

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH STUDENTS

BECKY WAI-LING PACKARD, MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE

- Communicate high expectations; feedback indicates taking the student seriously
- Identify what will be difficult for you to give constructive feedback
- Resist evaluating student's ability; focus on performance, behavior, or approaches
- Use rubrics where possible and emphasize possibility to improve (growth mindset)
- Share expectations ahead of time in group format to destigmatize feedback
- Offer strategies, be specific where possible, suggest an external authority if helpful
- Give yourself, the student, or the group a chance to revise, or a break if needed

Unfortunately, this work has not met the mark.

I have high standards as do graduate schools/employers.

I know you can meet this high standard. You are capable of better work.

That's why I am going to give you this feedback—because I take you seriously.

Tell me more about your approach. I appreciate how much energy you have invested.

Are you willing to try some different strategies?

~ ~ ~

I can tell your goal is very important to you.

That is why I am telling you that this plan has drawbacks we should discuss.

Graduate schools (such as Name-brand School) recommend two years of lab experience.

Let's develop a plan that will give you the best chance of reaching your goal.

~ ~ ~

A strong letter will need to address X, Y, and Z.

Help me to think about what I can write in support of your application.

I'm only offering one viewpoint. You could contact a few graduate schools, alumni, or employers. Here is an interview template from the career center.

We could debrief what you learn after you talk to more people.

~ ~ ~

Could we press pause? I would like a chance to rephrase that.

Tell me more about what you meant or how you came to that conclusion.

Let's take a five minute break and regroup.

Resources: Cohen, Steele, & Ross (1999); Rattan, Good, & Dweck (2012); Wilson et al. (2010).

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: CHARGED MOMENTS

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Listen First

Listen for the feelings behind the statement. People often make charged comments when they are feeling frustrated, angry, sad, or threatened. Ask questions to understand where they're coming from. Is there a way to hear the comment and let the speaker know you heard? Is more than this warranted?

Focus on the Behavior, not the Person

Don't attack the person (calling someone "ignorant" generally isn't a good way to get someone to listen to you). Raise how you experienced a particular comment or action. Talk about a particular behavior (e.g., email blasting a group in anger) and its consequence.

Now or Later?

Sometimes you don't think on your feet, the situation needs to cool off, or you want to talk things over with someone you trust. Do not feel it is too late to act just because you needed time to process.

One-on-One or with Others?

In some situations, a group setting can be helpful if you might need someone to back you up, or you want to bring an issue to the group. In other situations, a person can feel cornered or humiliated.

Create New Norms

A difficult moment can help to prompt the development of new norms, if used as a starting place.

When I heard you say _____, I felt uncomfortable because _____.

I wondered what you meant by _____.

I'm hearing _____ share one perspective. What do others think?

Huh. Have we used _____ as a reason for inclusion/exclusion before?

Ouch! Could we back up?

I'm glad you shared your views on _____. It sounds like you had a negative experience before. Let's talk more about how we want to approach that in the future.

I thought about what you said yesterday. I don't think I fully understood what you meant. Could you tell me more?

Recommended Readings

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Active and Peer Learning

Dasgupta, N., McManus Scircle, M., & Hunsinger, M. (2015). *Female peers in small work groups enhance women's motivation, verbal participation, and career aspirations in engineering.*

Retrieved from www.pnas.org/content/early/2015/04/03/1422822112

This article found that groups that are majority women (3/4) were more effective at promoting participation than equal representation or minority representation. Important when considering composition of teams for group projects.

Rath, K. A., Peterfreund, A. R., Xenos, S. P., Bayliss, F., & Carnal, N. (2007). Supplemental instruction in introductory biology I: Enhancing the performance and retention of underrepresented minority students. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 6(3), 203–216.

Supplemental instruction (as well as facilitated study groups) are more effective than tutoring in many contexts because these approaches normalize and integrate the help in a pro-active, targeted manner. SI or FSG programs do not mean one should eliminate tutoring; however, SI and FSG can buffer many students within gateway courses as well as faculty time. A worthy investment.

Haak, D. C., HilleRisLambers, J., Pitre, E., & Freeman, S. (2011). Increased structure and active learning reduce the achievement gap in introductory biology. *Science*, 332(6034), 1213–1216.

The way a course is organized, including regular homework assignments and chances in-class to work through problems with feedback, can make a difference in performance and understanding. A number of articles (Eddy & Hogan, 2014) have examined course structure and active learning with similar results. Reading these carefully can help with syllabus design and rethinking the use of class time.

