

Balancing Student Well-Being with Academic Integrity

With the increase in frequency and acuity of student mental health issues and a concomitant *decrease* in effective coping mechanisms evidenced by students, JMU faculty regularly encounter students who request some adjustment to or exemption from a course's academic requirements due to reported emotional distress. The origins of this emotional distress may range from "quizzes and tests make me anxious" to serious conditions that may require counseling and psychiatric treatment. Further, the requested academic adjustment or exemption may be as simple as a deadline extension or extra credit or as significant as a withdrawal from the course or from JMU.



These are often challenging situations for faculty members because of the perceived conflict between two important values: student well-being and academic integrity. In a recent survey, one JMU faculty member summarized the conflict in this way: "I have worried that my academic standards might add to the stress level of students I know to be feeling overwhelmed, even to the point of self-harming. I understand that the alternative – teaching classes with no academic rigor – runs counter to what a university should be, but I still struggle with this." Faculty frequently report feeling unprepared to effectively manage the intensity of some students' distress and similarly unprepared to gauge the pedagogical implications of the decision to alter course requirements.

An Ounce of Prevention

The following are some suggestions that may help to both reduce the frequency with which students make requests for academic adjustments and exemptions related to emotional distress and to assist faculty when they encounter such requests.

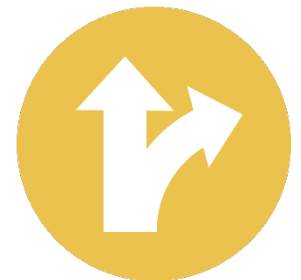


- Using past, real-world examples, work with colleagues and the Academic Unit Head to develop a **departmental philosophy** that provides **standards** and **guidelines** for when students may and may not use emotional distress as a legitimate basis for academic adjustments or exemptions.
- From a legal perspective, a syllabus has characteristics of a contract between the instructor and the students taking the course, and the general guidance is to not deviate from it absent an exceptional, articulable reason. Thus, it is important to thoughtfully consider the academic requirements contained in each **course syllabus** and, in most cases, to **consistently apply** these evaluative standards.
- Use the course syllabus to inform students of the **mental health resources** available to them. A sample statement can be found on the JMU Counseling Center's [Faculty Resources](#) webpage. Consider also including links to the [Academic Concerns](#) and [Taking Care of Yourself](#) resources.
- In both the course syllabus and on the first day of class, express to students the importance of **communicating, at the earliest possible time, any significant challenges** that they have in either learning the course content and/or demonstrating their acquired knowledge on performance measures.

- Strive to create an **engaging, inclusive** classroom environment in which respect and caring are foundational values and expected of both students and the faculty member. If class size permits, learn and consistently use each student's name.
- Although societal and cultural norms may generate a strong head wind, encourage students to focus on the **processes of learning** and change rather than the *outcomes* of grades and rankings.
- **Normalize** the **stress, difficulties**, and even **failure** that are inherent to the learning process, particularly when being evaluated (“It’s normal to feel nervous before a test and to feel sad after receiving a low grade.”). Provide students with a more positive lens through which to view challenges and setbacks (“You’re struggling with this content right now, but you’re making progress and I can tell that, with hard work and practice, you’ll get it.”).
- As appropriate and according to personal comfort, faculty members may consider **sharing brief stories** of how they have personally experienced academic stress and effectively managed it.
- For courses requiring group work, provide students with **clear, written guidelines** and **expectations** regarding behavioral conduct, including the importance of fulfilling assigned responsibilities within established deadlines, providing and receiving constructive feedback, facilitating the involvement of all group members, and managing conflict in productive ways.
- If performance issues emerge (e.g., low grades, sporadic attendance, defensive reactions to constructive feedback), arrange a **private meeting to speak directly** to the student about these concerns. Struggling students are typically receptive to an expression of genuine interest, care, and concern from a faculty member.

Making a Decision about Academic Adjustments or Exemptions

Without knowing the details of the situation presented by a student requesting an alteration of academic requirements, it is extremely difficult to provide specific guidance as to the “correct” or “best” decision. Even when the details are available, the decision-making process is complex and challenging. However, the following are some considerations that faculty may wish to explore in the process of deciding whether to grant academic adjustments or exemptions to a student reporting emotional distress.



- **Conduct an assessment** of your own views and concerns regarding the extension of some form of academic leniency based on student reports of emotional distress. Do you tend to be a “hard case” or a “soft touch”? Do your own experiences as a student in higher education make you more (e.g., “I wish someone had given me a break”) or less (e.g., “The academic demands that I faced were so much heavier”) willing to grant such requests? Have you felt “burned” in the past by students to whom you provided an academic adjustment or exemption but who you later learned were manipulative or dishonest? Do you have concerns that refusing to grant these requests might result in a negative student evaluation?
- What is the **significance** of the issue/event reported by the student? Is it something that most people would consider serious or noteworthy? Or is it more that the student lacks the coping skills and resilience needed to handle the normal vicissitudes of life?

- ▶ Is there **confirmable evidence** available of the stressors that the student is reporting (e.g., a notification from the Dean of Students or Title IX Office, documentation of a medical or counseling appointment)?
- ▶ What level of effort, commitment, and personal responsibility has the student **demonstrated** in the course over the semester? How much has the student's performance departed from the academic policies and standards outlined on the syllabus? Would granting the accommodation objectively alter the student's chances for success in the course?
- ▶ Are the student's academic struggles **unique** to your class or are they part of a **larger** picture?
- ▶ While causes are often multifactorial and bidirectional, is the student *primarily* experiencing an **academic issue** that is causing emotional distress (suggesting an academic intervention) or a **psychological issue** that is impairing their academic performance (suggesting a counseling intervention)?
- ▶ Would you be comfortable with the academic adjustment or exemption that you are considering being the **basis for a policy** set for all students experiencing a similar situation? If a faculty colleague or other students in the course questioned the basis for your decision, would you **feel confident when sharing your rationale** with them?
- ▶ How would a decision to grant or to not grant an academic adjustment or exemption align with your **department's philosophy** or your faculty colleagues' **existing standards of practice** in this area? Would it be helpful to **consult** with one or more trusted colleagues about how they might handle the situation?
- ▶ If you believe that a student's request is not justified, is there a **lesser adjustment** or **exemption** that you think may be reasonable and similarly helpful (e.g., waiving a quiz is not appropriate but affording more time to study is)?
- ▶ What are the chances that granting the academic adjustment or exemption **may actually perpetuate** a student's problems by allowing them to avoid responsibility and the natural consequences of their behavior?

A Few Final Considerations

- The fact that a student is receiving mental health treatment **does not automatically** indicate that some form of academic leniency is needed or justified. The majority of JMU Counseling Center clients are not requesting academic adjustments or exemptions from their faculty members.
- Mental health professionals regard **setting and consistently enforcing reasonable academic standards and behavioral limits** as therapeutically *desirable*. Holding students accountable frequently encourages them to enter counseling to address the underlying issues behind the challenges they are experiencing.
- If a student suggests that a particular academic requirement or standard is increasing the risk that the student will do harm to either themselves or someone else, the issue is **no longer primarily an academic matter but instead a health and safety matter** that likely necessitates the involvement of the Dean of Students and/or the JMU Police Department.
- **Neither physical nor mental health issues**, including those that have been formally documented as disabilities, **are legitimate excuses for disruptive and/or dangerous behavior** on a college campus.