

A Difficult Conversation: Counseling Out a Graduate or Professional Student

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?



Resources

Student Conflict Resolution Center

www.sos.umn.edu
612.626.0689, 254 Appleby Hall
Contact: Jan Morse

Boynton Mental Health

www.boynton.umn.edu
612.624.1444, 410 Church St SE
Contact: Matt Hanson

Graduate School

www.grad.umn.edu
612.625.2815, 321 Johnston Hall
Contact: Karen Starry

*A resource of the Dignity Project
Workgroup, 2019.*

Determine if the Decision Follows Upon 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 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 Director of Graduate Studies, 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 with the student have been difficult you may want to refer to [UM Mental Health](#), or consider consulting with the Student Conflict Resolution Center or the Graduate School resources listed on the left.

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 might 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 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 the student. 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 strengths and skills. Include an assessment of 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 their performance

Help the student to understand that leaving the program does not mean 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 ideas you have 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 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. Maintaining one's dignity 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 or decisions from their adviser or program. What if the student is resistant to dismissal? Seek assistance from Director of Graduate Studies, student's committee members, the Student Conflict Resolution Center, or other services as needed to set expectations and a timeline.