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Helping Students with Personal Issues and Problems

Good leaders and mentors are willing and able to help others in need. Given your leadership position on campus, it's very likely that students will come to you for advice or assistance about personal issues, particularly if you've taken the time to establish a relationship with them. Listed below are strategies for helping you help others who may seek your support.

- * First and foremost: Be a good listener and lend an empathetic ear. By providing a sounding board and letting others "bounce" their thoughts and feelings off you, a solution may bounce right back to them. Simply giving others a chance to get their personal feelings out in the open and allowing them the opportunity to think out loud can lead them to discover effective solutions on their own. Their problem may be solved with your doing little more than listening in a concerned and compassionate way.

"A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him, I may think aloud."
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, American author, philosopher, and orator

- * Before beginning to suggest strategies for solving the problem, help the students (and help you) clarify the problem. To do so, use phrases such as: "It seems like . . ." "Could it be that . . . ?" "I get the impression that . . ." An effective helper assists others in understanding and discovering solutions to their own problems. Often, the best help we can provide others is to ask the right question, rather than giving the right answer. Good questions help others help themselves by leading them to see their problem more clearly, which, in turn, can lead them to an effective solution.

"A problem well-defined is half solved."
—John Dewey, influential philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer

- * If you've experienced a similar problem, or have had other students come to you with a similar problem, share that experience. It's always nice for people to know that that they're not the only ones who are facing challenges, have worries, and stumble once in a while. Don't be afraid to let your students know that others have encountered similar obstacles and difficulties.

Sharing a similar experience of your own can help others feel that their problem isn't unusual and give them feel more confidence about solving it. However, avoid using the common expression, "I know how you feel." Although this statement may be well intended, it's presumptuous to say that you *know* how someone else feels because it's impossible to get into that person's head and actually experience what that person is currently feeling.

- * Be sure not to dismiss or minimize the person's feelings. Avoid saying things like, "Oh, don't worry about it, everything will be alright" or, "You'll get over it." Comments like these make it sound like the person's feelings are unjustified or exaggerated (e.g., "you're making

a mountain out of a mole hill”), or being discounted.

“When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn’t feel that way, you are trampling my feelings.”

—Author unknown

- * Try to avoid directly instructing or dictating to others what they should do. An effective helper is someone who helps see their options clearly, and allows them to make their own decision—rather than making the decision for them. When students make their own choices, they “own” their decisions and when they take action on those decisions, their sense of self-control and self-esteem is strengthened. Rather than becoming dependent on you to solve problems for them, they’re also more likely to become independent thinkers and self-helpers who gain self-confidence in their ability to solve their own problems.

“The point of being a mentor is not to create dependency but to promote self-responsibility, not to decide for someone, but to encourage self-direction.”

—Ender & Newton, *Student Helping Students*

Note Well! You’re not an “expert” and your job is not to save or rescue students; you’re a facilitator whose job is to respect and empower students.

- * If supportive listening and questioning are not enough to help solve the person’s problem, then “plan B” would be to help the student identify possible solutions. Brainstorming can serve as an effective method for generating possible solutions to personal problems. (See the box below for a quick of the key steps in the brainstorming process.)

Box 4.1

The Process of Brainstorming

Key Steps:

1. List as many ideas as you can, generating them rapidly without stopping to evaluate their validity or practicality. Studies show that worrying about whether an idea will work often blocks creativity (Basadur, Runco, & Vega, 2000). So, at this stage of the process, just encourage their imagination run wild and not worry about whether the ideas generated are impractical, unrealistic, or impossible.
2. Helps students use the list of ideas or strategies they generate as a springboard to trigger additional ideas, or combine two or more ideas into one strategy.
3. After students run out of ideas, review them and critically evaluate the list of ideas they’ve generated and eliminate those that they think would be least effective or realistic.
4. From the remaining list of ideas, ask them to choose the best idea or best combination of ideas.

The point of brainstorming is to create as many good options as possible and allow the students to choose those one that they’re most comfortable with, believe in, and are most consistent with their values (you don’t impose your values). Helping student identify options and make their own choices serves to respect their individuality and promotes their sense of control or ownership of the choices they make. Students can use the process of brainstorming to solve any other problem they may encounter. Thus, by exposing students to the process, you not only

help students solve their current problem, you empower them with a strategy they can use to solve future problems on their own.

