

The Decision Dialogues



An Interactive Guide for Peer Mentors and Partners

Problem-Solving Dialogues on Meeting the CMU Challenge
From a Student's Point of View





The Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank is organized by members of the Leadership, Dialogue and Change rhetoric seminar, and Professor Linda Flower. This Guide is based on findings of three Think Tanks focused on experience of CMU's Independent (working and/or first generation) students. Visit the findings on these and other issues, from writing support, to the culture of stress at CMU @ www.cmu.edu/thinktank/docs.html

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The Decision Dialogues:

An Interactive Guide for Peer Mentors and their Partners

These Dialogues let you compare your own experience to the insights of students, faculty, and staff of the Carnegie Mellon Think Tank who raised problems, posed rivals, and offered options in the face of challenges many CMU student face.

How many of these situations have you experienced? Which one makes you curious about what other students say? Join in the Dialogue with a Partner of your group.

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When you feel you don't fit in or live up to social norms, stereotypes.

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Mentoring with *The Decision Dialogues*

The Decision Dialogues let you talk about questions and decisions real CMU students have faced in order to compare your experience to the different — sometimes competing — options sometimes uncovered in the campus-wide problem-solving dialogues held by the CMU Community Think Tank.

What happens in a good *Decision Dialogue*?

- Unlike an “advice-giving” discussion, **Mentors** and their **Partners** enter a **dialogue** with each other **responding** to these real life scenarios — proposing decisions, making predictions about options and outcomes, and comparing their ideas with what the Think Tank said.
- Mentors and Partners **compare** these challenges to **their own personal experiences**, **sharing** their own decisions and options and outcomes.

How can Mentors and Partners use the *Decision Dialogues Guide*?

The Mentor is the **STAGE DIRECTOR**, the one who

- Introduces the idea behind the decision dialogue and how it works
- Reads and explains the instructions to the team
- Decides who reads aloud to dramatize a scenario
- Suggests when is a good time to pause, consider, and/or jot notes

As a **GUIDE**, the Mentor draws attention to three powerful problem-solving strategies

- Coming up with *rival hypotheses* (and rivaling yourself) as you consider: What IS the problem here and whose problem is it? What are some Options for responding? And what are possible Outcomes if I do?
- Testing what Options really mean by playing out more than just one possible Outcome
- Comparing *rivals* (raised by the team, the Stories behind the Stories, and the Think Tank) and asking: What should we make of this?

Mentors and Partners work together as good **LISTENERS** and thoughtful **CONTRIBUTORS** who

- Use the scenarios to uncover personal dilemmas that turn out to be shared by others
- Know when to turn from the Scenario to 1) asking each other how this relates to your own experience, which may be quite different 2) sharing your experience while modeling good decision analysis and 3) drawing out each other’s reflection on **how does this apply to me? What could I do?**

DIALOGUE 1


Fitting In



For many students here at CMU, being “different” in some way can make a person feel out of place or socially uncomfortable. In the Think Tank’s research done with Independent students and administrators on campus, we heard students describe the experience of trying to fit in different ways:

- ▷ I find it hard to balance both school and work responsibilities. Sometimes I miss out on being social—I don’t get to hang out with my friends because I have work.
- ▷ I’m probably not the only XXXX Student at CMU, but I assume I’m the only one of my friends who’s in my situation.
- ▷ Being an XXXX Student makes me different than other students, and many times I don’t want to feel different. I just want to fit in.

We invite you, as a mentor and partner pair, to use the following scenarios as a way to start your own conversation about fitting in as YOU experience it.



Scenario 1: Competing Social Norms

Try reading this scenario (based on real experiences) out loud. There seems to be some tension here. What is the problem?

Setting

At the Gates Center in the Spring Term, four students (who have recently started working as a team on a class project) are studying together for the next week’s midterms. Amid their study group discussion the conversation slowly shifts to talking about their Spring Break plans.

Madeline: I’m so tired of studying...

Suzy: Me too. I can’t wait for Spring Break to get here. What are you guys’ plans?

[**Madeline** suddenly tries to avoid eye contact by looking at her computer.]

