



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY  
WASHINGTON, DC

**To:** All faculty  
**From:** Haig Mardirosian, Dean of Academic Affairs  
**Date:** August 27, 2007  
**Re:** Mental health issues in the classroom

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As we open the fall semester, it is an appropriate moment to consider some issues concerning faculty responsibility and preparedness in light of the tragic lessons learned at Virginia Tech. Faculty have asked valid questions about their response to behaviors that they may sense are symptomatic of serious distress or psychological problems. Our partners in the Division of Campus Life have prepared a useful set of Frequently Asked Questions that I am forwarding to you. I thank Dean of Students, Faith Leonard, and her office for preparing this document.

In addition to this FAQ, the Counseling Center in the Division of Campus Life also offers resources and useful guides for faculty. These are available on the Center's Website, <http://www.american.edu/counseling>. Follow the link to "Support for..." and then "Faculty." Links to all of these resources are also found on the Dean of Academic Affairs' Website, <http://american.edu/academics/provost/dean.htm>.

I urge any faculty with questions or concerns to contact the Dean of Students' office directly at x3300, the Counseling Center at x3500, or my office at x2125.

## **Mental Health Issues in the Classroom: Practices, Policies, and Legal Implications**

### **Frequently Asked Questions from Faculty**

*When I observe a student whose behaviors suggest emotional distress, how should I approach the student?*

Students whose behaviors suggest emotional distress often appreciate a faculty member's concern. Those behaviors may include missed classes, deterioration in academic performance, or changes in physical appearance. Talking to the student about your observations can lead to referring the student to appropriate campus services.

***What about the student who wants me to keep information confidential, begins to talk about very personal information, or talks about self-injury?***

Promising confidentiality is typically not a good idea, but offering to help a student in as confidential a manner as possible will build trust. Faculty should feel comfortable in stopping the student who begins to share very personal information, pointing out that there are others on campus better able to help students with personal issues and referring the student to those services. Making the phone call with the student and/or accompanying the student to the appropriate office are often helpful interventions. If a student talks about self-injury, then calling the Counseling Center for advice is indicated. In the case of an emergency, call Public Safety at x3636 (the emergency line).

***If I refer a student to the Counseling Center, how do I know if the student follows through?***

You could ask the student to voluntarily sign a release of information at the Counseling Center so that you can be informed about whether the student has kept an appointment. Without a release, the Center staff is unable to communicate with anyone about whether the student has been seen. Counseling Center records are subject to the DC Mental Health Information Act which has strict provisions about patient confidentiality.

***What do I do about the student whose behaviors suggest that the student is distressed, but those behaviors are also disrupting the class?***

Talking to the student about the behaviors and asking that they stop are good first steps. If the behaviors continue, consulting with the Judicial Affairs and Mediation Services office (x3328) about whether the behaviors violate the Student Conduct Code is appropriate. If the student's behaviors need to be addressed immediately, you can ask the student to leave the class, after which a judicial complaint can be filed. In the case of a student whose behavior is threatening or violent, Public Safety should be called immediately at x3636 (the emergency line).

***What are the procedures for accommodating students with psychological disabilities in the classroom?***

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 both prohibit discrimination against individuals with disabilities, including psychological disabilities. Students can provide documentation of a disability to the DSS staff who determine reasonable accommodations based on the documentation. The nature of the disability is confidential and can only be released with the student's permission. Faculty with questions or concerns about a letter of accommodations provided by a student can contact DSS at x3315. If the student does not request accommodations, then there is no notification to faculty by DSS.

***A student informed me that he was requesting a leave of absence because of a mental health condition and that his advisor would be contacting me about his grades in my class. He also said his parents want to know more about his academic progress. What policies apply in a situation like this one?***

Under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), education records are confidential unless the student provides permission to release them. However, university officials with a "legitimate educational interest" may share information among themselves, so in this case, you and the advisor may talk freely about the student's progress. The advisor will need the student's permission to talk with his parents, unless they have documented that the student is a dependent for tax purposes. More information about FERPA, including the Confidentiality of Student Records

policy and a tutorial for faculty and staff, is posted on the registrar's Web site. University employees are strongly encouraged to be familiar with this policy ([www.american.edu/american/registrar/](http://www.american.edu/american/registrar/)).

*I'm concerned that the health and safety of a student or of the campus community may be compromised by all of these policy and legal constraints. How do we act in everyone's best interests?*

Faculty members play a valuable role when they identify a student at risk to an advisor, a dean's office, or an appropriate office on campus. Early intervention is key to avoiding a more serious situation. However, if a health or safety emergency does occur, then appropriate disclosure of information takes precedence over confidentiality of student records. The dean of student's office (x3300) is a good resource to help answer additional questions that you may have.

***Campus Offices:***

**Public Safety – emergencies – x3636**

Counseling Center – 214 Mary Graydon Center – x3500

Dean of Students Office – 408 Butler Pavilion – x3300

Disability Support Services – 206 Mary Graydon Center – x3315

Judicial Affairs and Mediation Services – 408 Butler Pavilion – x3328

Public Safety – Public Safety Building – x2527 (non-emergency); x3636 (emergency)

*Office of the Dean of Students*