Workshop notes:
Helping struggling students

Around 20 people showed up from departments all around campus for the CTE workshop on Wednesday, March 28, on how to help students who are struggling. Everyone actively participated in the discussion, with many of the faculty and TAs present giving insight into what they do to help students.

Detecting a problem

Sandra, a TA from Human Development, said she hands out a form to students at the beginning of a course, asking what are factors that might affect the student’s success in the course; how they would try to do well in the class; and what grade they expect to get.

“Some say a ‘C’ because that’s all they need to graduate,” she told the workshop.

“Then there are other students who want to get an ‘A’ but they may say on the form that they’re pregnant or a commuter or have 20 hours of work outside of class. When I look over their papers, I say to them, ‘Let’s sit down and have a conversation about what you need to do so that you do well in class.’”

Steven Cohen, a Ph.D. student in Communication, sets aside time every week for what he calls “pep talks” with his students.

“For an hour every week, I go to my students. We need to eat on campus, so instead of eating by ourselves, let’s eat with our students,” he said.

By going to the students and meeting in an atmosphere that is less formal than a teacher’s office, Cohen feels he is able to dig deeper into what might be affecting a student’s learning experience.

“I have a student who got kicked out of her house. I never would have known that, had I not been holding these ‘pep talks,’” he said.

Knowing when a student needs help

The first step towards seeking help is admitting to yourself that you need it, or having a teacher who recognizes that you’re in trouble and could use some assistance.

Once a student has recognized that he or she needs help, or a teacher has identified a student who is struggling, the University offers a wealth of resources to help students to overcome their problems.
Criminal Justice student Kinnard Wright was struggling with the math component of a statistics course that was required for his major. He turned to a faculty adviser for help and was put in touch with a tutor, with whom he worked regularly. Wright passed the course and is due to graduate this year.

In other cases, teachers know when a student is floundering and will take the initiative to get them help. They have many options, including, as an attendee at the workshop said, “sending them to the Shoemaker Building”, which houses the University counselling services. Another option is to talk with the student to try to work through the problems together, or send them to any one of the specialized services listed below. The list is not exhaustive.

- Help available to disabled students through the Disability Support Service includes extended time for tests, sign language interpreters and captioned texts for students with hearing loss.
- McKeldin Library has a wheelchair-accessible Adaptive Technology Lab for visually impaired students.
- The Office of Multi-Ethnic Student Education (OMSE) offers a number of resources, which are available to all students. These include a computer lab, tutoring, and the Sister to Sister program for first-year women students. And that’s just the tip of the resource iceberg at OMSE.
- A resource that has been oft promoted and talked-about at CTE workshops is the campus Writing Center. Part of the English Department, the Writing Center offers undergraduate students the opportunity to “improve writing and thinking skills in their academic work, and also in preparation for their respective careers.”

The University Teaching and Learning Program (UTLP)

The University Teaching and Learning Program (UTLP) assists graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in their professional development as college teachers. At the heart of the UTLP is the philosophy that teaching, like research, is a scholarly activity that requires intellectual engagement and public conversation.

UTLPers are required to discuss teaching and learning in higher education, be mentored by a faculty member, develop a larger teaching and learning project, and craft a teaching portfolio.

UTLPers have a common commitment to improving undergraduate education and an eagerness to make their classes the best they can. When UTLPers complete the program they are recognized at an annual reception and receive both transcript notation and a certificate acknowledging their participation in the program, tangible evidence of their thoughtful engagement with issues central to college teaching. Supported by the Graduate School, the UTLP is administered by the Center for Teaching Excellence. For more information, please contact UTLP Coordinator at cte@umd.edu or call (301) 314-1287.