

## Talking with Your Students About a Possible Strike

*Prepared for you by DFA, January 2018*

The risk of a strike this term naturally brings to mind the potential negative effects on students. This brief article is intended to provide some ideas on how to help your students cope with a strike.

### Student-reported effects of strikes

There has been some research on the effects of strikes on students (e.g., Amos et al., 1993). On the basis of the research, students report that they have been, on average, slightly negatively affected, both academically and emotionally by faculty strikes. However, it is important to know that the range of reported effects is quite wide, from very positive to very negative. Even though they are a minority, there are students who become very emotionally distressed before and during a strike, and/or report severe academic effects. Both of these types of severe effects appear to be related to how those students react to the uncertainty inherent in the situation.

Students who report the most severe academic effects (such as subsequently getting lower grades or failing courses) seem to be those who largely just ceased academic work during the strike. They report using coping methods such as “Put it out of my mind”, “Did things I enjoy”, or “Left the Halifax area”.

Ceasing work during the strike turns out to be a poor strategy because there is often a period of intense workload following a strike, when course content may be covered faster and in a compressed time period.

Students who coped well academically report having continued to study and do other academic work on their own during the strike. Some students who were behind in their work used it as an opportunity to catch up.

The worst emotional distress appears to be related to some students reacting to the uncertainty by excessively worrying, even catastrophizing.

### Helping students cope

Faculty can help students cope with possible negative effects of a strike. Advise students to treat the temporary cessation of classes like a “working study break”, i.e. to continue reading, studying, learning, writing papers, etc. Caution them that after the strike their general workload may be more intense than normal, and it is advisable to be current or if possible ahead in their own coursework.

If students ask what to do because they don't know the length of the strike and how their courses may be revised, be specific about your course with them. You could tell them of your contingency plans. That is, if the term ends up shortened by one day, in this course I will...; if by one week I will...; if by two weeks I will...; if by three weeks I will.... Some courses are more complex to revise than others, but since you'll probably be thinking of contingency plans for revisions anyway, it seems reasonable to share them with your students. The main point is: **give your students specific suggestions on what to work on during the strike.**

For students who may be at risk for over-worrying and experiencing severe emotional distress, provide a model of concerned but calm, rational coping. Point out that although you cannot predict exactly how long a strike will last and although there will be disruption, you fully expect they will have an opportunity to complete their courses, and that everyone, the DFA and Administration, will have every motivation to make this possible. Explain to your students that you have no wish to harm them; and when the strike is over you will try to work out a revised completion of the course that is fair and reasonable.

### Students' opinions

Interestingly, at Dal we found that students on average do not change their opinions about their own professors after a strike. It's as if they make a distinction between the professors they know (and typically think well of), and the more remote issues. The point here is, it is possible to maintain your good relationships with your students. Advising them and helping them cope with the strike will help to minimize any negative effects of a strike on students.

#### Reference:

The Canadian Journal of Higher Education, Vol. 23, Issue 2, 1993 [Student Reactions to a Faculty Strike](#)  
Maureen Amos, Victor H. Day & Elizabeth Power.