- * After helping students lay out all their options, if they still cannot make a decision and ask for your advice about what choice to make, start by sharing strategies that have worked for you in the past or that have worked for other students. Be sure to offer your advice as a concerned friend, not as an expert authority. For instance, before giving your advice, introduce it by saying, “This is just a suggestion . . .” or, “I wonder if this might . . .” Offer your recommendations as reasonable possibilities rather than as sure-fired solutions. The last thing you want to do is give the impression that you’re a professional psychotherapist by saying things like: “What your problem is . . .” or, “What you need to do is . . .” Statements such as these can make the person feel like a patient who is receiving your expert “diagnosis and treatment.”
- * Before ending your discussion, sum up what next steps will be taken to solve the problem or resolve the issue (e.g., what actions will be taken and when those actions will be taken).
- * If the problem is too serious or beyond your capability to deal with, encourage the student to seek professional help (e.g., from an advisor or counselor on campus). Know your limitations; don’t be afraid to say, “I don’t know, but I can refer you to someone who does know.” An intermediate step would be to consult with a campus professional who has more knowledge than you about the type of problem the student has come to you with, and come back to the student with different options suggested by the professional. (As a courtesy, you should inform the student that this is what you’d like to do.)
- * Last and most importantly, if someone comes to you for help or assistance with a personal problem, any information that person shares with you must remain confidential. This isn’t only the legally correct thing to do; it’s also ethically responsible thing to do because it respects the person’s privacy and reinforces the person’s trust and respect in you.

Note Well! The *Family Education Rights and Privacy Act* (often referred to *FERPA* or the “Buckley Amendment”) legally prohibits communicating student information to others. If you have any doubt about whether you can share information about a student, before sharing it, check with your program supervisor.

Reflection 4.9

Do you often find people coming to you for advice?

If yes, what issues do they come to you for help, and what do you think this says about where your leadership strengths or talents may lie?

Serving as an Effective Referral Agent

In some cases, you will be able to help students solve problems, but often you'll need to connect them with other resources and professionals on campus. You can strengthen your ability to be a connection catalyst by: (a) asking students about their needs, concerns and interests, (b) continually acquiring knowledge about the people, support resources and student opportunities on your campus, and (c) referring students to campus partners who most qualified to address their needs or concerns.

“I have helped students close the gap between their potential and performance by listening to their concerns and giving them information about things that can help them, whether it is the counseling center on campus, the tutoring services, or the student groups they can get involved in.”

—Peer Leader

Learn about the student-support services available to your students. Familiarize yourself with the campus catalogue (whether in print or on line), especially the portions that relate directly to the students with whom you work. Also, review the key contacts and resources listed in any program handbook that may be available for the particular program you're representing as a student leader. In addition, peruse web sites (and Facebook pages) for campus- and community-based resources that may be relevant to your students' needs. If you know where to refer students, they're less likely to get the “run around” and more likely to get around and use the resources available to them.

“The next best thing to knowing something is knowing where to find it.”

—Samuel Johnson, author of *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), considered to be one of the greatest single achievements of scholarship.

Note Well! For your students, you're likely to be the resource for all resources on campus. You provide the first line of defense for your students, and by providing accurate and timely referrals, you can intercept their problems and issues crises before they turn into full-blown crises.

Get to know the student-support professionals on your campus. A leader need not be a superhero or a superstar. You cannot do everything for everybody. You have partners who can help you in your efforts to help others. Introduce your students to other people, opportunities and resources, and encourage them to build networks of support. These relationships include other students, peer leaders, graduate students, faculty, teaching assistants, advisors, career professionals, and professionals in the local community.

Visit the people associated with the resources your students are most likely to use. Successful people have lots of mentors. Your goal is to strengthen your students' social network and stock of “social capital.” You shouldn't assume total responsibility for supporting your students. It takes a community and your college community consists of multiple members who have the experience, wisdom, resources and knowledge to serve as “campus partners” to help you help students. Know who the professionals are—the supervisors of your leadership or mentoring program, course instructors, academic advisors, personal counselors, etc. Have their contact information handy, cultivate relationships with them, and connect students to them. Some of your key campus partners include:

- Faculty
- Academic Advisors
- Career Counselors and Specialists
- Student Life Professionals
- Residence Advisors and Assistants
- Personal Counselors
- Campus Ministers
- Financial Aid Counselors
- Community Service Specialists
- Graduate Teaching and Research Assistants
- Working Professionals in the Local Community

Get a copy of their brochures and program descriptions, ask them about what they do, the challenges they face, their most essential advice for students, and how you can most effectively partner with them.

If you're not sure who to connect your student to, or aren't sure, take the time to ask questions of somebody who does know. When in doubt, find out! Somebody on campus almost always has an answer or can refer you to someone who does. Students will appreciate the time and effort you take to find the right answer or steer them in the right direction.

Make referrals strategically.

To be an effective resource-and-referral agent, not only do you need to know what the resources are, you need to motivate students to use them. There's an art and science to the process of making effective referrals that goes well beyond simply relaying information about resources. An effective referral agent inspires students to capitalize on their resources by providing students with a compelling rationale for the resources, and instilling them with a sense of confidence in the referred person or resource, and equipping them with a set of strategies for taking action on the referral.

Note Well! Your ability to make referrals effectively can empower students to develop the skills of resourcefulness—a life skill that can be used to solve problems and promote success beyond college.

Box 4.2 contains a summary of key strategies for making effective referrals.

