Sandwich Seminars
If you would like to schedule a Sandwich Seminar, please call Chelsea Bledsoe at ext. 2201.

Note: Sandwich Seminars are held on Wednesdays 12:30-1:30 p.m., and Thursdays 12-1 p.m. in the Brockway Hall Jacobus Lounge unless otherwise noted. This listing may be incomplete, please check http://www.cortland.edu/bulletin/ for the latest information.

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<td>“What’s New at the Inclusive Recreation Resource Center?”</td>
<td>Dr. Lynn Anderson and Dr. Vicki Wilkins, Recreation, Parks and Leisure Studies</td>
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<td>Wednesday, September 24, 2014</td>
<td>“Closing in on Dyslexia and Other Reading Difficulties – Exciting Breakthroughs in Cognitive and Neurological Sciences”</td>
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<td>Wednesday, October 8, 2014</td>
<td>“National Survey of Student Engagement, 2014: SUNY Cortland’s Results”</td>
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<td>Wednesday, October 15, 2014</td>
<td>“How HIP are we? What the data tells us about our campus’ High Impact Practices”</td>
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<td>Wednesday, October 22, 2014</td>
<td>“College Faculty Retirement – An end or beginning…OR: “The Rest of the story (issues not usually considered)””</td>
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DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS
Carolyn Bershad, Ph.D.
Director, Counseling and Student Development
SUNY Cortland

This article briefly addresses how to talk with students about difficult topics, and what to do when you feel out of your depth.

Sensitive topics, difficult situations, and emotional encounters can arise in the professional arena, just as they can in our personal lives. Being in a “professional relationship” with someone will have both the “professional” as well as the “relationship” components. As a faculty or staff member, your students may come to you to talk about their lives outside the classroom. They may see you as someone whom they admire and look to for understanding and support. They may perceive you as someone trustworthy and caring.

SUNY Cortland Data
So what personal information might they share with you? In Spring 2014, SUNY Cortland participated in the ACHA-NCHA survey. It is clear that our students continue to engage in alcohol and drug misuse at higher rates than the national average:

- 75.7% of our students surveyed this past Spring reported using alcohol in the last 30 days, compared to the national average of 62.5%.
• 49.3% of our students surveyed reported that they had consumed 5 or more drinks in a sitting, at least one time within the last two weeks, compared to the national average of 33.8% (5 drinks or more for males and 4 drinks or more for females is considered binge drinking).
• 19.4% of male students surveyed reported that they used a prescription stimulant (e.g., Ritalin or Adderall) that had not been prescribed for them within the last 12 months, compared to 9.9% for male students surveyed nationally (when women are included in this data, the SUNY Cortland average for illicit stimulant use is 11.5% versus the national average of 8.5%).
• 22.3% of our students surveyed reported using marijuana in the past 30 days compared to 18.3% nationally.
• 18.4% of our students surveyed reported using other drugs (excluding alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana) in the past 30 days compared to 13.9% nationally.

As research tells us, alcohol and other drug misuse are related to poor class attendance, poor grades, poor retention, damage to property, interpersonal violence including sexual assault and suicidal ideation (NIAAA website on College Drinking, 2014). Your students may be some of those students. Due to the above behaviors, as well as other concerns, they may experience serious difficulties which may affect their daily functioning. They may miss your classes, not complete assignments, or not perform as well as in the past. You may have already noticed these problems emerging, and have proactively asked your student in for a chat, or your student may approach you of their own volition.

Suggestions for Having Difficult Conversations

Please remember that you are not expected to solve your student’s problems, or to be your student’s therapist or counselor. When a student leaves your office, they will still have the problem that they have shared with you. But you can give them information on referrals, help them figure out what they might need to address their problem, and what resources on campus that they can use. In these instances, your primary goal is to listen to the student, and provide some evidence that you have understood, and can assist with information and/or ideas about next steps.

Listening may be the most important thing that you do for a student who comes to you with a personal concern. Research has shown that students typically go first to their peers for ideas, support and understanding, so the fact that they are turning to you means that you have earned their trust and that they see you as a possible source of help. But sometimes listening can be difficult. We have limited time, and someone starts talking and we believe that we know what they need before the first sentence is out, and we are into problem-solving. I would encourage you not to try to solve the problem, but rather to first listen, and gain a full understanding of what the student is experiencing.

If you are not a person who feels comfortable with these kinds of interactions with students, then also letting a student know the limits of your conversation is considerate of that student and the interaction. A comment like “there is a place on campus where the staff know more about how to address this concern—how about if I help you get connected” can let a student know that you care, but also that this is not the conversation where they should “tell all.”

Resources

Please also remember that the Counseling Center staff is available to consult with you about talking with students (before, during and after your talk). We talk with students daily about various concerns, and can provide some guidance and insight into how to approach a difficult conversation. We also regularly talk with families, staff, faculty and others, in a consultative fashion to help them through challenging interpersonal situations. You may reach us during our office hours, M-F, 8-12 and 1-4:30 to discuss a situation, or if you have a student in your office whom you are trying to connect with our services. Our office number is 607-753-
4728. Other resources can be found at http://www2.cortland.edu/offices/student-development-center/counseling-center/index.dot including information on how to refer a student to counseling and how to address other more complex concerns with students.

Difficult conversations can be the first step towards making positive change for our students. Your role as a faculty and staff member is an important one, since you have frequent contact with students and often may be the first to notice a problem. Thank you for all you do for our students.