- Lee:** I'm so excited to go home for the week! I haven't been home since Christmas. It will be nice to veg around for a while. My brother will be there, too. What are you guys doing?
- Suzy:** My parents rented a condo down at Hilton Head for the week. They're flying me down to meet them in South Carolina. Can't wait to get to the beach!
- [**Madeline** begins typing, suddenly refocused on her notes.]
- John:** I'm sticking around here this year because I really need to work on the research project I'm doing for my professor. But I'll probably try to make it down to Ohiopyle or something just to get away for a bit with some friends.
- Suzy:** [Asks again] Where are you going, Madeline?
- Madeline:** [Begins to look nervous] Uh...I...I think we should get back to work.
- Suzy:** Aw c'mon, we deserve a break. Aren't you ready for vacation? [Now Suzy begins to look uncomfortable.]
- Madeline:** Yeah, I am. [Offers best attempt at a smile.]
- John:** If you don't have plans, you should come down to Ohiopyle for rafting with me and a few others! It'll be nice to take a break from working. Everyone should do something fun for Spring Break.



LET'S TALK

1. How would you read this situation? Jot notes if you'd like, and compare your interpretation of the situation with one another!
2. In your experience at CMU, can you relate to any parts of this situation? What did the problem of "fitting in" look like in your situation? Try comparing your experience with your Partner.

On the next page, you will see a second version of this dialogue that gives a glimpse at what Madeline and Suzy were thinking. Would knowing this change your reading of this social interaction?



Version 2 (with *Thoughts*)

Madeline: I'm so tired of studying...

Suzy: Me too. I can't wait for Spring Break to get here. What are you guys' plans?

Madeline: [Tries to avoid eye contact by looking at computer.] *Oh man, I didn't mean to open that can of worms. I don't want them to know I have to stay here to work at my job over break.*

Lee: I'm so excited to go home for the week! I haven't been home since Christmas. It will be nice to veg around for a while. My brother will be there, too. What are you guys doing?

Suzy: My parents rented a condo down at Hilton Head for the week. They're flying me down to meet them in South Carolina. Can't wait to get to the beach!

Madeline: *Hilton what? I've never even heard of that place.* [Begins typing, suddenly refocused on her notes.]

John: I'm sticking around here this year because I really need to work on the research project I'm doing for my professor. But I'll probably try to make it down to Ohiopyle or something just to get away for a bit with some friends.

Madeline: *Okay, now I'm getting nervous. I'm the only one who hasn't said where I'm going. They're probably going to ask me next, but I can't go anywhere because I have to make money instead of spend it.*

Suzy: Where are you going, Madeline?

Madeline: *Shoot. My turn. Should I tell them that I can't afford to leave town? Uh...I...I think we should get back to work.*

Suzy: Aw c'mon, we deserve a break. Aren't you ready for vacation? [begins to look uncomfortable]. *I think I said the wrong thing. Did she think I was bragging, or...*

Madeline: Yeah, I am. [Offers best attempt at a smile.] *Gosh I wish they would stop asking me. I don't want to explain my situation and be 'outed.'*

John: If you don't have plans, you should come down to Ohiopyle with me and a few others! It'll be nice to take a break from working. Everyone should do something fun for Spring Break.

Madeline: *Why won't they let it go? It's not like I don't want to do something fun for break, but I can't because I can't afford to. Maybe I should just tell them the truth. But if I do that, then they might ask more questions about why I have to work, and then I'd have to explain that my family doesn't have money, which would be embarrassing. I don't want them to see me as "the poor kid." What should I do?*

How would you act in this Situation? What options do you see?

One Option

What can Madeline do?

Agrees to go to Ohio

Madeline decides that she might be able to take a day off work. She wants to fit in with this group, so she decides to sacrifice some income so she can fit in.

Predict another Option and Possible Outcomes

Predict another Option and Possible Outcomes

Outcome

What might happen if she does that?



Madeline would lose some money, which could mean she needs to work more after Spring Break, when school is in session. She would get to spend more time with John and his friends.



CONSIDER THIS

In the following shared experience, pay close attention to what each of the characters were thinking. From this, think about whether or not you see some more Options and consider the different Outcomes.

The Story Behind the Story

What is Madeline thinking?

I didn't mean to bring up Spring Break when I said I was tired of studying. I'm actually really worried about the break. Am I the only one who's going to be staying on campus? I need to stay here and work. I'm really worried about the break because I don't even know if the University Center will be open, or if I'm allowed to stay in my dorm room, since it seems like everyone there is leaving town.

I'm not sure if I should tell my friends what I'm really thinking. I don't want them to know that I can't afford to go anywhere—then they would see me as “the poor kid,” a stereotype I've tried so hard to avoid. I already feel so different from my friends—I'm the only one who has to work to pay for my own expenses, and I can't hang out with them as much as I want to.

What is Suzy thinking?

