

Relations with Instructors and Persons in Positions of Authority: Handling Challenging Situations Fairly

The Purpose of This Handout

This handout is about your relations with instructors and other persons in positions of authority or trust at the University. The purpose is to outline options for handling challenging or problematic situations effectively. What you can - and can't - do will depend on a number of factors:

- *at what point in the course or situation* you recognize the problem
- *whether* you believe the instructor or other person can or will change
- *how open* you are to revising your expectations, or changing your own behaviour
- *how flexible* your plans are
- *your specific goal:* problem resolution, a finding of wrongdoing, closure

Withdrawing from a Problem Course

Check the Add/Drop dates in the Registration Handbook or Calendar. Before you drop a course, consider the implications: having less than a full course load may make you less competitive or ineligible for a program, scholarship or award. Dropping a course can affect your OSAP entitlement. To discuss the academic consequences of dropping a course, consult an academic counsellor.

Constructive Criticism: Approaching the Other Person Yourself

Professionals (instructors and others in authority) take pride in their work. They want to do a good job. Give serious consideration to speaking about your concerns to the person with whom you are having difficulty. Maybe he or she can fix the problem.

1. Speak to an instructor after class or in office hours. Anyone is more accepting of criticism if it is put in a positive way. Plan what to say before you say it. It is normal to feel nervous in this situation. You may feel less nervous if a classmate accompanies you.
2. Raising an issue when others are present (for instance, in class) can allow broader discussion. This may lead to a solution. You must judge whether you think others share your concerns, and whether you think the professor or other party will respond well to this approach. Don't do it if you feel it may put the professor or a fellow student on the spot, make him or her angry, or otherwise be counterproductive. There are alternatives
3. You may prefer to write an email which allows you better control over what you say. The recipient can think things over before responding. The disadvantage is that putting something in writing sometimes makes a matter seem more serious than you think it is.

NOTE: This guide was produced by the Office of the Ombudsperson www.uwo.ca/ombuds. It is not an official university document and is not intended to replace university policy.

Relations with Instructors and Persons in Positions of Authority: Handling Challenging Situations Fairly

4. Express your concerns in a non-adversarial way. It is important to come across as polite and respectful even if you believe you have good reason to be upset. Your concerns will be taken more seriously if they are expressed in a calm and rational way. Also, try to be specific about the nature of your problem or concern. Describe the issue or incident as well as the impact it had on you.

Sample Statement

What happened:

- January 20 a student arrived late for class
- the professor said: "Some of us have more important things to do than worry about (subject of the course). (Student's name), perhaps you would care to tell us why you are arriving at twenty minutes past the hour? No? Then perhaps you would prefer to leave?"
- on a previous occasion the professor said, when this same student raised her hand: "Ah! Now our class expert on (issue student had previously indicated an interest in) will give us the official view of the matter!"

Impact on writer of the statement:

- this student believes the professor is picking on the other student
- normally she participates in class discussions; in this class she keeps silent to avoid becoming the butt of the professor's sarcastic remarks
- she claims others have come late and the professor has said nothing
- she feels she cannot trust this professor to be fair, and her anger about his sarcasm and bullying makes it hard for her to learn in the course.

What the student would like:

The student would like the professor to treat all students with respect; not to make favorites of some and targets of others; and to be fair.

Involving a Third Party

This approach is useful when one or more of the following is true:

- you feel you cannot convey the message yourself (or your messages have been ignored or rebuffed)
- the message is a difficult or personal one
- you believe the message needs to come from someone with some authority or power
- part of your goal is to have someone reprimanded or disciplined
- you want to remain anonymous

NOTE: This guide was produced by the Office of the Ombudsperson www.uwo.ca/ombuds. It is not an official university document and is not intended to replace university policy.

Relations with Instructors and Persons in Positions of Authority: Handling Challenging Situations Fairly

Often students worry that if they raise an issue or appear critical of something an instructor has or hasn't done, he or she will retaliate when marking the student's work. There is no way of knowing in advance who is likely to retaliate, so it makes sense to be cautious. However, the grade appeal procedure is a good recourse, and provides an important safeguard against retaliation.

The problem is in an undergraduate course

Speak to the undergraduate chair, or the assistant or associate dean (student affairs) if the course is offered in a faculty without departmental structure. If there are several sections of the course, speak to the course coordinator first. If not satisfied with how the matter is handled by the department, contact the relevant Dean's Office.

Other situations of conflict with someone in authority

Recourse is to that person's immediate supervisor, and, if not satisfied, up the line. Check Western's on-line Directory for organizational information about departments. Or ask the Office of the Ombudsperson for appropriate name and contact information.

You may worry that others will side with the person in authority, and either not believe there is a problem, or else not be willing to help. This could happen, so it makes sense to (a) assess the risks of speaking out, (b) consider all your options, and (c) try to look at the situation from many points of view. Some important things to remember:

- Excellence in teaching is highly valued at Western - it is an important consideration whenever faculty members apply for promotion or tenure.
- Most department chairs and others can be relied on to respect your wish to remain anonymous and to listen carefully to your concerns. (There are, of course, many situations where problem solving cannot take place if you insist on remaining anonymous.)
- The chair or other party may propose steps to resolve the matter, such as a meeting with everyone present. Be prepared to give such proposals your serious consideration.
- If your concern is based on a faulty understanding of what the other person's obligations are, the chair may dismiss it. (*So do your research first, before you complain.*)

Some chairs may ask you to put your concerns in writing. The other party can then be asked to comment or respond. Additional evidence and information about the problem may be sought. Any third party has a duty to investigate fairly and to hear all sides, and that will take time.