Advising/Difficult Conversations

Cohen, G. L., Steele, C. M., & Ross, L. D. (1999). The mentor's dilemma: Providing critical feedback across the racial divide. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25, 1302-1318.

This article recommends that professors combine high standards with an explicit communication of belief in the student to achieve a higher standard when giving critical feedback. This can help to buffer ambiguity regarding the intent of critical feedback particularly when involving a cross-race interaction.

Crosby, J.R., & Monin, B. (2007). Failure to warn: The effect of race on warnings of potential academic difficulty. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 43, 663-670.

Although the study is based on a simulated advising situation, the implications of the findings are relevant to advisors. This helps to explain why White advisors may avoid

giving critical feedback (failing to warn) to advisees of color for fear of looking racist even when that feedback could have been helpful.

Rattan, A., Good, C., & Dweck, C. S. (2012). "It's ok—not everyone can be good at math": Instructors with an entity theory comfort (and demotivate) students. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(3), 731–737.

Documents what researchers call "comfort feedback" or the false reassurance that certain students (such as women in math) do not need to worry about poor skill development or performance. Advocates for growth mindset and the encouragement of skill development.

Packard, B. W., Tuladhar, C., & Lee, J. (2013). Advising in the classroom: How community college STEM faculty support transfer-bound students. *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 42(4), 54-60.

This article focuses on the ways in which faculty embed advising messages within their class time (at only 30 minutes over the entire semester) suggesting this approach reaches a wider array of students than does meeting with students individually in meetings. Strategy can be extended beyond transfer students.

Mentoring—Peer and Faculty/Professional

Dasgupta, N. (2011). Ingroup experts and peers as social vaccines who inoculate the self-concept: The stereotype inoculation model. *Psychological Inquiry*, 22(4), 231–246.

Suggests that peers can provide positive buffering to identity and belongingness even in situations where the field itself (and professionals within them) are less diverse.

Carlone, H. B., & Johnson, A. (2007). Understanding the science experiences of successful women of color: Science identity as an analytic lens. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 44(8), 1197–1218.

Promotes the concept of "recognition" by experts (e.g., faculty and staff) as a key predictor of persistence for underrepresented students, beyond the student's interest, competency, or performance.

Schwartz, J. (2012). Faculty as undergraduate research mentors for students of color: Taking into account the costs. *Science Education*, 96, 527–542.

Documents the costs incurred by faculty who became research mentors for students of color. A good piece to raise policy questions at the institutional level for supporting faculty mentoring of students in equitable and effective ways.

Kasprisin, C. A., Boyle Single, P., Single, R. M., & Muller, C. B. (2003). Building a better bridge: Testing e-training to improve e-mentoring programs for diversity in higher education. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnerships in Learning*, 11(1), 67–78.

This article explains why training mentors is so important for a mentoring program. MentorNet has tested each module and does not run a program longer than it has modules for to promote mentee/mentor interaction.

Packard, B. W., Marciano, V., Payne, J. M., Bledzki, L. A., & Woodard, C. T. (2014). Negotiating peer mentoring roles in undergraduate research lab settings. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnerships in Learning*, 22(5), 433–445.

If peer mentors are not validated and trained by their faculty, they may be perceived as less credible and have a less positive experience.

Wilson, Z., Holmes, L., deGravelles, K., Sylvain, M., Batiste, L., Johnson, M., . . . Warner, I. (2012). Hierarchical mentoring: A transformative strategy for improving diversity and retention in undergraduate STEM disciplines. *Journal of Science Education & Technology*, 21(1), 148–156.

Explains the LA-STEM program and how the peer mentoring operates effectively. In the LA-STEM program, they have a pathway to recruit underperforming students after their first year of courses.

Stolle-McAllister, K., Sto Domingo, M. R., & Carrillo, A. (2011). The Meyerhoff way: How the Meyerhoff scholarship program helps Black students succeed in the sciences. *Journal of Science Education and Technology*, 20(1), 5–16.

Documents key element of the Meyerhoff scholars program and how the scholars fared better than a comparison group of college students.

Climate and Intersectionality

Cheryan, S., Plaut, V. C., Davies, P. G., & Steele, C. M. (2009). Ambient belonging: How stereotypical cues impact gender participation in computer science. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97(6), 1045–1060.

Highlights how the environment including posters and role models provide messages of who belongs.

Griffin, K. A., Cunningham, E. L., & George Mwangi, C. A. (2016). Defining diversity: Ethnic differences in Black students' perceptions of racial climate. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 9(1), 34–49.

Identified differences in perceptions of racial climate and diversity, stereotypes and marginalization as associated by second generation and first generation immigrants.

