

Professional Communication Guidelines for Students, Faculty, and Staff

Members of the College of Nursing (students, faculty, and staff) are dedicated to the highest standards of excellence, professionalism, and ethical behavior. We know that creating and sustaining a culture of respect, trust, mutual understanding, civility, and healthy working relationships is essential to achieving our Mission, Vision and Values.

The following document outlines guidelines for communicating in ways that are professional, respectful, and civil, and which foster collaboration. These guidelines remind us that communication moves in two directions between sender and receiver, requires grace and understanding, and is a learned skill. The guidelines presuppose that all parties ultimately want the highest good for the school, the situation, and each other. The guidelines outline effective and collegial communication strategies to support mediation and negotiation when differences of opinion arise.

Line of Communication

Professional and effective communication begins first with contacting the right person. For students, the CON uses a line of communication as a guide for selecting the appropriate faculty or administrator when you want to communicate a concern. This line of communication is included in the program handbooks; when it is not followed, the request may be delayed. Begin by addressing the first person in the sequence, and if the matter is not satisfactorily resolved, then progress to the person on the next level:

1. Begin with the specific person involved. (e.g. faculty, clinical instructor, SILC lab faculty, etc.)
2. CON course chair (listed in the syllabus for each course)
3. Program Specialty Coordinator / Program Coordinator / Program Director
4. Division Chair
5. Dean of the College of Nursing

When sending emails, consider this line of communication before adding additional recipients on the email. The line of communication is broken if, in addition to the right person, several others further down the line are also included. Start with the person who is involved first. Give them the respect and opportunity to address the need. If communication breaks down or a reasonable outcome is not attained, then progress to the next person in the line.

Often, concerns can be addressed with a quick email exchange that provides clarification and answers questions. Some situations can be resolved more quickly through a face-to-face meeting (in person, by phone, or on Zoom). Think about which method might work best for your situation.

Consider the following example:

Student is requesting help from faculty: “Greetings Prof. Wildcat. I am having difficulty understanding the instructions for writing this paper. I have already consulted the rubric, textbook, and my study group, but am confused about how to do a synthesis on these articles. Could we schedule a Zoom meeting for later this week? My availability is....”

Here are several possibilities for what might happen and how to respond:

1. Faculty does not respond in 2-3 business days. Student resends the email with a few edits: “Greetings Prof Wildcat. I sent an email three days ago asking to set up a meeting to discuss the upcoming assignment and have not heard back. As the due date is fast approaching, I would like to set up a meeting to clarify the synthesis portion of the assignment. Could you please respond by

tomorrow? Thank you.” If the student does not get a response, the next email is sent to the faculty and the course chair, explaining that the student has not heard back from the faculty and needs assistance in order to complete the assignment successfully.

2. Another option: Faculty responds quickly but states that the student has what the student needs and they should look at the instructions. Student responds, “Thank you for your quick response. After reviewing the instructions, textbook, and other resources, it seems I still need clarification on the synthesis section. As I want to do my best on this assignment, I would like to set up an appointment with you either by Zoom or phone.” If the faculty ignores the student’s reasonable request, the next email is sent to both the faculty and the course chair. Student’s message: “I am following up with my request for clarification on my upcoming assignment, per the email train attached. I am feeling very frustrated after asking twice for help, and I have not been given any support, resources, or an opportunity to meet as requested. I want to do my best on this and all assignments. Please advise me on next steps to get the help I need.”
3. Best outcome: Faculty quickly responds and sets up a Zoom session to provide clarification and other helpful resources. Student sends email thanking faculty for their time and support.

Effective Communication

Professional communication involves not only the words you use but *how* you use those words. In addition, body language speaks volumes, so consider what miscommunications may happen when only communicating through email. Your words might construct a totally different picture than the one you intended because the recipient doesn’t have visual cues from facial expressions or other body language. Take the following examples, for instance:

Email from a faculty to a student: “You are late on this assignment and may fail the course.” Does this mean the faculty is saying the student is failing? Does “may fail” mean the same as “is failing,” and if not, what makes the difference between the two statements? Is the faculty expressing concern by reaching out to help, or is the faculty being threatening?

Consider this statement instead: “This assignment was turned in late and received a deduction in points. Because this continued behavior may negatively affect your progression in the course/program, please schedule an appointment with me or the Academic Success Coach to discuss time management strategies.”

Email from students to faculty: “We demand you look at our proposal for making a change in the assignment. Currently, it is not fair.” Does this mean the faculty already opposes the request? Is the faculty under obligation to meet this demand? Do those making the demand have the authority to make it, or would it be more effective if presented as a suggestion? Does this statement foster cooperation or resistance?

