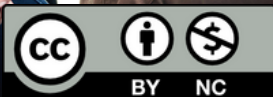


Care Conversations

A Discussion Guide for Offices,
Centers, Departments, and Programs
at Colleges and Universities



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Overview

Over the last several years a number of significant events impacted higher education leading many faculty and staff members to face new realities in their work environments and personal lives. This guide is aimed to support college and university communities in facilitating conversations that can foster a culture of care within local units during a time when restoration is critical for the well-being of both faculty and staff members.

This guide is a local product of a national grant project during the 2022–23 academic year. Dr. Cate Denial, Professor at Knox College, led this Care in the Academy initiative funded through the Mellon Foundation. Over 30 individuals from United States colleges and universities or other forms of employment participated as teams or individuals. The goals of the project were to provide a framework for infusing care into the academy as well as to start conversations and pilot initiatives at home institutions.

For simplicity and readability this guidebook uses the term department to refer to these units. This resource supports departments in holding care discussions and engaging in strategic planning around care, as well as supervisors with individual supervisees. Holding these conversations regularly throughout the year and integrating annually goal-setting, implementation, and feedback can benefit the department. The recommendations can be implemented into a team meeting or other existing ongoing conversation as relevant. Further, care strategies and successes can be included in an annual report.



A Framework for Departments

Below are several questions that can be discussed with department members to enable conversations around care. Each department can decide when to hold these conversations, which might include any of the times noted below.

- General department or other team meeting dedicated to the topic
- Departmental retreat
- Smaller subgroup meetings if the department is larger in size (e.g. Such might be most appropriate for larger divisions)

Departments can also consider providing their team members with the prompts in advance of a large group discussion to allow everyone some time for reflection and to gather their thoughts. For some departments it might be most appropriate for the main supervisor or chair to lead these discussions. Others might want to invite a member of the team to facilitate these discussions. Some departments might also prefer to have someone outside of the department lead these discussions. Lastly, although the conversations are listed separately, depending on when they are conducted, some departments might choose to hold multiple conversations during the same meeting time. Generally, it is advisable for departments to provide sufficient time and opportunities for all voices to be heard through multiple forms of communication such as writing and speaking.



Departmental Conversations

#1 Departmental Self-Reflection

Discussion questions:

- What care approaches do we employ within our department already?
- What, if anything, seems missing or important to include? Example: We do really well with making sure that we recognize each other for our efforts. For example, we have a culture of thanking one another publicly during team meetings.

#2 Developing a Departmental Care Plan

After the first discussion the department can next start developing a care plan. Make sure to write out the plan and provide access to the entire unit so that they can revisit it at any point and it can later be revised if needed.

Discussion questions:

- What basic principles and approaches of care do we want to abide by as a unit? Co-create a list.
- What will we do in the next week, 3 months, or year to enact care? Including any current approaches and future opportunities.

Departmental Conversations

#3 Checking In

After several months, have a check-in conversation with the department

Discussion questions:

- How is our care plan going?
- Is there anything that we should improve or modify?

#4 Year-End Review

At the end of the year, evaluate how everything went. Consider adding the outcomes in a departmental annual report within a subsection focused on faculty and staff well-being.

Discussion questions:

- What went well this past year?
- What were the outcomes of our care plan?
- What are our care plans for the upcoming year?

A Framework for Individual Supervisory Conversations

Supervisors can build an overall culture of care within their departments through both group discussion as well as conversations with supervisees. Such interactions can acknowledge and provide support to individual differences.

Discussion questions:

- What personal care goal would you like to work towards this year?
How can I support you in this goal as your supervisor?
- What helps you to feel appreciated and recognized in your role?
- Where do you find meaning and purpose in your work? Are there ways to enhance or support this further?
- What nourishes your growth and creativity at work?
- What contributes to you feeling like a valued member of our team?



Concluding Remarks

Care in the academy is as critical as it has ever been. We hope that this guide provides a supportive framework to advance much needed conversations on this topic.

Sample Departmental Care Plan

Chemistry Department Care Plan

As a department we endeavor to:

- Actively listen to and show respect to one another at all times during department meetings, individual interactions, and other communications such as email.
- Celebrate achievements and special milestones during department meetings (e.g. promotions, teaching awards, scholarly publications, etc.).
- Hold department retreats twice a year (interim and summer) to connect as colleagues.
- Regularly check in with new and part-time instructors at the beginning of the semester and throughout the term to make sure they have the support they need.