



Lessons Learned: Dealing with Issues, Part 4

by Mary Owens, Ph.D.

This installment focuses on determining if a situation is fixable, that is, whether a student-faculty issue can be resolved.

The confidence instructors and students have in each other is critical to effective teaching and student learning, often determining whether a student-faculty issue is fixable. The instructor should believe the students can learn from him/her; similarly, the students should have confidence in their instructor's ability to teach them. Also important is their own self-confidence: the instructor's belief that he /she can teach those students, and the students' belief that they can learn from the instructor.

Usually when a student comes to complain to the chair about an instructor, he or she lacks confidence in the instructor's ability to teach.

As the chair, I had to get to the heart of what led to this failure of confidence. This meant gathering information from the student about what happened, particularly examples and details (covered in the [Spring 2016 issue of CEQ](#)).

These examples provided opportunities for me to share insights into the instructor's perspective and possible reasons for his/her actions and to broaden the student's understanding of the roles, rights, and responsibilities of instructors and students in the classroom community. The authority of the instructor in the classroom, while not absolute, is essential. Students, as well as instructors, have responsibilities for moving the business of the class (student learning) forward by participating cooperatively. Students do not have the right to interfere with the instructor's teaching or other students' learning.

With the information gathered, I would ask the student how I could help.

Students often misunderstood the options they had: they might think they could move to another instructor's class or the instructor would be replaced because they complained. I often explained the procedures and deadlines for changing classes.

In order to reassure students and build their confidence in their instructor, I would also recount the instructor's relevant experience and qualifications, share information on faculty support systems and evaluation procedures, and describe departmental final exam processes, which typically involve blind cross-grading by other instructors.

Essentially, students had two options in cases where they had an issue with an instructor: ***to withdraw from the class*** or ***to stay and make it work***.

Even if the deadline for *withdrawing from classes* had not passed, there was little chance for even partial tuition refunds, so the student would forfeit any money spent on the class. In addition, dropping the class would delay the student's completion of the class until the next term, thus costing the student time as well as money.

On the other hand, *staying in the class* was in the student's best interests with regard to money and time; it was also temporary.

If the student was willing to consider staying in the class, I offered to address the student's concerns with the instructor. Students are often afraid of retaliation if their instructor finds out they have complained, so I would keep the information general enough to mask identities and not reveal names, acknowledging the instructor might very well be able to figure out who had complained. If the student wanted me to, I would speak with the instructor.

I would make the case, however, for the student first try to address the issues him/herself, often using the analogy of an issue between co-workers being resolved better between the two co-workers themselves than by bringing in the boss. I acknowledged the courage it would take to raise issues, noting the safeguards of the instructor's syllabus statement on student grades, the department's grade review process, and chair intervention. I offered my involvement as a backup plan should the student want it.

If the student opted to first try and handle the issues him/herself, suggestions for addressing the specific concerns the student raised would follow: framing questions and requesting help politely; using instructor office hours; participating actively in class; organizing time and schoolwork; going to tutoring centers, identifying resources available for and relevant to the student's concerns.

The importance of changing a negative attitude and being as receptive as possible to the instructor's teaching was also stressed. If the student felt strongly that he/she could not do so, dropping the class would be the better choice. I would ask the student to make a commitment to adjusting his/her attitude.

The commitment made, the student would agree to update me every couple of weeks, by leaving a voice mail with name and a message like "It is okay" or "I want you to talk with the teacher."

If it was going okay, I would not share the complaint with the instructor until after the class and the term were done.

If the student wanted, I would speak with the instructor (see the [Winter 2015 issue of CEQ](#) for my piece on how to prepare for such conversations; see the [Summer 2016 issue](#) for my article on gathering information from faculty). In those cases, both student and instructor would be asked for follow-up reports during the rest of the term.

When students opted to try to resolve the issues and remain in the class, they were usually able to complete the class and move on with their educations, proof that resolution of the issues had occurred.

Along the path to resolution were teachable moments, those opportunities for informing students, for building understanding of their role in the learning process with regard to themselves and others, for empowering them to deal constructively with issues, and ideally for building some empathy for others.

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