

## *The Teaching and Learning Communique*

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# **What to Do When a Student is Failing: A Guide for Mentors**

One joy of a faculty member in academia is the opportunity to train the next generation of scholars who will continue our work to innovate and create, extend human knowledge, and improve the human condition. In most cases, mentoring students is rewarding; we mentors witness the growth, discovery, and learning of our students.

On occasion, however, mentoring can be tiresome, frustrating, and even downright unpleasant. Most often this occurs when a student fails to progress in the required and expected manner. Such students are the present focus: how should mentors react when a student fails to progress?

We recommend a structured three-step approach to investigate, understand, and then address the problem of a failing student: (a) determine the cause, (b) consider solutions, and (c) act.



## Determine the cause

A mentor can't possibly help his or her mentee succeed without understanding the barriers preventing success, so the first step must be gathering data to understand the problem at hand. Of course, the unequal power structure of a mentor-mentee complicates data gathering in some cases, so information must be obtained through some combination of direct and indirect sources.

In all cases, we recommend talking directly to the student—but we also recommend observation and consideration of behavior patterns over time, as well as consultation with other faculty members or individuals who may have information to share.

Every case will be different, and most cases will involve multiple barriers to success. Below we outline several of the more common factors that impinge the success of students.

*Insufficient ability:* For various reasons, students are sometimes admitted to programs without the intellectual abilities needed to succeed in those programs. This is unfortunate as it can frustrate mentors, and also creates inappropriate and unachievable demands of the student.

*Insufficient preparation:* On occasion, and for various reasons, sometimes curricula do not prepare students with the skills they need to succeed.

*Life stressors:* Students have families, friends, and lives outside of school, so of course they face the range of human challenges that exist. Relationship challenges, ill parents, parenting duties, and financial insecurity are common problems.

*Mental illness:* Students can become mentally ill just like anyone else, and illnesses can impede progress in their work. Depression and addictive disorders are common.

*Physical illness:* Chronic or acute physical illnesses also are common. Chronic pain, for example, may restrict scholarly progress.

*New interests:* Sometimes students discover the field they are pursuing is



not really their intellectual passion. Without interest, and especially without a desire to pursue the field long-term, persistence to a degree is difficult. On other occasions, students still have passion for the field but they grow disenchanted with their focus within the field. Similar problems may arise.

**Personality conflicts:** A skilled mentor can adjust to student habits and idiosyncrasies, but in some cases a mentor may just not “fit” with the mentee. We suggest this situation is fairly rare, as skilled mentors will adjust to work with mentees’ idiosyncrasies, but it does occur.

### **Consider the solution**

Again, each case will be distinct and multiple solutions may be attempted or required. We list below some common options mentors should consider before taking action.

**Additional training:** The student may benefit from additional training, which could range from structured and formal (e.g., enrolling in a class) to semi-structured (e.g., mentor guided readings) to completely unstructured (e.g., mentor suggests the student read certain areas and student is responsible for self-training).

**Medical care:** Mentors can recommend but not require their students seek medical or psychological care. Privacy laws limit the information mentors can request from students, but some students will gladly respond and share the outcomes of their care-seeking.

**Probationary period:** Some programs offer opportunity to place students on probation, and this status can be extremely powerful to motivate some students into action. Typically, students are warned prior to probation starting and then are placed on probation with the expectation that milestones will be met by a certain deadline. Failure to meet those deadlines leads to dismissal.

**Exit strategy:** In some cases, either before or after a probationary period, dismissing the student from the program is warranted. This might be done urgently in some cases, but more often it will be done in a professional manner that offers students opportunity to “save face” and exit with grace. A master’s degree might be awarded to a doctoral student, for example, or a student might be granted opportunity to transfer completed coursework to a

different program on campus or to a different institution in town.

***Change in mentor.*** Encouraging or requiring the student to switch to a new mentor may solve problems in some cases. In other cases, however, it may just transfer problems from one mentor to another, so we recommend it be initiated only when there is clear reason or indication it will be effective.

***Leave of absence.*** Particularly when physical or mental health challenges arise, or when serious life stressors emerge, a leave of absence is an effective strategy to help students focus on other life priorities for some period of time, returning to their program only when they are ready to re-focus on the intellectual and emotional challenges of training.

## **Act**

Once problems are identified and options weighed, the mentor—sometimes in partnership with program, departmental or university administrators—must act. This can be difficult, as emotional, stressful, and sometimes life-changing discussions and decisions will occur. Frank, open, and straightforward communication is recommended. Hiding the truth, or diminishing the gravity of the situation, will more often continue the problem rather than solving it. Transition plans will solve the problem rather than prolonging it.

In taking action we urge the mentor to avoid seeing any solution as a failure. A dedicated and skilled mentor sometimes is the wrong mentor for any particular student, and any particular student may fail with any mentor.

If probation or dismissal are enacted, firmness is required. Deadlines must be set and requirements adhered to. Similarly, if a change in mentors occurs, then a clear written plan must be specified to enact the transition and ensure the student follows a different and more successful path with the new mentor. In the case of doctoral students, intellectual property and publishing opportunity issues must be clarified with the previous mentor,

In many cases, a failing student will be relieved to have an “out” into a new university, a new laboratory, a new mentor, or even a new program or career. They may also be helped greatly through professional medical care. Our point is simple: inaction is usually a mistake and will rarely solve the problem. Action is likely to help all parties.



## **Conclusion**

It is rarely fun to deal with a failing student. But we as faculty mentors have an obligation to help our students, even when they are underperforming. By identifying the cause of failure first, and then determining the optimal solution or solutions to address that failure, we are in the best position to take firm and decisive action that helps the student succeed, either in their current program or by moving to an alternative path without prolonging a stressful and unsustainable situation.

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