I don't know what's wrong with just taking a break for a minute to talk about Spring Break. I'm so excited for vacation! I get the feeling that Madeline feels awkward about Spring Break, but I don't know why. It sounds like she doesn't have plans. Maybe I should invite her to come with my family to Hilton Head.

What is Lee thinking?

Spring Break with my family will be really fun. I wonder why Madeline isn't going to go home...maybe she doesn't have a good relationship with her family. I guess I've never talked with her about her background.

What is John thinking?

It would be fun if Madeline joined us at Ohiopyle. It seems like she feels awkward about staying in Pittsburgh for break, but I know what it feels like to be the only one who isn't going home, and I don't want her to feel left out. I think she works a lot. I do, too. I try to make it seem like I'm just doing a lot of research as a resume-builder, but really it's to pay the bills.



CONSIDER THIS

What do you make of this experience now?

You might want to take a look at some Options and Outcomes that other people have offered on the next page.

Options	Outcomes
What can Madeline do?	What might happen if she does that?
<p>Stay silent and continue to evade questions from friends.</p> <p>Madeline has a persona she wants to maintain so she doesn't seem like "the poor kid" who can't do fun things because she doesn't have the money. She feels embarrassed about her situation.</p>	<p>➔ Madeline would feel flustered, and her friends would think that she's hiding things from them. The longer she evades revealing her challenges, the more difficult it may be to tell her friends the truth in the future.</p>
<p>Tell the truth about her situation.</p> <p>Madeline could take advantage of this situation to explain to her friends.</p>	<p>➔ Suzy may take pity on her (not so good) or see her differently (good). Lee might have more admiration for her and her responsibility and challenges. John might be willing to disclose that he's in a similar situation, and that he also does research because he needs the income</p>



LET'S TALK: WHAT IS YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE WITH FITTING IN?

What was the problem? How did different people read it at the time?

Do you see any different Options now than you did then? What sort of Outcomes can you imagine?



Scenario 2: Dealing with Stereotypes

Racial/Ethnic/Gender...

CMU students tell us that sometimes people assume that you do fit in—into a group, an image they hold, or even a stereotype. But it just isn't you. The problem, however, is that it is a part of you. So there you stand caught in this borderland.

- ▷ Aamira moved from India to Connecticut in the 4th grade, goes back to India every summer. But whenever she returns, she is perceived as "too

American.” Yet at CMU, she is seen as “Indian.” She says she feels caught in this strange “middle ground.” She isn’t sure she wants to risk alienation from Indian student by denying that identity. What if she followed the advice “just be yourself,” and ended up being considered a “loner”? Maybe it’s just easier to be a chameleon; to fit in with whichever culture she’s currently around.

- ▷ Missy is a cute, short blond. She can’t help it. Why was it so hard to get invited into an engineering study group with the “serious” students?
- ▷ Ren thought the Asian Culture Club would feel like the “safe place” he wanted. So why did it feel like everyone there was one of the “popular Asians,” somehow more sophisticated or mature. Should he just leave?

Below is a more detailed scenario about someone caught in that “middle ground.” There is a lot of friendly laughing going on here, but real tension too. And there are no easy answers.

Setting

Amanda is a first-year, independent African-American student from Compton, CA. She grew up in a predominantly black neighborhood, but attended schools in suburban neighborhoods for the majority of her primary education. Due to these disassociated existences, she begins to associate “white speech,” music, and cultural expression with upward mobility and financial and spatial privilege. Once at Carnegie Mellon, she attempts to find multiple networks of support, one being the Black Student Union.

In this scene, Amanda walks into the BSU office for the first general body meeting. She is early, and the room is occupied by seven black students, setting up for the meeting and listening to Future’s “Stick Talk.” She feels uncomfortable.

Davinah: Hey! What’s up? Welcome to the BSU. Are you here for the GBM?

Amanda: Uh, yes I am. I know I’m really early though.

[**Bradley** dances around the room to the music, interacting with the other students.]

Bradley: I love this song!

Amanda: Uh... so do I! [to herself] Why did I say that?

Bradley: [Excitedly] You Future hive?! My n*gga!

[**Bradley** reaches to “dap” Amanda, extending his right hand.]



ACT IT OUT!

Try dividing who will play the roles of Amanda, Davinah, Bradley, and Caylee. After dividing the roles, try either reading or acting out the following scenario.