Harackiewicz, J. M., Canning, E. A., Tibbetts, Y., Giffen, C. J., Blair, S.S., Rouse, D. I., & Hyde, J. S. (2014). Closing the social class achievement gap for first-generation college students in undergraduate biology. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 106(2), 375–389.

This article documents that values affirmation research is not only relevant for students of color in educational settings generally, but also for first-generation college students in science. This suggests that first-generation college students may perceive a limited sense of belongingness that can impede their performance on exams. Having students write about things they are good at or value can help to mitigate negative performance; similar results have been suggested by introducing growth mindset beliefs in class.

Johnson, D. R. (2012). Campus racial climate perceptions and overall sense of belonging among racially diverse women in STEM majors. *Journal of College Student Development*, 53(2), 336-346.

This paper drew upon nearly 2000 women pursuing STEM fields who were enrolled in the 2004 National Study of Living-Learning Programs. Their sense of belongingness was related to overall campus racial climate as well as the residential hall climate.

Ro, H. K., & Loya, K. I. (2015). The effect of gender and race intersectionality on student learning outcomes in engineering. *Review of Higher Education*, 38(3), 359-396.

Using a dataset with over 5,000 student participants, the researchers disaggregate the data illustrating differences across gender and race, and at the intersection of gender and race.

Wilson, R. E., & Kitteson, J. (2013). Science as a classed and gendered endeavor: Persistence of two white female first-generation college students within an undergraduate science context. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 50(7), 802-825.

Explains how the intersection of class and gender play out as students pursue their STEM goals.

Recognizing our Intersections of Identity and Building a Culture of Mentoring

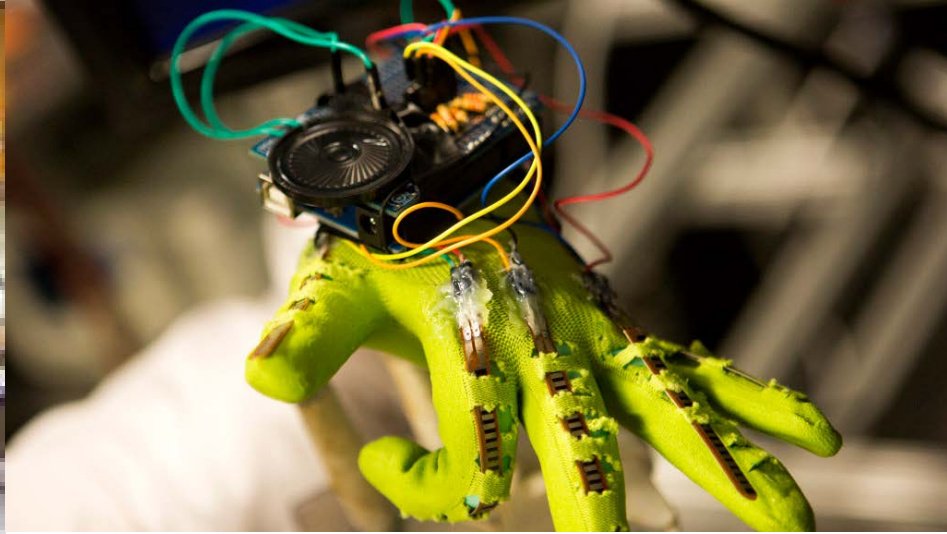
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Outline

1. Why Identity Matters: Intersectionality and STEM Participation
2. Mentoring with Intentionality: Why Providing Critical Feedback and Sponsorship is Difficult (and Strategies to do this well)
3. Building a Culture of Mentoring: How We Contribute

Run much?





Self Reflection

I am...

_____ age

_____ gender identity

_____ racial/ethnic identity

_____ job/career/hobby/activities

_____ daughter/son/partner/parent

_____ alumna/alumnus from

_____ hometown/home state

Which Door?



Which Door?



Which Door?



Which Door?



Which Door?



Which Door?



Which Door?



Was that easy or difficult?

Crenshaw (1989)

Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men.

Yet, often they experience double-discrimination - the combined effect of practices that discriminate on the base of race, and on the basis of sex.

And sometimes they experience discrimination as Black women - not as the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women (p. 44).

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Which Door?



Intersectionality

Black women from high-income backgrounds

Black women from low-income backgrounds

Nontraditional-aged women who are parents

Nontraditional-aged men who are veterans

Latino LGBTQ men

-Not just each identity/experience added together.

