
The Ombuds Guide: Student & Instructor Issues

Purpose of this Handout:

This handout provide you with suggestions to more effectively resolve difficulties with instructors. Your options will depend on a number of factors:

- When you recognize the problem
- Whether the instructor can or will change
- How open you are to changing your expectations

If You Have A Concern, Speak Up

The first thing to remember is that instructors are professionals who want their students to be successful. If you are having problems in a course, the instructor is usually the person you should talk to first. Very often he or she will be able to fix the problem. If you are uncomfortable with speaking with an instructor you may wish bring someone as support. The support person's role is to offer emotional support and not to become directly involved in the issue. Here are the steps you should usually take to resolve an issue, misunderstanding or problem with an instructor:

1. Communicate Directly With The Instructor

It's often better to speak to the instructor during office hours or after class, that is, in private. Plan what you're going to say before you meet and gather together any relevant papers. Give some thought to how the problem arose. Have a picture in your mind of what the circumstances are - and what you think a fair outcome would be. And don't forget that all of us are more open to criticism if it is put in a constructive way.

Sometimes it can help to raise an issue in class, particularly if you're aware that a number of other students share your concerns. An example might be an assignment that most students are confused about. However, if you think bringing up a problem in class will put the instructor on the spot or make him or her angry or humiliated, then don't do it.

2. Communicate Indirectly With The Instructor

Write a note. You can control what you say in a note and the instructor can think it over before responding.

3. Communicate With the Chair of the Department

Sometimes you may wish to involve a 3rd party. This can be useful if you think you cannot get the concern across yourself. This may be because the issue is a difficult or personal one or you are uncomfortable speaking directly with the instructor. The Chair of the Department is usually the person to approach in this situation. Again you may bring a support person, such as the Ombuds, to this meeting.

Remember that the Chair will, in all likelihood, want to speak with the instructor to hear what they have to say about the issue. You may be asked to be present at that meeting. The College Calendar lists the Chairs of the various academic departments.

4. Communicate With the Associate Dean of the School

If you are unable to schedule an appointment with the Chair, or if the instructor you're concerned about is the Chair, or if you are not satisfied with the response of the Chair, then the A/Dean is your next stop.

Again, students sometimes worry that other College people will take the instructor's "side" and not believe there is a problem. While this might happen at times, it is not usual. Excellence in teaching is highly valued by the College - Chairs and Deans want to hear about problems so they can address them.

You should recognize, however, that the Chair or A/Dean also has a responsibility to respect the instructor's rights too. So, they will need to check out your concerns and give the instructor an opportunity to respond - it's only fair to involve the instructor in the solution to a problem or misunderstanding.

You can feel free to talk about your concerns with the Ombudsman at any time during the process. The Ombuds can often help you to focus your options and give you suggestions on approaching the instructor. In some situations the Ombuds may present your concerns to the instructor (so he or she is at least aware of them) or to facilitate a discussion between you and the instructor. And remember, anything you discuss with the Ombuds is strictly confidential.

Check Your Assumptions and Expectations

Some problems occur because, at times, students have unrealistic expectations or assumptions about the instructors at the College. Common student assumptions that cause problems are:

All instructors should be good teachers: Remember that teaching and learning styles differ. Someone you think is a good teacher may not seem so to others. The real responsibility for your learning rests with you.

Instructors should care about their students. Caring shows in the effort the instructor makes to teach the course well and to evaluate all students in a fair and equal way. Caring also means being respectful and having a classroom where everyone feels included. If an instructor forgets your name or refuses to accept a late paper, it doesn't necessarily mean she or he doesn't care

Instructors should tell you what is wrong with your work: It is reasonable to expect that you can go over your work with the instructor and receive an explanation for the marks given. However, the instructor doesn't have an obligation to tell you "what you should have said." If you disagree with the instructor about a grade after you've discussed it with him or her, there is an appeal procedure open to you. The procedures are printed in the College Calendar. You can also confidentially discuss your concerns with the Ombudsman.

Instructors should be flexible and understanding about deadlines and grades: Instructors have an obligation to be fair to all their students. Sometimes the wish to be flexible to one student will conflict with the obligation to be fair to all. In that case, fairness to all should take priority over flexibility to one.

