THE CLINICALLY STRUGGLING / FAILING STUDENT

Jane M. Dyer, CNM, MBA, PhD, FACNM
Belle S. Spafford Endowed Chair
College of Nursing, University of Utah
Objectives

• Identify possible issues of the struggling student
• Plan for improvement
• Understand common pitfalls and concerns of preceptors
• Understand the components of evaluations / documentation
• Prepare for events after a student failure
• Identify resources for faculty and students
• Understand the emotional aspects for faculty and students
Process of Performance Evaluation

1. Collect all the documentation
2. Identify problems
3. Anticipate other problems
4. Evaluate the immediacy
5. Develop a plan
6. Assume responsibility

Central Focus:
- Student
- Preceptor
- Program / Site
Collect Documentation about the Prior Struggles

• Evaluation forms
• Emails
• Letters to student and others
• Any other written documentation
Evaluation Form Content

- Date and signatures
- Professionalism
- Communication / Documentation
- Data collection
- Hand skills / Physical Exam
- Assessment/Diagnosis
- Development of plan of care
- Implementation of plan
- Evaluation of plan
- Ranking system
- Place for written feedback
- Grade assignment
- Storage of form
Gave v. Assigned
Got v. Earned
Identify the Student’s Problem(s)

- Lack of knowledge
- Lack of ability
- Situational
- Professionalism
- Communication
- Learning disorders
Cultural Clash?

- Site
- Countries, races, ethnicities
- Generations:
  - Yours
  - Theirs
Anticipate Other Problems

• Performance in other program areas
• Learning disorders
• Consequences of failure to improve
Evaluate the Immediacy

- Life-threatening v. concerning
- Student’s tenure in the education program
- Chronic or acute onset of struggles
Develop a Plan for the Struggling Student

- Jointly with student, student advocate and program
- Share the Plan with those that need to know
- What happens if objectives are / are not met
- Written, dated, signed
SMART Objectives

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Time
- Realistic
Setting the Struggling Student Up for Success

• Clarity of expectations in the clinical setting
• Review the Plan Objectives
• Offer experiences that support learning and evaluation
• Express support and encouragement
• Not being or appearing “arbitrary and capricious”
• Preserve dignity
• Share personal stories as appropriate
Assume Responsibility

• Be clear about your responsibilities
• Why we don’t
• Foster a culture of constructive feedback
• Get training and experience
• Use mentors
Suggested Wording

• Different preceptor styles
• When your ideas differ
• Ask questions and be open
• Observe them
• Remind them
As you go through the day

• Know the expectations and the Plan Objectives
• Write notes to yourself throughout the day
• As/if agreed, give specific feedback throughout the day
  – Positive - ASAP
  – Negative - ASAR
Setting Up the Evaluation

• In person
• Quiet, private place
• Keep your emotions under control
• Focus on their observed behaviors
• Model good communication
  – Describe
  – Observe
  – Listen
Evaluate the Day

• Document, document, document
• Ask them questions (avoid “yes / no”)...
• Identify the evaluation topic or specific behavior
• State your observations ("I saw..., I observed...")
• Tell them how they did and did NOT achieve their Plan Objectives
• Suggest changes or ways to improve
• Tell them what to expect next
• Document, document, document
After the Evaluation

“Is there anything I could have done differently today that would have helped you to have a better day? This helps me to get better.”
After the Evaluation

• Go back to the Plan to re-evaluate it
• Examine your performance
• Document, document, document
• Communicate, communicate, communicate
• Get on with it
Sometimes there is a Performance Failure

1. Collect all the documentation
2. Identify problems
3. Evaluate the immediacy
4. Develop a plan
5. Assume responsibility
6. Anticipate other problems

Student
Site
Faculty
You Must Know

• Evaluation process and forms
• Assignment of the failing grade
• Student’s rights
• Program / College / University’s process for failing a course
• Program / College / University’s process for dismissal
What does the syllabus say?

• The syllabus as a “contract”
• Clear expectations for success
• Evaluation process
• Everyone’s responsibilities
• Impact of failing the course
Is there documentation?

• Be professional
• Based on comparison of student’s performance to standards
• Format of evaluation
  – Verbal – with written documentation
  – Written
    • Clear examples of deficiencies
    • Dated and signed
Has the documentation been shared with the student?

• Failure should come as no surprise
• Documentation of student’s knowledge of process
• Documentation of other evaluations and meetings
• Documentation of plans to support success
Has the student had the opportunity to improve?

- Documentation of other meetings
- Plans to improve – SMART objectives
- Documentation of failure to improve
Is it so egregious that no opportunities to improve will be provided?

- Severity
  - Life threatening
  - Unprofessional
- Stop the experience
- WAIT and allow “cool down” period
Why do students fail in their performance?

- Personal issues
- Poor studying skills
- Poor performance
- Lack of insight
- Lack of appropriate support / feedback
- Personal responsibility – see all of the above
Why are we afraid of assigning a failing grade?

• Feel like failures or feel guilty
• Reflects our teaching incompetence or lack of experience as a preceptor
• Suggests that we don’t care
• Easier to pass them
• Reluctance to negatively impact student
• Don’t agree with part of the process
• Fear of litigation
Litigation Truth

• Not “arbitrary and capricious”
• Based on syllabus
• Grievance process followed
• Burden of proof on the student
• Courts
  – Overwhelmingly supportive
  – Support educational institution’s autonomy
  – Don’t want to get involved
Why should we assign a failing grade?

• Responsibility to the public
• Responsibility to the student

“If not you, then who?”
Delivering the News

You can’t change the news but you can make it worse by delivering it poorly.

Your stress is usually before and during the meeting; the student’s stress is usually during and after.
Delivering the News

• Who should deliver the message
• Practice with a mentor
Delivering the News

• Prepare
• Greet them
• Share the information
• Remain calm and respond
• Set the next possible steps
Grievance Process

• Program, School/College, University – KNOW THEM !!!!!!

• Availability of information to student

• Involve student advocate

• Work with program’s legal office
After the Failure

• Go back to the evaluation process to re-evaluate it
• Examine your performance
• Document, document, document
• Communicate, communicate, communicate
• Grieve and then get over it
References

- Cleland, J., Arnold, R., and Chesser, A. Failing finals is often a surprise for the student but not the teacher: identifying difficulties and supporting students with academic difficulties. Medical teacher, 27(6):504-8, 2005.