Research: STEM intersectionality

- European American women > African American women in STEM
- AA women + men < EU women + men: gender stereotypes
- In 2009: 4% of bachelor's for women of color; 14% men of color
- Black men and Black women as distinct groups
- Cluster white and Asians- masks low-confidence among Asians

O'Brien, L. T. , Blodorn, A., Adams, G., & Garcia, D. M. (2015). Ethnic variation in gender-STEM stereotypes and STEM participation: An intersectional approach. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 21(2), 169–180

Ro, H. K., & Loya, K. I. (2015). The effect of gender and race intersectionality on student learning outcomes in engineering. *Review of Higher Education*, 38(3), 359-396.

Questions

- What do we achieve by “splicing up” the groups?
- Which groups are meaningful affinity groups?
- How am I supposed to know all of the identities my students hold?
- If I did know all of my students’ identities, how would this influence my practice?

Outline

1. Why Identity Matters: Intersectionality and STEM Participation
2. **Mentoring with Intentionality: Why Providing Critical Feedback and Sponsorship is Difficult (and Strategies to do this well)**
3. Building a Culture of Mentoring: How We Contribute

(My) Mentoring Definition

A *developmental* relationship = supportive, grows the person

Involves a *constellation* of people

A collection of interactions that provides a function (e.g., research support, encouragement, coaching)

- I'm going to focus on Recognition as a type of interaction

Positive outcomes (academic/grant/persistence)

Recognition as fundamental to mentoring as a dev't relation

“One cannot pull off being a particular kind of person (enacting a particular identity) unless one makes visible to (performs for) others one’s competence in relevant practices,
and, in response,
others **recognize** one’s performance as credible.”

Recognition

“And then she encouraged me to become a TA the next semester. I couldn’t believe it.”

“He wrote a recommendation for me.”

“She stopped me after class about what I had said. It was as if I was a colleague.”

- Recent focus group with URM students in STEM

Lack of recognition

It sort of seems like the white students in the class were the over-achievers, the type who challenge the professor, who work in the lab. [Professors] seem to, not welcome them as their peer, but their soon-to-be peer.

With students of color, it's kind of like...

I get the feeling I do when I walk through somebody's house with shoes on. Like I'm in somebody else's home and I'm improperly walking, when I'm in science.

From Carlone & Johnson (2007)

Which Door?

Recognizable

**White students
Male students
Higher-income**

**Less
Recognizable**

**Students of Color
Female Students
Low-Income
students**

Lack of recognition

I told [the professor], “I don’t know how I could go from a good grade to a 70.”

He was like, “What *was* your grade?”

I was like, “I had a 100.” His face dropped.

He looked at me like that [a black person getting a 100 in the class] never happened before.

From Carlone & Johnson (2007)

Lack of recognition

I went to [an experimental biology conference]...

I ran into the chair of the dept. from [my undergraduate university].

He just couldn't believe that I was first author of my project. He was in such dismay that I actually worked in the field. . .b/c remember he is the one that suggested I [switch majors] in order to graduate.

From Carlone & Johnson (2007)

Intersectionality increases ambiguity

Thus, the mentor requires intentionality to open possibilities.

Particularly when the tendency is to make assumptions (and reduce someone to a single box).

Putting into boxes? Human nature.

Opening up possibilities? Requires intentionality.

Will you coach me?

Will you coach me?

Alyssa was an Olympic Swimmer before coming back to college. She is grateful for the chance to dig back into her academic life. When she enrolled in your Calculus course, she expressed great enthusiasm. You distinctly recall that first day of class when she shared her passion for a particular community organization and how much she enjoys rallying volunteers to join her in her work there.

When you graded Alyssa's first exam, you noticed how jumbled her logic was. You provided extensive feedback and additional practice exercises. The second exam, however, turned out much like the first. After trying to reach out to Alyssa to set up a meeting prior to her third exam, you notice Alyssa looking dejected in class. What do you say or do?

Will you coach me?

Alyssa went through a difficult divorce before coming back to college. She has been raising her two children on her own for the past three years with the help of her parents. She is grateful for the chance to dig back into her academic life. When she enrolled in your Calculus course, she expressed great enthusiasm. You distinctly recall that first day of class when she shared her passion for a particular community organization and how much she enjoys rallying volunteers to join her in her work there.

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Which Door?



Mentoring with intention

- Beyond the boxes
- As if the person was an Olympic Swimmer
- Start from Belongingness
- Strive to recognize

Try: Give feedback that *recognizes* a student

And link the behavior to the aspirational professional identity



“I noticed you really stuck with it today. It’s that kind of persistence that will pay off for you in the field, Mysi.”

