



Lessons Learned: Dealing with Issues, Part 3

by Mary Owens, Ph.D.

This installment continues the *gathering of information* aspect of dealing with student-faculty issues, with the focus specifically on *gathering information from faculty*.

Gathering information from faculty is similar in a number of ways to *gathering information from students*. One similarity is the goal of gathering information about the issue in order to facilitate a resolution. To do so effectively, I had to *remain as open* as possible and *consider all sides*. In both, I also had to take what each side said “with a grain of salt,” keeping in mind that what actually happened was probably somewhere in between their accounts, and remain focused on resolving the issue so the mission of educating students could go forward.

In addition, many of the same strategies are useful in gathering information from both students and faculty: *taking notes*; using *open-ended/information questions* with *yes/no question follow-ups* to verify and clarify; *pausing/waiting* for replies; *eliciting specific details and examples*. (See [College ESL Quarterly, Spring 2016](#).)

There are, however, significant differences between gathering information from students and gathering information from faculty. One important difference is the opportunity to *prepare mentally* for meeting with the faculty member, generally not an option when gathering information from a student because the first notice a chair has of an issue is often when the student comes in about it. The importance of *preparing mentally* for such meetings by *venting*, *rehearsing*, and *framing* was discussed in the first installment of the series ([College ESL Quarterly, Winter 2015](#)).

Other differences are the duration and depth of the chair’s relationships with those involved. The student’s relationships with the chair and the faculty member are temporary, limited usually to the duration of the class. Aside from the student’s account and interaction with the faculty member and the chair, little else may be known about the student. The chair’s primary focus is on fixing the immediate issue so the student can complete the class successfully and move on, with the hope of some positive effects on the student’s future.

On the other hand, the faculty member has a longer and deeper relationship with the chair and a history extending before and after the present issue. The chair can and should draw on this history in evaluating accounts and determining ways to address the matter constructively. Factors such as patterns of behavior or family or health issues may be relevant to understanding the situation and facilitating a resolution. While the chair’s primary focus is on resolving the immediate issue, the potential for additional long term and broader effects, positive or negative, should also be weighed.

Here are some additional suggestions for ***gathering information from the faculty member***, followed by an example. (See [College ESL Quarterly, Spring 2016](#) for more.)

- Operate using the premise that the faculty member wants to do his/her best
- Affirm your support for the faculty member's role/authority as the teacher
- Frame the discussion in terms of the shared commitment to educating students/the mission
- Refer explicitly to the importance of addressing what is interfering with the mission
- Give examples of specific behaviors that are problematic (elicited from student)
- Listen to the faculty member's response
- Elicit the rationale for the behavior if the faculty member does not provide one
- Share the student's words/perspective—this can be very powerful
- Couch the student's concerns in terms of interference with the mission
- Provide specific alternatives for achieving the faculty member's purpose
- Elicit a commitment from the faculty member to address student concerns

An Example:

A group of students came near the end of a semester to complain that their teacher did not want them to succeed and was going to fail them. Even after I had reviewed the scoring procedures for their departmental final exam and the grade review process, they were not assured. I pressed for further information, and one said, "Our teacher is always telling us we will fail. How can we pass if our teacher believes we will fail?"

I met with the faculty member.

Some of your students came in very worried about how they will do on the final exam. They said you tell them that they will fail.

I don't want them to fail! I have to get them ready for the final exam, so I warn them, so they can pass. I tell them they will fail if they continue to make these mistakes and don't do what I am telling them to do. I tell them over and over and they do not seem to hear what I am saying.

Do you start with 'You will fail if you do not...'? I think they probably stop listening after the 'fail' part and do not hear at all whatever advice you are giving them. Also, your students said, 'How can we pass if our teacher believes we will fail?' Could you reframe this message to 'You will pass if you do what I tell you'? It is the same message, but framed positively.

The faculty member agreed to work on constructive phrasing. Two weeks later, students reported to me that the class was going better.

In my next installment, I will address determining if a situation is fixable. Additional installments will focus on facilitating a resolution and on following up. These are not discreet, consecutive stages, but are important intertwined aspects of the process of dealing with student-faculty issues.

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