and follow-up--all important intertwined aspects of the process.

This time, I am focusing on *gathering information,* specifically from students. With student-faculty issues, often the student(s) came to complain to the chair, whose first responsibility was to gather information and understand the history, as well as the dynamics and factors at play, in order to facilitate a resolution. To gather information effectively, I had to *remain as open* as possible and consider all sides.

In addition, the process of *gathering information* provided many teachable opportunities for correcting misperceptions and educating students about the expectations, roles, rights, and responsibilities of faculty and students in U.S. higher education.

Here is my advice for *gathering information,* followed by some examples.

Take notes, including dates, names, the class, faculty member, and what happened. Not only is the student heard, the concern is written down. You will not remember all the relevant details. Also, the notes constitute a written record.

Start with information questions, which elicit more information than Yes/No questions. Questions such as "How can I help you?" or "What is going on?" often generate useful insights into at least the complainant's perception of the situation.

Be patient and willing to wait if an answer is not immediately forthcoming. Pause for 10-15 seconds after asking a question.

Yes/No questions can be effective to clarify and verify information, as well as inform students about faculty and student roles, rights, and responsibilities.

Get specific details and examples of the problematic behavior. Here is an example.

In response to the chair's *"What is going on?"*, the student replies, "My teacher is not doing his job."

"What do you mean your teacher is 'not doing his job'? Can you give me examples?" If no examples are offered, Yes/No questions can follow, such as *"Is he using the textbook?" "Does he explain what is in the text?"* *"Does he answer your questions?"*

"Yes, he answers, but I do not understand what he says."

"Do you ask again if you do not understand?"

"That would not be respectful."

This was an opportunity to explain that students in US colleges are expected to ask if they do not understand and a chance to clarify the function of faculty office hours and to go over ways of asking a question again tactfully. For instance, "Could you give me another example? I still don't understand," would work better than "You explained it badly."

Here is another example.

The student replies, "My teacher does not like me. I think she will fail me."

"How do you know she does not like you?"

"She makes angry faces when I speak. She shouted at me today."

"Do you raise your hand to speak? What did she say when she shouted?"

The student may offer that he was talking to a classmate, providing an opportunity to explain faculty and student rights and responsibilities and their rationales: social talking during class is disruptive and interferes with the rights of teachers and other students. If the student said he was sometimes late, I asked how often. Since so many of our students work, I regularly used the analogy of a job in discussing punctuality. *"What would happen if you came late to your job once every week?"*

"I would lose my job."

Moreover, the very common student fear of retribution (even failing) for complaining often led to my reviewing the purposes of a syllabus, especially the grade components, which I often compared to a contract that the teacher cannot change to include not liking a student. This also led to explanations of grade reviews or other processes available to students.

In addition to ***gathering the information*** necessary to facilitate resolving the issue, I hoped to educate students about their rights and responsibilities towards their teachers and classmates and their own contributions to moving their classes forward. My hope was to create in those students some understanding of and empathy for their teachers and classmates.

Sometimes, that shift in the student's perception was enough for him or her to recognize his or her role in the issue and what steps to take toward resolving it.

Of course, ***gathering information*** means getting not only the student's account, but also getting the faculty member's side of the story, which I will cover in a future piece.

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