



# TA Connections

Newsletter for Teaching Assistants ♦ Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center  
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## Recognizing and Assisting the Emotionally Troubled Student

Students face a variety of difficulties on a daily basis and faculty, staff, and teaching assistants may often wonder how they can help those students. The emotional and academic pressure of university life, while manageable and even exhilarating for most students, can be simply overwhelming for others. Such students may not yet have attained the level of maturity necessary to develop adequate coping skills, or they may be struggling with relatively long-standing emotional deficits that are exacerbated by the transition to college life.

Consequently, due to your position, status, and visibility on campus, students experiencing emotional distress may turn to you for help. Or, because of your role, you may find yourself confronted by a disturbed or disturbing student who needs assistance. How you respond in these situations could significantly impact the student's ability to deal constructively with their emotional conflicts.

One of the most common concerns college students face is depression. This is an issue that impacts many students. Depression can have negative impacts on one's academics, social life, personal and familial relationships. As with most problems, it is helpful to intervene as soon as possible. By being better able to recognize the symptoms of depression and knowing what course of action to take, you may assist depressed students in pursuing changes that will result in a lessening of their depressive symptomology.

Signs of depression may include:

- Flat affect (inexpressive face)
- Slow speech
- Decrease in interest in course material
- Difficulty concentrating
- Poor class attendance
- Failure to complete assignments
- Expressions of hopelessness or worthlessness
- Agitation or irritability
- Crying
- Low energy/lethargy

If you notice the mentioned signs, consider the following actions:

- Listen
- Take the issue seriously
- Directly express your concern for the student
- Directly ask the student if he or she is feeling depressed
- Try not to threaten, admonish, or reproach a depressed student for falling behind in course work or missing class
- Try to find alternative ways for the student to catch up on missed work
- Make the appropriate referral to Counseling and Student Development Center (CSDC)

The CSDC provides personal counseling for NIU students and CSDC staff is prepared to assist students with overcoming these challenges. To refer a student to CSDC, simply have the student visit the Center located in Campus Life Building Room 200.

You may also call the Center with the student in your office to facilitate the student coming to CSDC. Also, CSDC staff members are available to consult with you about concerns you have about a student. You may call them to discuss the best way to handle a student issue or concern. You can learn more information about CSDC on their website at: [www.niu.edu/csdc](http://www.niu.edu/csdc) or by contacting them at (815) 753-1206.

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Well-planned discussions early in the semester can increase students' motivation to learn and passionately change attitudes when students find interest in the subject. Although discussions have the benefit of fostering effective learning in the classroom, some hurdles may include a lack of student participation due to cultural barriers; more preparation and planning needed for the instructor; unpredictable outcomes; and less control by the instructor (Cashin and McKnight, 1986). Effective discussion requires a variety of teaching approaches that focus on two-way, verbal communication between the teacher and the students. These approaches can also include variations of communication among students, such as dialogue and guided discussion. When preparing to lead a class discussion it is best to begin with clear-cut course goals, such as the following:

- **Define the topic**  
The topic for discussion should be clear enough to focus the students' attention on relevant issues that are more likely to engage them. Brainstorming – having students suggest possible solutions without discussion of their feasibility – is an excellent approach to achieve this goal.
- **Preparation**  
The instructor should be prepared to explore any issue reasonably related to the topic. Plan each discussion session by creating writing assignments; composing lists of issues or questions for guidance and focus; and giving students assigned readings and study questions related to the topic a class or two in advance of the discussion. A key element in the facilitation process is choosing how you will cover the content before the discussion takes place. Assigned readings should present more than one side of an issue.
- **Openly discuss your expectations**  
Explain the ground rules to students by verbally defining the role discussion will play and describing what students' responsibilities will be on the first day of class.

