Northwestern Health Sciences University

Identifying and Referring Students in Distress

A Guide for Faculty

Becky Lawyer, MA, LPC
Dear Faculty,

“*Do you have a minute?*”

Our students regularly approach faculty members at Northwestern Health Sciences University with a request for their time to ask a few questions related to class, and sometimes end up discussing a personal problem instead. How will you know when they need more help then you can give them?

The university counselor is pleased to provide you with the first edition of “Identifying and Referring Students in Distress”, a guide to assist faculty members in making referrals to the university counselor. Faculty members are often the first to notice students who may be struggling. You see these students regularly and are in a direct position to observe behaviors. Often times you may be the first person in whom the student confides. Consequently, you are in an excellent position to identify students in distress, provide assistance and refer them to the university counselor. The university counselor supports the academic mission of the University by providing services that help students achieve their educational goals. Services are designed to reduce the emotional and interpersonal problems that interfere with learning.

The goal of this guide is to assist faculty mentors in early identification of students in distress, brief facilitation and the referral procedure. It addresses services offered by the counseling office and offers an overview of specific student concerns.

I hope you find this booklet useful. Please don’t hesitate to contact me with any questions you have, either now or in the future (phone: 952-885-5458 or email: blawyer@nwhealth.edu).

Thank you for your help with supporting our students.

Sincerely yours,

Becky Lawyer, MA, LPC
University Counselor and Disability Services Coordinator
Licensed Professional Counselor
This information is provided to Northwestern Health Sciences University faculty members in order to help decide when to refer students to the university counselor.

Knowing when it’s appropriate to help students, and when a counseling referral may be beneficial may pose a dilemma. While your role as faculty gives you many opportunities to get to know students on a personal basis, the role itself is often not compatible with becoming deeply involved with their personal problems.

When in doubt, **make a referral.** The intent of referring is not to get rid of the student, but to connect them with appropriate resources. It is often helpful to refer the student to the university counselor, informing them that this is a free service for people just like them who are struggling with personal problems.

**ABOUT UNIVERSITY COUNSELING AT NWHSU**

**Who is the university counselor and where can she be found?**
Becky Lawyer, MA, LPC, the university counselor at Northwestern Health Sciences University, holds a Master’s degree in Counseling & Psychological Services from St. Mary’s University of Minnesota and is a Licensed Professional Counselor. She has counseled diverse populations in both educational and non educational environments. She has experience in helping students address personal, relationship, disability and study skills concerns that may impede their progress at Northwestern Health Sciences University. In this role, she also works with students that are in need of classroom or clinic accommodations due to a disability. The university counselor is part of the staff in the Student Affairs office.

**Who is eligible to receive counseling services from the University Counselor?**
Counseling services are available, free of charge, to all currently enrolled students at Northwestern Health Sciences University. Students will be assessed by the university counselor, and based on their need, will either be scheduled for an appointment with the university counselor or a referral to an appropriate agency or outside resource will be made.

**Will students be seen right away?**
Students should normally be encouraged to make an appointment to see the university counselor. She is on campus Monday through Friday from 8:30am-5pm. Students in crisis will be seen as soon as possible.

**Are student appointments kept confidential?**
Under most circumstances, students can be assured that their sessions with the university counselor will be confidential. A student who poses a threat to self, others, or to the community, or is involved in a case of abuse or neglect of minors or elders, must be advised that in such instances confidentiality will be breached to protect the people involved.

Counselor-client relationships are protected by law. A counselor may not divulge any information regarding a client, including the fact that the client is a client, to anyone without the written, informed consent of the client, with the exceptions listed above.
ASSISTING STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

A. If a student asks for help
If a student disclosed personal information, asks for advice or assistance, or inquires if counseling is available for students, inform them that NWHSU provides students with personal counseling services. An appointment can be made with the university counselor by contacting the Student Affairs office.

B. If a student displays distress
If a student talks with faculty, administrators, or staff and 1) describes difficulties that are affecting academic or social functioning, or 2) demonstrates distress by crying, asking to talk in private, etc. it is advisable to ask the student if assistance is wanted.

- If the student says “Yes” - suggest talking to the university counselor and provide information for making an appointment or walk the student down to the Student Affairs office to make an appointment.
- If the student says “No” – no further action is required.

C. Student at risk of academic failure
Personal problems, emotional distress, substance abuse, family / financial difficulties, and stress are circumstances to be coped with by the student. Students who indicate that personal circumstances are interfering with their performance or who ask for special considerations may be asked if a referral to the university counselor is wanted.