The Instructor should see me whenever they have office hours and there's no one else with them: You need to keep in mind that instructors' office hours must be shared between all their students. Office hours are also a time that the instructor uses to prepare for lessons, mark papers and look after other administrative duties. It's not reasonable to expect that you can demand the instructor's attention whenever he or she appears to be alone.

Examples of Problem Situations

Talking to the instructor about a problem has the best results when the instructor will do something about it. Here's some examples of situations where it is likely a good idea to try this approach:

- (1) *The instructor hasn't marked & given back the 1st assignment & now the second one is due.*
- (2) *The instructor didn't state in the course outline when tests would be scheduled.*
- (3) *The instructor makes stereotypical remarks about minority groups.*

It's probably worthwhile talking directly with the instructors in the first two examples. Point out that it would be beneficial to have their feedback before handing in the second assignment (1) and to be able schedule study times (2). Example (3) is trickier. Many of us are unaware that we're making stereotypical remarks and appreciate it being pointed out to us (in a non-judgmental way!). There may be other situations, unfortunately, where some instructors let their prejudices show. In these situations, you may be better off using another approach to address the issue.

Whenever possible it is best to bring an issue to the instructors attention before speaking with a Chair or Dean. If for some reason that is not possible or you're not sure how to approach an instructor, consider getting some ideas for dealing with the problem by talking with the Chair or the Ombuds. Examples may include:

- (1) *The instructor seems to frequently belittle, embarrass or insult students*
- (2) *The instructor doesn't follow course outline, fails to keep office hours, violates academic regulations*
- (3) *The instructor tests for material not taught, uses evaluations methods perceived to be unfair or unreasonable, ignores students questions or requests for clarification.*
- (4) *The majority of students in your class appear to be failing, yet the instructor seems to think the problem is with the students.*

Taking Care of Yourself

You can often feel overwhelmed when you're having problems in a course. You need to pay attention to how you are feeling - if you're experiencing any of the following danger signs, it's time to take action.

- ◆ you dread going to class ABC or you're avoiding it - you haven't attended in weeks.
- ◆ you're ignoring other courses because of class ABC
- ◆ you're not sleeping due to worry about course ABC
- ◆ you have thoughts about "getting back" at instructor X
- ◆ you often feel afraid, sad, angry, depressed, ashamed or worthless
- ◆ you thought you wanted to study in a particular subject area, but now because of instructor X, you're having second thoughts
- ◆ all you seem to talk about is how mad you are about course ABC and instructor X
- ◆ you've noticed major changes in your appetite - you're not eating enough or way too much
- ◆ your friends are worried about you

If you recognize any of the above signs, then it's probably wise to seek some help:

- ◆ The Counselling Centre (Lansdowne - 2nd Floor, Dawson Building; Interurban - 2nd Floor, Campus Centre) offers confidential assistance to students in managing personal or academic difficulties.
- ◆ Learning Skills Centres (Lansdowne - 2nd Floor Dawson; Interurban - Campus Centre 218) can help you be a more successful student.
- ◆ First Nations Education (2nd Floor Ewing);
- ◆ Disability Support Services (Interurban - Campus Centre 202; Lansdowne - Dawson 202)

Withdrawing from the Course

If you are feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope one option may be to withdraw. Check the College Calendar "Important Dates" and "Tuition Fee Refunds" for information on Withdrawal dates and refund policies. **Be aware that withdrawal may affect your eligibility for Student Loans and Bursaries or for admission to future courses or programs. You should check with Academic Advising and/or Financial Aid before withdrawing. (Interurban - Campus Centre, 2nd Floor and Lansdowne - Dawson Main Floor)**

Please remember, you are welcome to contact the Ombuds Office if you wish any clarification, information or assistance regarding this or other College policies, rules or procedures. (Lansdowne - Paul 222; Interurban - Campus Centre 234; 370-3405; ombuds@camosun.bc.ca)

(Thanks to the Ombuds Office of The University of Western Ontario for permission to adapt their handout "Student-Instructor Relations")