

Learning to Self-Advocate: Education Edition



By Nikkee Porcaro

Recently, I worked with a former student who is now a freshman at the University of Maryland. This student has always been conscientious, organized, and diligent, but one class — a philosophy seminar — was vexing her. When I asked why, she explained she didn't understand the assignments, and couldn't seem to get ahold of the teacher.

The student then pulled out no fewer than 20 emails spanning several weeks that had received no response. She showed me the emails, in which she'd set up three meetings with the teacher that he subsequently blew off. She explained that his office hours conflicted with another class and showed that she tried to ask for alternate meeting times, to no avail. She showed me online quizzes he had graded incorrectly that he promised to fix and never did.

This is utterly unacceptable, but how do you tell that to a first-semester 18 year old who got into her dream college through Freshman Connection and

who wants nothing more than to not rock the boat?

I've heard similar stories from some of my high school students, about non-responsive or unfair teachers and administrators. I truly believe most teenagers, despite their reputations, are good students who understand fairness and have reasonable expectations, so when they complain to me about a situation like this, I certainly give credence to their grievances and help them brainstorm solutions.

So how do you stick up for yourself in a situation in which your grade is on the line, but you fear potential retaliation? I recommend taking the following steps:

Step 1: Try to speak to the teacher in person. Sometimes, putting a face to a name and some in-person urgency can spark a resolution. Be respectful, but also be firm and clear, and try to remain unbiased: "Professor X, I emailed you on Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday, but have not received a response, and I am confused about the assignment due on the 20th. Can we schedule a time to meet?"

Step 2: Document everything specifically and objectively: dates, times, exact descriptions of situations. Leave emo-

tions out of it. Make sure to watch your diction; don't use words that could convey bias. If your teacher has not responded to your last five emails over the past two weeks, list the dates they were sent and a brief description of what you inquired about. Your frustration should not be evident in a list like this; let the facts speak for themselves. Write this list concisely, objectively, and without unnecessary flourishes. Remember, "I emailed my teacher, like, five times and she didn't answer" is less effective and jarring than a succinct list of dates when specific emails were sent and ignored, along with dates of no-show meetings. You can first try to present this list to your teacher to show how you've tried to make an effort at connecting. If that doesn't work, try Step 3.

Step 3: Go above the teacher. Find the email address of the department head or administrative chair and concisely explain your situation: "I've been trying to connect with Professor X all semester, but have been unable to do so. I am concerned both about my mastery of the material and my final grade in the class. I have compiled a list of my efforts

in trying to contact Professor X. I have no desire to get him in trouble, but can you please advise me on what I should do to remedy this situation?"

My student and I did get to Step 3, and emailed the department head, subject chair, and administrative team to whom her specific professor reported. We edited the email for clarity, conciseness, and objectiveness, and got a response from the chair within 24 hours. Within 24 hours of receiving *that* response, the professor emailed my student, ready and willing to set up a time to meet, and they've met twice in the past two weeks about her final paper.

My student was nervous at first to "tattle" on a teacher, but it is an educator's moral, ethical, and most likely contractual duty to respond to students who contact them. Once she saw how she could stick up for herself while remaining professional and polite, she learned not only how to pen a philosophy paper, but how to be a self-advocate.

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