How faculty can help students thrive as scholars:
Five suggestions from the Faculty Council on Access and Academic Support

Although Penn students are very talented, they can also struggle academically and personally. In
this brief, the Faculty Council on Access and Academic Support, a council that advises the
Provost under the leadership of the Vice Provost for Education, offers five things to keep in mind
to help our students thrive, including some key resources to assist students in doing so.

1. Recognize that students’ performances in our classes depends, in part, on factors
unrelated to their academic abilities or inclinations.

Some of those factors stem from things outside of the Penn classroom: a student’s health, family,
economic situation, preparation or extracurricular activities, for instance. Some of those factors,
though, are related to what may go on in the classroom, e.g.:

Stereotype threat: If unaddressed, students’ concerns about stereotypes that exist in society can
weaken their own performance in a variety of fields. (See Related Studies below for more
information.)

Unconscious bias: The biases we have – and do not know we have – can influence how we
assess the work of others. (See Related Studies below for more information.)

2. Help students to see that struggle is normal.

Some Penn students may interpret struggling in a class as a sign that something is wrong with
them, or that they cannot succeed in a field or at Penn. Help students to understand that struggle
and confusion are normal parts of learning. (See Related Studies below for more information.)

3. Communicate regularly with students about their progress.

* Provide frequent assessments and feedback. Be sure to give students substantive feedback
before the drop deadline. TAs can play an important role here.

* Course Problem Notices are an effective way to let struggling students know how they are
doing in your course. CPNs allow faculty (or their TAs) to reach out to students, with a copy of
the message sent to the student’s advising office so the office can detect any patterns.

* Reach out also to students who are doing well. The connection with a faculty member can help
build a student’s sense that he or she can excel in the field.

4. Take advantage of available resources to support students.

For students who are struggling, either inside or outside the classroom, Penn offers a network of
resources. These resources are generally available for both undergraduates and graduate students.

Faculty Guide to Support for Your Students:
http://www.upenn.edu/ctl/resources/support_for_your_students/
5. Contact academic advisors if a student is having difficulties.

If undergraduate students are struggling or in crisis, for whatever reason, faculty seeking a single contact point can contact or refer those students to their academic advising offices. Advising offices will, as needed, connect students to other sources of support.

For SAS students: col-casenet@groups.sas.upenn.edu or 215-898-6341
For SEAS students: Sonya Gwak, Academic Programs, sgwak@seas.upenn.edu or 215-573-8369
For SON students: advisor@nursing.upenn.edu or 215-898-6687
For Wharton students: advising@wharton.upenn.edu or 215-898-7608

If you have a student in crisis after hours, contact Public Safety (215-573-3333 or 511 on campus) and ask for the Student Intervention Services team to reach out.

Faculty may be more comfortable recognizing signs of academic struggles than other difficulties. Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) suggests some signs to consider: http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/caps/concerned.php.

Related Studies:

On stereotype threat:

http://www.academia.edu/806308/The_role_of_stereotype_threats_in_undermining_girls_and_womens_performance_and_interest_in_STEM_fields

https://ex.cts.isc.upenn.edu/Mediasite/Play/a08acecc6cdf41fa8b968153bb5973c41d

On unconscious bias:

http://www.pnas.org/content/109/41/16474.full

On normalizing struggle:

http://ims.mii.lt/ims/konferenciju_medziaga/SIGCSE%2710/docs/p431.pdf

This document is online at: http://provost.upenn.edu/education/teaching-at-penn/fcaa