After establishing the goals for an effective classroom discussion, it is time to set the stage for participation. A summary of recommendations are listed below:

- Activities that involve relevant (and perhaps one personal) questions that increase the memorization skills of the teacher and spark introductory conversation among the students will help to break the ice.
- To prepare students, have them discuss the nature of a good discussion using questions that provoke a conversation, such as: What role do listening and asking questions play in a conversation? What kinds of responses make people feel bad?
- To help some quiet or shy students to overcome their fears, invite them to try out their voices by speaking as reporters for their small groups to the larger group during the last part of the class.
- Implementing a strategy such as “sign-posting” (Dawes, 2002-2007) for your students by explaining where the class has been, where it is going, and how the day's discussion relates to the topic, in the last five minutes of class, can help everyone refocus.
- Revoicing (O'Connor and Michaels, 1993, as cited in Finders, Jan. 16, 2006) is a strategy that can be used by teachers to respond to what the student has said with a summarizing statement such as, “So what you are saying is...” This subtly allows the teacher to intervene when students may not be able to articulate their views.

These ideas and suggestions will vary in their usefulness depending on the course design skills you possess, the kind of discussion you are planning, and your educational goals. However, they will help to create a safe environment in which students can freely express their ideas.

## References:

- Cashin, W.E. and McKnight, P.C. (1986). Improving discussions. IDEA PAPER No. 15, Kansas State University: Manhattan, KS.
- Dawes, J. R. (2002-2007). Ten strategies for effective discussion leading. Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University: Cambridge, MA.
- Finders, M. (2006, January 16). Managing your teaching load: A session for new(er) faculty [Blog]. Retrieved September 21, 2007, from <http://www.uwlax.edu/catl/2007%20CoTL/Facilitating%20Effective%20Discussions.doc>.
- Gottschalk, K. K. (2001). Facilitating discussion: A brief guide. Cornell University: Ithaca, NY.

Blackboard is the course management system used campus-wide at NIU that allows faculty to post materials, deliver tests and surveys, hold online discussion and perform many other course-related functions. In May 2007 Blackboard was upgraded from version 6.3 to 7.1. This particular upgrade includes some substantial new user features and system capabilities that previously have not existed.

## Discussion Board

- **New Appearance:** A robust search engine has been added to the top of the list of discussion fora along with data regarding the number of total posts, unread posts, and total unique participants in each forum.
- **Forum View:** Discussion threads are now separated rather than each being expandable or collapsible from the forum view.
- **Thread Detail:** The thread detail view of a discussion includes not only a search box at the top, but also a box displaying the structure of the entire thread along with another box below that displays the substance of the individual posting currently selected.
- **Forum and Thread Grading:** Discussion fora can now be graded either by forum or thread, making it possible for faculty to view either selective or comprehensive collections of postings for a student and then to post grades for discussion contributions directly to the Blackboard gradebook.
- **Forum Moderation and User Management:** The new forum manager role is assigned by default to the faculty member for the course or leader of the community but can be delegated to another user in the course.
- **Group Discussion Features:** Group members can now create new threads in the group discussion board by default without the faculty member having to first create a forum or thread.
- **Rate Postings:** When this new feature is enabled by the faculty member in forum settings, users can assign a scaled rating to posts, based on a scale of 1-5 stars.
- **Statistics:** Statistics of user forum participation such as total posts, date of last post and average post length are now available in the Performance Dashboard.
- **Thread Subscription:** Faculty members can allow forum users to subscribe to threads. A notification email is sent to the subscriber's official NIU email address when a new post has been added to the thread.

## Assessment and Gradebook

- **Customized Feedback:** Feedback options are now ungrouped so that any combination of them may be displayed to students upon completion of an assessment.
- **Enhanced Submission Reports:** Assessment submission reports now include first name, last name, course name, username, course ID, name of the assessment and date/time of the submission, serving as verification of assessment completion for the student.
- **Extra Credit:** Faculty members can now mark questions as 'extra credit only' when creating tests.
- **Multiple Attempts:** Assessments can now be configured to allow for an unlimited or specified number of attempts.
- **Self-Assessment Options:** Blackboard assessments can now be used for self-assessment purposes without figuring the results into the gradebook final score calculations.
- **Display/Disable Average Score:** The average score for assessments can be disabled, preventing students from viewing the average class grade.
- **Test and Survey Import/Export:** Tests and surveys can now be exported from Blackboard individually as well as imported individually into a specific course section.
- **Visual Text Box Editor Cross-browser Support:** Users can now embed links to a variety of audio/visual materials as well as perform more advanced text editing functions and even spell check using the text box editor without knowing any html.
- **MathML and WebEQ Tools:** Mathematical and scientific equations can now be entered more effectively in Blackboard.

Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center offers a wide array of programs each month regarding the principles and practices of teaching with Blackboard. For more details about the programs or to register for the workshops, visit [www.facdev.niu.edu/blackboard/workshops](http://www.facdev.niu.edu/blackboard/workshops).

To learn more about the new features in Blackboard, visit [www.niu.edu/blackboard/resources/version71.shtml](http://www.niu.edu/blackboard/resources/version71.shtml)

For the second straight year, a record number of TAs (more than 160 TAs) participated in the fall TA Orientation. The all-day program, held in the Holmes Student Center Regency Room on Tuesday, August 21<sup>st</sup>, offered excellent presenters, enlightening discussions, and good interactions. The following four lucky TAs won door prizes of \$25 gift certificates from the NIU Book Store: *Ashley Dupes (Department of Communication)*, *Adam Spoolstra (Department of Accountancy)*, *Anna Burman (Department of Geography)*, and *David Jacobs (Department of Philosophy)*.

The purpose of the fall 2007 TA Orientation was to introduce TAs to basic principles of teaching, share information about campus support resources, and provide networking opportunities with both new and experienced TAs at NIU. Tim Griffin, the University Ombudsman, opened the program with an interactive presentation entitled, "Classroom Strategies That Foster a Sense of Community." Two panel discussions, one presented by experienced TAs and another presented by resource experts from various units on campus, shared information about campus resources that new TAs may find useful. In addition, the program offered sessions on stress reliever strategies, academic integrity, and five breakout sessions on survival tips, grading, discussion strategies, conducting labs, and international teaching and learning.

Each participant received presentation materials, lunch, refreshments, and Certificates of Participation. The Fall TA Orientation would not have been possible without the support of all the presenters and speakers who volunteered their time to share their expertise and experience.

**Mark your calendars and plan to attend the Spring TA Orientation on Thursday, January 10, 2008!**

## NIU Freshmen Characteristics

The next time you find yourself facing the attitudes or values of your students in the classroom consider the following information and you might gain a better understanding about who your students are and how best to meet their needs. For example, the average age of fall 2006 new freshmen at NIU was 18.2. The largest minority group of new freshmen at NIU in 2006 was Black students (611). The largest minority group of new transfers at NIU in 2006 was Hispanic students (146). The largest number of new transfers came from College of DuPage in Lisle and Rock Valley College in Rockford. The average high school class rank of new freshmen enrolled at NIU in 2006 was 62.5%; 32% were in the top 25% of their high school class; and their average ACT composite score was slightly above the national average at 22.2.

The following profiles should interest TAs who teach freshmen courses in various academic departments. This information was compiled from the 2006-07 Data Book, an annual publication from the NIU Office of Institutional Research. The Data Book can be found on the web at <http://ffsrv01.fifa.niu.edu/InstitutionalResearch/>

### NIU Freshmen Political & Social Attitudes, 2006

Through hard work, everybody can succeed in American society  
A national health plan is needed  
Federal government is not doing enough to control pollution

### Activities Frequently Engaged by NIU Students, 2006

Read a newspaper for local/national/global news and information  
Studied with other students  
Used internet for research/homework  
Attended a religious service

### NIU Freshmen Very Important Goals, 2006

Be very well off financially  
Raise a family  
Help others in difficulty

### Top 5 Reasons Students Attend NIU, 2006

Good academic reputation  
Graduates get good jobs  
Recruited by the athletic department  
Cost to attend  
Good social reputation

According to official enrollment figures by class level, full-time freshmen were the largest on-campus student group at NIU for fall 2006. This indicates the need for faculty and TAs to familiarize themselves with the characteristic profiles of these incoming students and address their needs effectively. This requires combined efforts by everyone involved in teaching and learning processes to understand student learning styles and incorporate effective teaching methods. The informational resources available from the Office of Institutional Research can provide faculty and teaching assistants with useful data on understanding our students' needs for enhancing their educational experience at NIU.

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