Suggestions for Managing Difficult Conversations

- **Ask to talk with the student in a private setting** (not in your personal living quarters). Try saying something like, “I’m wondering if you have a few minutes to talk after class today.” Avoid the words, “We need to talk,” which may be heard as fighting words. Although your concerns may be serious, the conversation will likely go more smoothly if you can put the other person at ease rather than raising her or his anxiety.

- **Be as concrete and specific as possible.** Avoid speaking in vague generalities such as, “I’m wondering how things are going,” or evaluative statements such as, “You seem unhappy.” Use only enough words to capture the issue. Don’t belabor your points. If you go on and on you will come across as lecturing or scolding, which can trigger defensiveness. **Consider using openings like:****
  - “I want to bring up the Code of Conduct that you signed before leaving and talk with you about some concerns I have about your behavior.”
  - “I’m interested in hearing your perspective about (describe behavior), and I want to make sure you understand mine.”
  - “I’d like to see if we might accomplish a better understanding regarding (describe behavior or situation).”
  - “Maybe I’m reading too much into (situation or behavior), but it seems like (describe your perception of situation or behavior).”
  - “I need your help with (describe what just happened) because I want to understand it from your point of view.”
  - “I’ve received reports from other students that (describe reports), and I want to understand the situation from your perspective.”

- **Allow the student to speak freely, without interruption.** Listen carefully. At the end, (or if the student says more than four or five sentences, in which case you can interrupt to do this step so you don’t lose track of what the student is trying to communicate), say something like, “Let me make sure I understand what you said. You said…” (describe what you heard about student’s experience or point of view and allow yourself to be corrected by student if you didn’t hear it accurately the first time). You may come to learn a lot about the student that you weren’t aware of. **Acknowledging the student’s point of view does not mean you agree with it.**

- **Tell the student what changes you’d like to see in the future:**
  - “What I suggest is…”
  - “How about if we try…”
  - “My proposed solution is…”

- **Ask for a response from the student:**
  - “Does this make sense to you?”
  - “Do you agree?”
  - “To be sure I was clear, will you please describe what I’m asking for?”
  - “What do you think?”