Tips for Recognizing Students in Distress

Students often feel depressed or anxious for short periods of time when they are attending classes. This is a perfectly normal part of being a human being and is to be expected. Most students handle these times well and without notice. However, sometimes these periods intensify and interfere with daily function and academic success, making intervention helpful. Some obvious and not-so-obvious signs of distress include:

- Significant change in academic performance, preparation, and behavior in class
- Excessive absences and tardiness
- Repeated requests for special consideration due to life events
- Unusual change in mood, demeanor or hygiene
- Listlessness or falling asleep in class
- Inappropriate remarks or outbursts
- Aggressive behaviors
- Signs of drug or alcohol usage that is noticeable in class
- Disorganized thoughts or speech
- Inability to concentrate on conversation or activity
- Increasing dependency upon you
• Reports of death or difficult relationship
• References to suicide
• Social isolation
• Statements of hopelessness or prolonged observable unhappiness

Guidelines for Responding to a Student in Distress
Acknowledging your awareness of a student’s distress can open up dialog and reveal your concern. In fact, your response can be pivotal in a student’s willingness to seek help. Please consider the following general guidelines for response:

• Request to speak to the student privately
• Let the student know why you are concerned about them in terms of what you have observed. For example:
  - "I often hear you mention your worries about (your family, your relationship, health...etc), and I think that's something you are right to be concerned about."
  - "It seems from our recent conversations that this is something you really need to talk about."
  - "When you mention that you are thinking of suicide, I know it concerns you and it concerns me, too."
• Share your observations or concerns (“I’ve noticed... I’ve seen .... And I am concerned about you.”)
• Listen to the student’s story
• Ask what the student is doing to address the problem
• Help the student explore the academic consequences of no action or change (for example if they are having family difficulties that are causing them to lose sleep at night / fall asleep in class, what is the academic consequence for continuing to fall asleep in class?)
• Do not promise confidentiality
• Know your limits and refer students to appropriate resources on campus

If the student appears to be hesitant about meeting with the university counselor, the following statements may encourage them to follow through with your recommendation:

• **Let the student know what they will gain** from meeting with a counselor. For example:
  - "I think you will find it very helpful to discuss all this with someone impartial, someone who can help you sort out your thoughts and feelings."
  - "This is just the thing to consult with a counselor about - a counselor will know more about this than either one of us."
  - "You and I just don't have enough time together to address these concerns the way they deserve, and I think you'd get a lot out of talking them over with someone at greater length."

• **Reassure the student that making a referral isn't a rejection.** For example:
  - "Even though you will be talking with your counselor about this, I want us to keep in touch about how things are going for you."
"Come back and let me know how your meeting with the counselor goes -- you don't have to tell me details, but I'd like to know that you've found someone helpful to speak with."

- **Offer to keep the student company** while they call for an appointment, or to call on behalf of the student while they are sitting there with you.

- **Let the student know what to expect** if they come to talk with the university counselor. For example:
  - The university counselor is here to help all students make the most of their university experience - consulting a counselor doesn't mean you are "crazy" or "sick."

**How to Make a Referral to the University Counselor**
Depending on the urgency of the needs of the student, there are several referral options. General appointments with the university counselor are scheduled ahead of time. Students can make an appointment by contacting the Student Affairs Coordinator, Lori Hanegraaf:

- By e-mail: lhanegraaf@nwhealth.edu
- In person: Student Affairs Office
- By phone: (952) 885-5405

In general, it is best for the student to contact us directly. In my experience, when a faculty member schedules the appointment for the student s/he is less likely to keep the appointment.

**However**, if you or the student feels the concern is urgent, please ask the student to come directly to the Student Affairs office or walk the student over yourself. The university counselor will make every effort to see these students immediately or as soon as possible.

When a student comes into the Student Affairs office in distress (e.g., highly emotional, tearful, disorganized thoughts or speech, thoughts of harming self or others) and requests a counseling appointment, staff will interrupt the university counselor if she is in session with another student in order to meet with the distressed student.

**If a Student is Reluctant to Seek Counseling Services**
While culturally we have made some progress in demythologizing and destigmatizing counseling services, many continue to view counseling services as scary, a sign of weakness, or only utilized by "crazy people." It can help to acknowledge and validate the student’s fears about seeking help. Then consider normalizing the process of counseling. This can be done by talking with students about the variety of issues that can be addressed through counseling. Normalizing the process of seeking help may be especially helpful for international students whose countries may not have similar views of psychological counseling. Reluctant students might also be relieved to know that they can speak with the counselor on a one-time basis without making a commitment to ongoing counseling.
In some cases, you may find that the student has already sought counseling services in the past and was unsatisfied with the experience. There are many reasons why counseling may not be successful in a given situation. Please encourage the student to consider giving counseling another try.

While it is important to care about the emotional well-being of students, we cannot make their decisions for them, and counseling is always a personal choice. Occasionally even your best efforts to encourage a student to seek counseling will be unsuccessful. If the student resists referral and you remain uncomfortable with the situation, contact the university counselor at 952-885-5458 to discuss your concern.