Box 4.2

Top-Ten Strategies for Making Effective Referrals

- **First, take time to *listen* closely to the student's problem before making the referral.** Don't refer so quickly that it appears as if you're giving the student the "brush off—sending a message that you're disinterested or unconcerned.

- **Respect and maintain student confidentiality.** Make it explicitly clear up front that you intend to keep your conversation private and confidential.
- **Explain *why* you're referring the student rather than trying to help the student yourself.** For example, make it clear that you cannot provide that advice because the issue or problem is beyond your area of expertise or qualifications, so you're making a referral to ensure that the student receives the best advice and support.
- **Provide a description of the resource and its purpose.** Establishing a sense of purpose is an essential leadership principle. You can apply this principle to the referral process by explaining why the resource exists, how it relates to the student's current issue or concern, and what good things are likely to take place if the student uses it. Students can have reservations, doubts and sometimes skepticism about utilizing resources and approaching people ("faculty are not interested in talking to freshmen," "tutoring is just for dummies", etc.). When you provide a clear rationale for using the service and paint a positive picture of what the resource can do for students, you increase the likelihood that they'll actually follow through on your referral.
- **Personalize the referral: Refer students to a *person*, rather than a position or office.** Here's where knowing people really helps. Referring students to Donnie or Doug or Barbara is far more powerful than referring them to an "advisor" or "counselor." Referring students to a real person, rather than an anonymous entity, serves to humanize the referral process and increases the student's sense of personal connection with the recommended resource.
- **Reassure students that the person you're referring them to is caring, concerned, and qualified.** Vouch for the credibility and character of the person. A Calculus tutor knows Calculus and knows how to explain it to students. Academic advisors understand academic requirements and options, and they know how to help students make informed educational decisions about their course work. Personal counselors understand how to help students cope with and heal from crisis. Better yet, share your experiences or the experiences of other students who have benefitted from the support-service professional. For instance, "I went to Doug and he laid out exactly what I needed to do to apply for law school. He's a real good guy, really cares and knows his stuff."

Use your best judgment about what particular support professional on campus would provide the best match or "fit" for the student's personality and needs. If you're unsure who that person might be, seek input from fellow peer leaders or other campus partners.
- **Help students take the steps needed to make an appointment.** When students come to you for support, this may be the very time that they'll be most willing to act on your referral and get the support they need. So, "strike while the iron is hot" and help students make the appointment while you're with them. If they're unwilling to make the appointment immediately, let them know you're ready and willing to help set up the appointment whenever they're ready.)
- **Help students prepare for the first visit.** Assist them with identifying what information to share, what questions to ask, and how to approach the resource person. This should serve to

increase the student's confidence and increase the likelihood of following through with the appointment.

- **If possible, walk the student to the referred person's office.** This will ensure sure that the student knows where to go and how to get there; it may also provide the student with the social support needed to actually get there.
- **Compliment students for making the effort to seek support and striving for self-improvement.** Delivering such reinforcing comments serves to raise student awareness that help-seeking is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of personal strength and resourcefulness.
- **Follow up with the referred student.** Encourage students to get back to you about how the referral went (in general). If you don't hear from a student, consider contacting that student to ask if they saw the referred person and if there's anything else you can do to help. Even if students don't act on your initial recommendation or don't get back to you, following up with them serves to remind them to follow through on your referral and that you're still thinking about them.

Note Well! Always respect the boundaries of your position. You're not a professional counselor or therapist; instead, you're more like a trusted friend and resource agent who helps students connect with key campus services and student-support professionals.

Reflection 4.10

What student issues would you say are beyond the professional boundaries of your position and should be referred to a professional on campus?

Where do you draw the line?

Making Crisis Referrals

As students come to know and trust you, it's possible that highly serious and sensitive matters may be brought to your attention—such as issues involving relationships and sexuality, alcohol and drug abuse, anxiety, depression or suicidal thoughts. Although it's unlikely you'll be dealing with crises on a regular basis, you need to be prepared for the possibility. Specific guidelines and procedures for dealing with crisis are likely to be provided in a peer leadership handbook or handouts you received during leadership training. In addition to information you may have received from these resources, we offer the following guidelines for making crisis referrals.

“When written in Chinese, the word ‘crisis’ is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity.”

—John F. Kennedy, 35th President of the United States

- Let the student know that you are concerned and are there to listen to her or his concerns. In difficult situations, you can help most by simply being available, asking questions, listening (and listening some more), and reaffirming your encouragement and support.
- Encourage the student to make an appointment immediately with a personal counselor or advisor. If possible, escort the student to the appropriate office, or remain with the student until an appropriate professional becomes available.
- If the student elects not to act on your urgent recommendation to seek help and you fear that the putting himself or others in danger, immediately and discretely inform your program supervisor. If that person cannot be reached, inform the campus police. If the student is in a crisis situation, that student's right to privacy or confidentiality is outweighed by the need to ensure the student's safety and the safety of others.
- Keep a record of the steps you took during the crisis and the parties you contacted.