Guide to Making Effective Comments in Starfish

✦ Starfish
by HOBSONS

An effective comment in a Starfish flag or note is one that professionally and respectfully tells the student what behavior prompted the flag and describes what action the student should take to resolve the issue, offering support and resources as appropriate.

✦ Remember: The student can see your comment.

- Students as well as the other faculty and staff to whom the student is connected see the flag comments and notes you add in the Starfish system.

- Any comments you make should be ones you would feel comfortable telling a student face-to-face.

- Comments must be professional and objective - document observed behaviors that indicate possible concerns as opposed to voicing subjective opinions or projections about students' thinking or motivation.

✦ Direct your comment to the student.

- Direct your comment **TO** the student; don't write in the third person ("This student is..."). Consider addressing the student by name: "Taylor, your score on the first test was…"

- Provide comments and supporting facts that explain the problems the student is having. Specify behavior, performance, or patterns of behavior (e.g., disrupting class, low homework grades, repeatedly missing assignments).

- Word your comments so that your student (and the advisor and student support staff) can easily understand the problem and your expectations of what the student should do to resolve it.

✦ Communicate professionally.

- Focus on behavior; avoid labeling the student ("unmotivated," "disrespectful").

- Avoid sarcasm, which can easily be misunderstood and rarely encourages communication.

- Positive feedback motivates better than negative feedback. Start with a positive point if possible, then state the issue, and end with steps for a positive outcome.

- Expressing concern for the student and their grade is more likely to motivate a student to take action.

- Raising an Alert Flag with a comment must be just one step in the process of identifying issues and intervening to help students avoid potential roadblocks to their academic success. In addition, a direct conversation, either in person or through email (or other electronic means), should always be a part of the identification/intervention process.

EXAMPLE COMMENTS

INEFFECTIVE COMMENTS:

"You need to do better in class."
(Not specific, does not state the problem and the expectations)

"The student clearly doesn't care about this class and isn't college material."
(Third-person, projecting, labeling, not supported by examples)

EFFECTIVE COMMENTS:

"I am concerned about your poor quality of work and irregular attendance. Please come talk with me during my office hours [insert days and times] or email me so that we can talk about what you can do to make sure you have a successful semester."

"You actively participate in classroom discussions and show good understanding of course material. However, you scored very low on your first exam. Please visit the Tutoring Center, where you can receive tips for test preparation and test taking that will help you succeed on exams."

"From what you have shared with me about the stress of keeping up with your assignments and other responsibilities, I am concerned about your attendance and your ability to balance work and school life. I recommend that you set up a time to talk about this with your advisor or with the counselor at the Student Development Center. If I can help you do that, please let me know."

When to use the Notes feature instead of raising a flag:
As an instructor, you can create a Note for a student in Starfish with the option to email the note to the student. The student's advisor can see the note but will not receive an email notification. Notes are good for information such as a reminder about an approaching assignment deadline, but for academic and attendance issues you should raise a flag instead.