



Best Practices Manual For Counseling Services

A Guide for Faculty & Staff

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Purpose for Best Practices Manual for Counseling Services

The purpose of this guide is to provide faculty and staff with information about counseling services, referral information, and how to most effectively assist BridgeValley students who are in crisis situations. As a staff or faculty member, you may be the first person students turn to when they need help. More importantly, because of your ongoing (and often frequent) contact with students, you are often able to observe signs and symptoms of a potential problem long before a student might arrive at our office for services. Your role in expressing concern and assisting a student in getting help can be quite significant in his or her life. It is by no means expected that faculty and staff will “provide counseling” for students. However, all employees at BridgeValley should realize that because of the trusting relationship that they may develop with students, they may be approached for support and/or advice of a personal nature. Therefore, it would be helpful for faculty and staff to be able to “spot the signs” of a student who may be having emotional or psychological difficulties, to respond effectively to such students, and to facilitate an effective referral to Student Services.

General Guidelines on Responding to Concerns about a Student

Faculty and staff members should determine for themselves their personal comfort levels with becoming involved with student problems. Becoming the main source of support to a troubled student sometimes can be overwhelming, frightening, and/or tiring. It is important that you know your own limitations in providing assistance to students, and that you are aware of times when a referral is the best option.

When to Consider Referring a Student for Counseling Services

The following are intended as guidelines to help you decide when to refer; they are not hard and fast rules, and your personal and professional judgment should always come into play first. You are not expected to be a counselor, and when in doubt about whether or not to make a referral, we encourage you to call the BridgeValley Counselor. Students dealing with personal concerns or problems tend to show signs that they are struggling in some way. The below indicators may be useful in assessing whether or not a referral should be made. You should refer a student for personal counseling when:

- the problem is beyond your expertise
- you are not comfortable with the situation
- personality differences interfere with your ability to help
- you know the student or their family personally and you would not be an objective person to help
- the student is reluctant to talk to you even though they acknowledge they have a problem
- you are stressed yourself, pressed for time or not feeling well

- the student reminds you of someone you know who has a similar problem that hasn't been open to your suggestions
- The danger is immediate and there needs to be direct intervention because of danger to the student or someone else.

How to Make an Effective Referral*

1. Displaying an attitude of sincere interest and helpfulness toward a person in need is most important.
2. A mutual decision between the student and faculty/staff member regarding concerns and the need for referral creates the best climate for helping a person... unless the student is seriously disturbed and is unable to accept such responsibility.
3. The purpose of the referral should be made clear to the student (to see a professional counselor on campus that will offer immediate assistance and assess the need for referral for ongoing counseling).
4. Timing is crucial. When a student is receptive, pick up the phone to alert the BridgeValley Counselor that you are bringing a student to their office.
5. Walk with the student to the counselor's office and remain until the counselor is available to speak with the student. Introduce the student to the counselor and give a brief introduction to the issue at hand.
 - *Note that it can be very traumatic for a student to retell their story to a stranger. Any assistance you can provide to help normalize the situation can be very helpful, both to the student and to the counselor.*
 - *If the issue is not urgent and you cannot accompany the student to the counselor, you should make the student aware that services are available and, if the student is agreeable, make a referral to the BridgeValley Counselor.*
6. It is not your responsibility to make a psychological judgment/diagnosis about the student's state of mind, nor is it your obligation to refer students for counseling. However, any assistance you may provide to assist students is encouraged.
7. Confidentiality: Remember to adhere to the legal and ethical standards of student confidentiality as outlined in FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974).

**Please note that this process is not to be used for poor academic performance. It is intended to help us serve students in emotional and psychological distress. For students exhibiting poor academic performance please complete an early alert form located on MyBridge.*

Understanding Emotional Distress

Emotional distress is a physical and psychological reaction to issues and events emanating from one's environment. Perceived obstacles to goal achievement, environmental change, life challenges, and periods of significant transition are common stress triggers for college students.

As a faculty or staff member interacting daily with students, you are in an excellent position to recognize behavior changes that characterize an emotionally troubled student. You may observe that at certain times of the year, particularly during midterms, finals and holidays, students experience increased anxiety.

Recognizing Signs of Student Distress

A student's behavior, especially if it is inconsistent with your previous observations, could well constitute an attempt to draw attention to his/her plight... "a cry for help." . A student in distress may be first identified because of changes in behavior, attitude, or academic performance. These changes may be quick and dramatic, or they may involve slow but steady deterioration over time. Because it is normal for all students to have periods of time where they are less participatory in class, feel depressed or anxious, or experience a decline in academic performance, it may be helpful to watch for an overall change in the student's normal patterns rather than react to an isolated change. *That said, any talk of death or suicide should be addressed immediately, even if it is an isolated incident.*

Changes to Watch for:

- Excessive absences from class
- Multiple requests for special consideration in the absence of supporting data (e.g. extensions on assignments or accommodations for class lectures without a documented learning or other disability)
- Failure to turn in assignments or take tests
- Changes in class participation
- Decline in academic performance
- Failure to keep scheduled appointments with you
- Dramatic changes in weight or physical appearance (including personal hygiene)

Unusual or New Mood/Behaviors

- Outbursts or other disruptive behaviors
- Intoxication
- Excessively rapid speech or increased activity level
- Tangential or irrelevant speech/writing
- Social or interpersonal withdrawal
- High levels of anxiety, sadness, stress, or despair
- Crying
- Frequent requests or demands for your time

- Poor academic performance
- Complaints of inability to concentrate
- Multiple physical complaints
- Excessive exercise habits
- Sleeping in class

Isolation and/or References to Death

- Overt or covert references to suicide
- Evidence of a suicide plan
- Preoccupation with death themes
- References to/preoccupation with violence
- Homicidal or other threatening statements, whether verbal or written
- Intentional isolation from family or friends
- Perception of having no support network
- Feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, despair
- Evidence of serious loss (death, divorce)
- Indication of drug or excessive alcohol use

If a student is an immediate threat to one self of others, Faculty and/or Staff members are instructed to notify the Dean of Students Mr. James McDougle and Campus Police Immediately.

Basic Crisis Procedures

During the hours of 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. Monday – Thursday, students in crisis may be seen the same day on a walk-in basis. If you are confronted with a student in crisis and wish to refer him or her on an emergency basis, and if possible, please call our office prior to the student's arrival to provide us with some background information. We will gladly consult with you about how to make the referral and discuss whether immediate intervention is necessary. Whenever possible, please inform the student in crisis that you are sharing information with us. In crisis situations you should walk the student to the office personally.

If a faculty or staff member needs to consult about a student crisis occurring after hours, other options include:

Contacting the Director of Counseling at 304-634-4923

Confidentiality

We respect and protect the individual student's right to privacy and believe that a commitment and confidentiality is indispensable to effective, successful counseling. Information which is obtained in the context of a counseling relationship may be released to other individuals and agencies only with the student's written permission. There are some exceptions to confidentiality. These include: suspected abuse or neglect, situations involving potential threat to harm one-self or others.

Contact Information

Dean of Students
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