You have a problem with your program, your adviser, or your advisee. Maybe you feel that another student is being favored at your expense. Perhaps you need to tell an advisee that progress to date is unacceptable. What do you do? Should you schedule a face-to-face conversation? If so, how do you prepare? How do you conduct this potentially awkward discussion?

**INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Do you want to do something about it? If the situation is temporary, a wise alternative may be to cope with the problem rather than confront it. If the problem is serious and difficult to resolve, perhaps a dialogue with the person will help to improve matters.

If you want to do something about it, consider whether a direct conversation is the best approach. Consult with someone who understands the academic culture. The Student Conflict Resolution Center (academic issues), Office for Conflict Resolution (employment issues), University Counseling and Consulting Services (confidential counseling), or a trusted mentor are all good resources. Consider:

- How does a direct conversation contribute to the achievement of your short- and long-term goals? If your goal is to vent, don’t have the conversation.
- If you value the relationship, will a direct conversation enhance the relationship or risk damaging it? If you feel unsafe or threatened in the relationship, don’t have a face-to-face conversation.
- What are the alternatives to a face-to-face conversation? Are there intermediaries who can help?

**SETTING UP THE MEETING**

If you decide a direct conversation is best, don’t do it by email or phone. Meeting face-to-face will provide you the opportunity to judge the reaction of the other person and adjust your approach, if needed.

- Make an appointment, planning for adequate time. The place should be private, such as a professor’s office.
- Practice the conversation with a trusted mentor or friend. Anticipate the range of reactions and practice your response.
Preparing for a Difficult Conversation

THE CONVERSATION

- Use diplomatic, not inflammatory, language to present the issue in the meeting.
  - Give the other person the benefit of the doubt. Don’t assume the worst about their intentions. Try to put yourself in his or her shoes and understand the needs and stressors that person is experiencing.
  - Frame the conversation so that you are acknowledging his or her needs and helping to make clear your own needs and concerns.
  - Avoid judgmental language. For example, instead of saying, “You could have told me two months ago, but you didn’t,” try something like, “This assignment comes at a time in the semester when I have no real options to change my schedule.”
- Understand and acknowledge your role in the conflict. Maybe you missed a deadline, failed to communicate about obstacles, or have been inaccessible or non-responsive at times. Acknowledge these shortcomings.
- Be an attentive listener.
- Try to have an open and positive attitude.
- Come prepared to share some ideas for resolutions and to listen to others. Be open-minded about possible solutions. If the other person asks, “What do you want me to do about it?” respond by generating several acceptable outcomes rather than limiting yourself to only one.
- Be brief, organized, and to the point.

ENDING THE CONVERSATION

- Have an exit strategy in case the conversation goes badly. If the conversation begins to escalate unpleasantly, bring it to an end. For example, “Rather than talking more now, let’s adjourn and talk more tomorrow after we’ve had a chance to reflect on this.”
- Have realistic expectations. It may be a great achievement for the conversation to go “not badly.” Don’t expect it to provide the ideal resolution or to resolve all of the relationship issues.
- Identify next steps before concluding the conversation. When you will hear back regarding the response? What will you do to further problem solving? Acknowledge that you may feel awkward in the days ahead but you want to get over the awkwardness and have a good working relationship.

Supportive and Confidential Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Conflict Resolution Center</th>
<th>Office for Conflict Resolution</th>
<th>University Counseling and Consulting Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan Morse, Director</td>
<td>Carolyn Chalmers, Director</td>
<td>Matt Hanson, Senior Psychologist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>254 Appleby Hall</td>
<td>662 Heller Hall</td>
<td>340 Appleby Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone: 612-624-7272</td>
<td>Phone: 612-624-1030</td>
<td>Phone: 612-624-3323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:morse005@umn.edu">morse005@umn.edu</a></td>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:conflict.resolution@umn.edu">conflict.resolution@umn.edu</a></td>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:hans1053@umn.edu">hans1053@umn.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web: <a href="http://www.sos.umn.edu">www.sos.umn.edu</a></td>
<td>Web: <a href="http://www.umn.edu/conflictresolution">www.umn.edu/conflictresolution</a></td>
<td>Web: <a href="http://www.uccs.umn.edu">www.uccs.umn.edu</a></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
If a student is not making good progress, talk with—and listen to—the student.

“I sense there is a problem and wanted your thoughts.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not Happy in Program</th>
<th>Conflicts with Adviser</th>
<th>Lacks Necessary Skills</th>
<th>Lacks Motivation</th>
<th>Interpersonal Conflicts</th>
<th>Personal Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wrong field for the student?</td>
<td>Wrong project or adviser?</td>
<td>Struggling because of gap in skills (e.g., math, writing, language)?</td>
<td>What is keeping the student from the work?</td>
<td>Interpersonal issues with other students, faculty, or staff?</td>
<td>Health, mental health, life balance, disability?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support student’s efforts to identify a new field or career path.</td>
<td>Help resolve issues or work with student to identify new project and/or adviser.</td>
<td>Refer for skill building/training.</td>
<td>Time management, personal or family problems?</td>
<td>Solve “in house” or seek Conflict Resolution/Counseling and Consulting Services.</td>
<td>Refer student to appropriate University services, (e.g., mental health, UCCS, Disability Services).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A graduate or professional student has not met their academic, research, or clinical goals. The decision has been made to counsel them out of the program. How can you convey this to the student and help them make a graceful exit from the program?