“Sean, you took a risk there. I noticed – don’t be discouraged others did not take up your thread. If you want to talk more about your idea...”

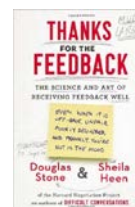
Why feedback is difficult

To provide...

Research: People worry about looking biased, may gloss-over, or focus purely on the problems, or miss the timing

To hear...

Research: people don't really want feedback or cringe when they receive it



See “Thanks for the Feedback” by Stone and Heen (2014)

The problem with feedback

SPEAKERS

Tend to see poor performance = fixed (in)ability

Don't want to look racist/gender biased

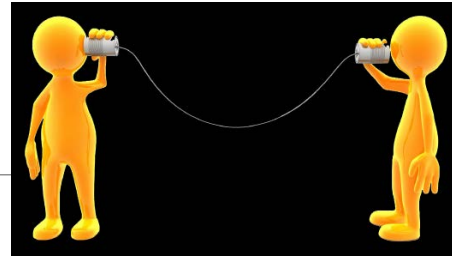
- Gloss over problems

LISTENERS

Mistrust about the intention of message

Lack of clarity about process, confidence to implement

Intentionally frame critical messages



Communicate high standards. Recognize the person as belonging.

Convey strong beliefs in the person's capability (growth mindset)

Separate **plan** or **work** from the **person**

Appreciate the effort. Separate effort from effectiveness.

Ask if willing to try new strategies; provide sample strategies

Find group formats to communicate advice (and gain help)

Cohen, Steele & Ross (1999); Stone & Heen (2014)

Crosby & Monin (2007); Packard (2003); Wilson et al. (2010)

Examples

“He said this [poor performance from my first year] needs to change if you want to go to medical school. He was straightforward and truthful. He said ‘medical school is not out for you, but some things need to change.’ Other people’s advisors were saying they were fine when they weren’t. Then we outlined what I needed to do.”

I had my advisors and I could tell them this is what I am planning to do. They will sit with you about how you getting there, what flaws, what might be a year-long hiccup. But the idea was I was going to get there.

Strategies

Mentors, Supervisors, Instructors

- Clarify that feedback is intended to help the person to grow
- If a formal program, include an explicit discussion of feedback
- Remember to give feedback on performance AND brainstorm strategies to improve skills
- Ask, *when* and *how* is feedback helpful to hear

Mentees

- Ask for feedback, and where appropriate provide insight into when and how feedback would be most valuable
- Show that you can take in feedback, even if not immediately, then as follow-up
- Where necessary, ask for an illustration or example of how to work on that skill

Will you vouch for me?



What is at stake?

The recommender's reputation

The student's reputation

The project

Morale of others

Resources at the college/organization



Strategies to improve

Sponsors, Supervisors, Professors

- Clarify when there are opportunities so newer people can see them more readily
- In formal programs, include an explicit discussion of sponsorship.
- Think about who you would recommend/nominate– and how to push for greater coaching to improve the number/diversity of who can be sponsored

Mentees

- Ask for clarification of ways you can show that you are ready for the next challenge
- Talk to peers about who the sponsors are, and how it is likely to get noticed for your good work.

Outline

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3. **Building a Culture of Mentoring: How We Contribute**

Walk the Campus

- Reputation
- Representation
- Resources and Policies



Brochures. Walls of Fame. Career Panels. Space. Norms. Temp.

Example

When a student asked that question (that pertained to diversity/inclusion in the discipline), the science professor said, “I don’t care about that crap!” Well, I didn’t feel safe in that space. I was like what is going on? I did not feel safe there. I did not take more classes in that area even though that was my intended major.

A student asked me if I should take a class with Professor X. I am colleagues with Professor X and I know that person’s reputation. My response? Silence.

Try: Talk to colleagues when you hear limited assumptions

(re: who “can” do this work)



When I heard you say _____, I felt uncomfortable because _____.

I wondered what you meant by _____.

Huh. Have we used _____ as a reason for inclusion/exclusion before?

I'm glad you shared your views on _____. It sounds like you had a negative experience before. Let's talk more about how we want to approach that in the future.

Summary

1. Reflect on your own identity/identities
2. Go beyond the boxes. Where do you see others in full/fail to see intersectionality?
3. Recognize students. Coach Olympians!
4. Be intentional in your feedback.
 - Critical feedback- frame feedback to be taken in
 - Sponsorship - give feedback before a request is made...and stretch out of your comfort zone.
5. Don't underestimate daily interactions...before/after class, email.
6. Talk to your colleagues. We contribute to our dept/consortial climate!

Questions? Comments?

