

Guidelines for Difficult Conversations

When difficult conversations arise with students, our goal is to listen, learn, and respond with care. These moments can be uncomfortable, but they are also opportunities to strengthen trust, model resilience, and guide students toward growth.

Set the Tone

- Listen respectfully and without interrupting.
- Focus on understanding what the student is saying, not on preparing your next response.
- Critique ideas, not individuals.
- Approach the conversation as a chance to learn, not to debate.
- Use language that avoids blame or speculation.
- Make space so everyone has the opportunity to speak.
- Avoid assumptions or asking anyone to speak for a group or identity.

In Practice

- Start with curiosity. Begin with an open invitation such as “Tell me what has been going on for you lately.”
- Balance accountability with care. Help students understand that a policy or consequence can exist alongside genuine support.
- Stay grounded when emotions rise. Sometimes students may be upset or withdrawn; your calm presence matters more than having the perfect response.
- Collaborate rather than carry it alone. Loop in academic support, counseling, or colleagues when needed so students feel connected, not isolated.
- End with clarity and reassurance. Summarize next steps so the student knows what will happen next and that they are not navigating this alone.

How to End It Constructively

- Summarize and agree on next steps. Recap what was discussed and any agreements or action items.
- Suggest a pause or follow-up. If emotions are high, take a break and schedule a time to revisit the topic later.
- Politely signal you need to leave. Acknowledge the time constraint and thank the student for their openness.
- Close on a positive note. Express appreciation, such as ‘I appreciate you taking the time to talk about this.’
- Know when to agree to disagree. If there is no common ground, close respectfully and connect the student with additional support.