Determine if the decision follows a fair process

Their adviser or program chair has been working with the student to help them improve their performance, but the student is not able to sustain sufficient improvement. There have been preliminary discussions with the student to let them know specifically what they need to improve, and the consequences for not meeting those goals. The student has been offered assistance and resources.

In consultation with the student's adviser and faculty committee, the decision has been made that it is time to help the student leave the program. The decision has been reviewed to assure that it is not based on anything other than the student's consistent failure to achieve stated performance standards. You, as the adviser, committee chair, or DGS, have been designated as the person to have a conversation with the student about transitioning out of the program.
Prepare for the conversation – take time to talk

Think about the timing of this conversation; generally it is best to talk as soon as possible after the decision has been made. This is not a casual conversation to have in the hallway or by email. Personally invite the student to meet with you in your office. Allot sufficient time for a conversation, recognizing that this could be difficult or stressful to the student. Anticipate the emotions that will be involved. If previous conversations have been difficult, you may want to refer the student to the U of M Mental Health website listed below, or consider consulting with the Student Conflict Resolution Center or the Graduate School resources below.

Review previous discussions about progress and recommendations for improvement. Be direct in saying that the department faculty has made the decision to dismiss them from the program because the student has not made sufficient progress. State the criteria for satisfactory progress and compare with the student’s performance. Explain with concrete feedback and specific examples. Share all relevant information regarding the decision. Ask the student for their perspective and give them a chance to respond.

Offer reassurance

Students, knowing how much can be at stake for their futures, can feel very intimidated or defensive talking about these issues with a faculty adviser. Remember the power imbalance: students may feel concerned about letters of reference, etc. Offer reassurance that the department will provide them with referrals to resources such as personal and career counseling, and that you will work with them to help develop a range of options. Share information with them regarding other academic programs or career opportunities that might be of interest to them. If the student is in a PhD program and is eligible for a terminal master’s degree, apprise them of this process.
Give positive feedback

Be honest and direct with your feedback; focus on the student’s positive strengths and skills. Include an assessment of such professional skills, such as oral and written communication skills and conflict management, and give them resources where they might develop those skills. Separate the person from the performance. Help them understand that leaving the program doesn’t mean that they have failed, but that it is not a good fit for them at this time. This approach can help students to “save face” and to evaluate where they might be more successful.

An additional aim is to help students think constructively about next steps as they move forward in their career. It may be possible to do this in the same meeting or you may suggest a subsequent meeting to have this discussion. Support the student’s efforts to identify a new field, career path, or direction. Share your ideas about what you think would be a good direction for the student to pursue. Encourage them to conduct informational interviews with people in careers that interest them or encourage a meeting with a career counselor. If you have anecdotes or data about careers that other students have followed when leaving the program, share that information as it may give them ideas and help to normalize the event.

Document your conversations

Keep notes of your discussion, including suggestions and referrals. Ask the student for their help in jointly designing next steps for this period of transition. At the end of the conversation, review the discussion and outline a plan of action. You may wish to make a copy to give to the student, or send an email summarizing your discussion. Typical items in a transition plan include a final separation date, transfer of research data or lab materials and keys, and communication with others in the group. Please remember confidentiality guidelines and do not discuss private student information with those who do not have a legitimate need to know.
Additional considerations for international students

Changing their academic plans may involve visa issues, thus you and your student should consult staff at the International Student & Scholar Services (ISSS) office. Saving face is important for all students, but particularly some foreign students, so remember to include positive feedback along with criticisms.

Seek outside help

Some students will not accept recommendations from their adviser or program. What if the student is resistant to the dismissal? Seek assistance from the DGS, the student’s committee members, the Student Conflict Resolution Center, or other services as needed to set expectations and a timeline.

### Difficult Conversations Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U of M Mental Health Website</th>
<th>University Counseling and Consulting Services (UCCS)</th>
<th>Student Conflict Resolution Center (SCRC)</th>
<th>The Graduate School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.mentalhealth.umn.edu">www.mentalhealth.umn.edu</a></td>
<td>Matt Hanson, Senior Psychologist</td>
<td>Jan Morse, Director</td>
<td>Karen Starry, Departmental Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phone: 612-624-3323 Web: <a href="http://www.uccs.umn.edu">www.uccs.umn.edu</a></td>
<td>Phone: 612-624-7272 Web: <a href="http://www.sos.umn.edu">www.sos.umn.edu</a></td>
<td>Phone: 612-625-2815 Web: <a href="http://www.grad.umn.edu">www.grad.umn.edu</a></td>
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</tbody>
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### Additional Resources for Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Development Plans</th>
<th>National Graduate Student Crisis Line</th>
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