Reducing Course-Related Conflict and Complaints

Suggestions for Faculty

Below are some areas where student-faculty conflict is common, along with suggestions on how to manage them. This information can be included in the syllabus. Students need to know what is expected of them and how they will be evaluated.

Plan for Conflict
Let students know that conflict is a normal, healthy part of group interaction. Also let them know how you plan to handle conflict in your classroom (or in your advising relationships). Be direct: give them feedback, but also ask for (and accept) feedback from them. Know how you want students to approach conflict with you and tell them the steps available to them to raise issues with you.

Syllabus
Provide students with a syllabus at the first course meeting. Walk through it with the students and encourage them to ask questions as you go; engage them in understanding how you are shaping the course.

Be sure that the course syllabus clearly communicates course objectives and your expectations. Try to avoid major changes during the term. If you must make changes, provide oral and written notice of any changes.

Grading Criteria
Students are entitled to an explanation of the criteria used to evaluate their work. Conflicts can arise over the method used to determine grades, or students' perceptions of unfair or arbitrary grading. Encourage students to discuss concerns early in the semester.

List the measures to be used and the weighting for each (papers, exams, etc.). Return at least one major assignment (or other indicator of student progress) prior to the deadline for withdrawal from the course. If a student is struggling, refer them to appropriate resources.

Attendance/Class Participation: If participation and attendance are expected, clearly define what this means to you and how you will evaluate it.

Make-up Exams, Late Assignments
In cases where students have legitimate excuses to miss an exam or other course assignment, the faculty member can choose to make accommodation to make up work.

State in the syllabus what reasons (verified illness, family emergencies, University sponsored events, etc.) will be accepted; indicate the type of documentation required to excuse the absence, and inform the student of his/her options to make up the work.

Penalties for late assignments (if accepted) should be clearly defined.

Classroom Behavior
Clear expectations for classroom behavior need to be established early. A conversation about expectations should include the whole class- get students to talk about what they expect from each other, themselves and the faculty member. The more involvement you get from students in establishing classroom norms, the more adherence you will get to expectations.

Indicate the consequences for inappropriate classroom behavior.

Outside Activities
Trips, classes, or other activities that take place at other than regularly scheduled class time, or at an off-campus location should be announced as early as possible and in writing, especially if the activity is mandatory or will impact the student's grade.

Course Records
Retain all of your graded materials (including exams and assignments that are not returned or picked up). Students have the right to at timely review and an opportunity to discuss their grades.

Access to Faculty
Include information on how to most effectively reach you (whether by phone, email, text message, or in person) on all course syllabi.

Schedule and maintain office hours; include this information on course syllabi and provide the department office with a copy of your schedule, if possible. If you are unable to maintain regular hours, let your students know that and encourage them to set up meetings in advance.

If you know in advance that you must miss posted office hours, announce this to your classes and offer alternate times. If you need to miss office hours without notice, post a note on your door including your contact information.

Resources
Be sure that students are aware of their resources. Encourage them early on to access both academic and non-academic services available to them.

Ombuds Office
Understand that not all students are comfortable raising issues, especially difficult ones, with a faculty member. Encourage them to do so if possible, but also let them know that if they do not feel comfortable coming to you, they can contact the Ombuds Office for assistance. Feel free to put my contact information on your syllabus:
Ombuds Office
Molly McAvoy
651-523-2555
mmcavoy@hamline.edu