NOTE: This guide was produced by the Office of the Ombudsperson www.uwo.ca/ombuds. It is not an official university document and is not intended to replace university policy.

Relations with Instructors and Persons in Positions of Authority: Handling Challenging Situations Fairly

Intervention by the Ombudsperson

In cases where students feel too insecure to make any approach to an authority for fear of consequences, the Ombudsperson can suggest systemic or delayed approaches. While these methods do not resolve the problem now, they may make a difference to future students.

Other interventions are also possible, depending on the circumstances.

Changing Your Expectations

It's a good idea to examine your assumptions about the obligations of instructors or others in positions of authority or trust. Are they fair, realistic and reasonable? Some common assumptions:

If I don't get everything I'm asking for, I'm going to go as far as I can!

It's natural to feel this way at some point during a conflict. The amazing thing is that small changes can sometimes make a big difference in how we feel. Appreciating where the other party is coming from makes it easier to find solutions and move forward.

All professors should be good teachers.

Everyone agrees that good teaching is important and can really make a difference. However, teaching styles vary and someone you think is good may not seem so to others. Whether you have a good teacher or not, remember that the real responsibility for your learning rests with you, the student.

People at the University should care about students.

Caring should show primarily in the effort the professor makes to teach the course well and to evaluate all students in a fair and timely way. Caring also means maintaining a classroom where everyone feels included. Forgetting a student's name or refusing to accept a late paper is not necessarily evidence that a professor doesn't care. Everyone in authority is expected to be courteous and sensitive to others, but also to be consistent in making decisions and to make those decisions in accordance with the rules.

Instructors should hand work back before the drop deadline.

You are expected to make and to be guided by your personal judgement about whether you are learning in the course. There is no rule obliging instructors to hand work back before the drop deadline.

You do have a right to go over your work with your instructor and to receive a reasonable explanation for the marks awarded. But what constitutes a "reasonable explanation" is open to judgement. No professor has an obligation to tell you "what you should have said" instead. If you disagree with a professor about a grade, the appropriate recourse is to appeal, rather than argue at length.

Think of other expectations you may have and ask yourself if they are reasonable.

NOTE: This guide was produced by the Office of the Ombudsperson www.uwo.ca/ombuds. It is not an official university document and is not intended to replace university policy.

Relations with Instructors and Persons in Positions of Authority: Handling Challenging Situations Fairly

Sometimes, if you make a little effort, you can learn to overcome a problem. An example of this kind of learning is learning to understand speech in an unfamiliar accent. The more you listen, the better you get – but only if the will to understand is there. Look for the strong points! You may find the other person has more strong points that you first thought.

Examples of Potential Problem Situations

Letting a person know about a problem works best when the problem is something he or she can do something about. Which people in the scenarios below are possibly violating a rule? How could they remedy the situation? If you were the student, what would you do in each situation? If you were a 'third party', what questions would you ask?

- Professor A said there would be a test on Tuesday. Then she forgot, and now says it will be on Friday.
- Professor B, my graduate supervisor, expects me to work twelve hours a day, even on weekends.
- Dr. C, my work-study supervisor, loses things all the time. Then she blames me.
- Professor D has an accent and mumbles, too. I just can't follow what he says.
- Professor E has just returned the first test. The class average is only 38%. She seems to believe there is no problem except that "students are all lazy".
- Mr. F, the person I had to talk to about getting a loan, implied I was irresponsible and should quit school and go to work instead.
- G, my TA, never helps me when I ask, but he helps others. I think he dislikes people of my race.
- Professor H asked the three students with learning disabilities to talk to him right after class.
- Professor J has not returned a thesis chapter submitted more than two months ago.
- Dr. K never seems to be available during her so-called office hours.

Taking Care of Yourself

Problems with people in positions of authority or trust can sometimes be overwhelming. Take care of yourself. If you are experiencing some of the following signs it is time you took some action:

Personal Danger Signs

- you find yourself skipping class X or just not coming to school at all on those days
- your other courses are being seriously neglected because of class X
- after class X you are usually too upset to concentrate
- if you meet Professor (or Mr. or Ms) X in the hall you begin to shake
- you are not sleeping well
- you have lost (or gained) a significant amount of weight
- your friends are worried about you; your key relationships are stressed
- you are afraid there is no future for you

NOTE: This guide was produced by the Office of the Ombudsperson www.uwo.ca/ombuds. It is not an official university document and is not intended to replace university policy.

Relations with Instructors and Persons in Positions of Authority: Handling Challenging Situations Fairly

- you often feel angry, sad, depressed, anxious, ashamed or worthless
- you have fantasies of getting back at Professor X after you graduate
- you have been avoiding family and friends you usually talk to
- you feel Professor X knows something bad about you no one else knows
- you feel that if only X would be pleased with you or your work, all would be well
- after years of wanting to go on in a particular discipline, you are unsure now
- you keep complaining about X; you can't seem to talk about anything else.

Workshops on stress management, time management, exam anxiety and other pertinent topics are offered regularly by the Student Development Centre Website: www.sdc.uwo.ca. Personal counselling is available through both the Student Development Centre and Student Health Services Website: www.shs.uwo.ca. You should also talk to your academic counsellor about how to limit or manage the academic consequences of your problem.

NOTE: This guide was produced by the Office of the Ombudsperson www.uwo.ca/ombuds. It is not an official university document and is not intended to replace university policy.