Consider this statement instead: “Dear Prof. Nancy, several of us in the course have found a discrepancy in the assignment and the grading rubric. May we schedule an appointment to discuss this issue with you?”

Here are a few considerations to guide your requests and communiqués:

1. Begin by assuming that both parties want the best for the CON and are willing to work collaboratively for the higher good.
2. Never respond when upset or emotional; give yourself a timeout first.
3. Think about what you really want to say, then state it objectively.
4. Consider whether the tone of your email will encourage cooperation or resistance.
5. Always give the other person the benefit of the doubt. Ask them for clarification and possible solutions from their perspective. Try to put yourself in their shoes.

6. While you may not always get what you want, you can always act professionally. Demonstrate tolerance with grace when you need to agree to disagree.

Remember, good communication is more effective in resolving problems and building relationships. It demonstrates professionalism that is crucial both here in the CON and in the professional world. So, choose your words carefully!

CON Policies for Communication

The CON provides various policies for coursework and communication within course syllabi, on D2L, and on the CON website. Familiarize yourself with these policies each semester so you understand the expectations of the program. Here are a few brief reminders:

1. Expectations for return emails: Generally, students, faculty, and staff are expected to return emails within 2-3 business days unless otherwise posted.
 - a. Business days don't include after hours (after 5:00pm), weekends, or holidays when calculating the return email timeframe. Plan in advance to receive a timely response.
 - b. If you are unable to respond with a complete answer, acknowledge that you received the email and indicate when you will be able to answer in more depth.
 - c. When emailing to ask for a due date extension, follow syllabus instructions for this process.
2. The content of email messages demonstrates your levels of professionalism and respect for others. Here are a few guidelines:
 - a. Open with a salutation using the correct title and name (e.g., "Greetings, Dr. Wildcat"; "Hello, Professor Jones") and end with a formal closing (e.g., "Best Regards" or "Sincerely").
 - b. Write in complete sentences and use spell check.
 - c. Avoid ALL CAPS, which indicate yelling, anger, or frustration.
 - d. Use "please" and "thank you" as appropriate.
 - e. Keep your email as short as possible. Give a brief explanation of the issue, what has been done to address it, and what help you are requesting. If needed, suggest scheduling an in-person or phone meeting to discuss more details.
3. Not communicating is a form of communication ... just not the kind you want to send! It is important to keep the lines of communication open among students, faculty, and staff. Check your email daily. Here are a few examples:
 - a. Students: If you think you might be late turning in an assignment, contact the faculty before the assignment due date. You may be able to ask for an extension if it is early enough. But regardless, you will demonstrate professionalism when you let the faculty know that you might have to turn an assignment in late and the reason for this delay.
 - b. Faculty/Staff: You have been asked to send in a document that you do not currently have. Instead of ignoring the request, send a response explaining that you don't have the document, what you are doing to secure it, and when you plan to send it.

Communicating Your Case

There are many models for promoting effective communication, negotiation, and mediation. Consider how you could integrate either of the models below into your emails, Zoom sessions, and live meetings.

1. "I" versus "You" – When the conversation focuses on "You" or how the other person is at fault, it automatically generates a defensive stance. This creates opposition and makes it less likely that there will be an amenable resolution. When the conversation focuses on the speaker, or "I," it allows the other

person(s) to see how their actions have affected someone else, opening the opportunity for understanding and discussion. Look at the following examples.

- a. Student talking to faculty: “You keep assigning too many random assignments that are not on the schedule. You are not being fair or realistic.”
 - b. Compare this statement to the following: “When I see we have another assignment added this week that was not previously in the schedule, it creates a real hardship on me and my family. I find it is hard to add it to my schedule and give it the time it deserves.”
2. Nonviolent Communication Model – This includes four steps: 1) objective statement of the problem, 2) how I feel, 3) what I need or value, and 4) possible solution or request. Look at the following examples:
- a. Faculty talking to staff when the faculty did not receive requested information for a grant report: “You were supposed to send me the information I requested last week. Now it is late. When are you going to send it?”
 - b. Compare the previous statement to this one: 1) I did not receive the information I requested last week for my grant report. 2) I am feeling very frustrated and anxious to get the report turned in. 3) This is important to me because I could lose the grant. 4) Would you be able to send the information to me before the end of the day? If not, what can I do to help expedite this process?

Remember...

Remember to choose your words wisely, put yourself in the other person’s shoes, seek to understand, consider how you would like to be spoken to, and model professional communication always. This approach will contribute to creating and maintaining the workplace that we want!

Additional Resources

<https://www.aacn.org/nursing-excellence/healthy-work-environments/skilled-communication>

NLN Healthful Work Environment Toolkit: <http://www.nln.org/docs/default-source/professional-development-programs/healthful-work-environment-toolkit.pdf?sfvrsn=20>