CHARACTERS

Amanda, independent student
 Davinah, student member of the Black Student Union
 Bradley, student member of the Black Student Union
 Caylee, student member of the Black Student Union

Amanda: [to herself] Oh God, I know I'm gonna do this wrong. Why can't we just high-five? And I really wish he wouldn't call me that word. I can't say it back. I know I'm going to pronounce the -er or something and just sound crazy. I just can't relate. Why did I say I like this song?? I hate Future. [speaking to Bradley] Haha, you know it! My ni.. Guy!

[She reaches her hand to meet Bradley's with an awkward hand-shake.]

Amanda: God, everyone just saw me mess that up. They know I'm not like them.

Davinah: Bradley, get out of here with your Future hive, n*gga. I'm more into Kendrick and J. Cole to be honest. What else do you listen to, Amanda?

Amanda: [to herself] Does EVERYONE in this group use the N-word? Is that how I fit in? [speaking to everyone] Uh well... Other than Future, who I love, I don't really listen to hip-hop. I like EDM a lot... I listen to country, too. Do you guys like Luke Bryan?

[The room is quiet for a moment. **Bradley** laughs.]

Bradley: [stops laughing]: Wait, are you serious?

Caylee: [laughing] When we have parties, we're definitely not playing Luke Bryan. We just can't turn up to that.

Amanda: [to herself] I need to save this somehow. [speaking to everyone] Aw, come on, you guys! Luke Bryan is great! He's one of the best country artists of our

generation! He's, I don't know, I just like it.

Bradley: I guess I respect that? [Laughingly] I see you Amanda, I never would have guessed you liked banjo music.

Caylee: [looking **Amanda** up and down]: Are you SURE this is the organization for you? [everyone busts out laughing].

Amanda: [stunned, silent, thinking to herself]: I know they're just joking, but Of course It's not. It's like high school all over again: too white for the black kids and too black for the white kids. Story of my life.

Davinah: [sensing Amanda's hurt feelings]: Aw we're just teasing, girl. We mess with all of our friends. Look, the meeting is about to start. Are you staying to find out how to join?

Options

What can Amanda do?

Be yourself upfront; do not perform stereotypical blackness

Instead of pretending to listen Future and being comfortable "giving dap," and using the n-word, Amanda had the decision to remain in BSL and express her true personality, not bending to projected racial identity.

Another option...

A good rival would be...

Outcomes

What might happen if she does that?



If Amanda chooses to resist the performance of stereotypical blackness, she risks isolating herself and not being accepted by her target network of support. At the same time, she can remain true to her own identity and not compromise herself for social acceptance. As a result, she may be labeled as "white-washed," or not cool enough.



LET'S TALK: WHAT'S YOUR EXPERIENCE DEALING WITH STEREOTYPES?



Your Story: Can you relate to this sort of dilemma? If so, what was your version of this experience? If this feels outside of your experience, can you imagine or predict how the person in it is feeling or thinking. That may be equally important!

Amanda's Story: What do you think Amanda should do? What are her options? What are possible results from those choices?

The Story Behind the Story

Here is a little bit more background information—the “Story Behind the Story.” Does it change how you might respond?

What is Amanda thinking?

- ▷ Amanda is developing her own understanding of her racial identity. Because of her upbringing in a predominantly black neighborhood as well as her schooling in a predominantly white system, she has witnessed both the limited opportunities and violence of the “hood,” and the resources and perceived upward mobility of the suburbs. She begins to affect “whiteness” in her speech, associating these behaviors with a gateway to a superior lifestyle.
- ▷ Caught between these two worlds, Amanda has always felt “too black for the white kids” at her school, and “too white for the black kids” in her neighborhood. Although she feels strongly about the social issues impacting American minorities, she fears that she will never be accepted by the “cool” black kids that listen to hip-hop, dress in urban fashion, and dance well. She is being stereotyped as well as stereotyping others.

What is Davinah thinking?

- ▷ When Davinah first sees Amanda, she automatically believes that they would have no cultural barrier or differences due to her appearance. Realizing the misfit with the BSA crowd, she quickly decides that the best way to make Amanda feel comfortable is to lie to her, saying that Bradley and Caylee just talk that way to their friends.

What are Bradley and Caylee thinking?

- ▷ As it becomes increasingly clear to Bradley and Caylee that this girl is not the type of black student that would be interested in their club and become laughingly vocal about it, they assume they are merely speaking the obvious, even if she looks uncomfortable. That's just how it is.



PAUSE AND CONSIDER

These thoughts seem to come from three different responses to the problem of *not* fitting in. If you sat down around a table with these four students and asked them to come up with rival hypotheses to each other, what do you think they would say?

Options

What can Amanda do?

Fake it till you make it

If Amanda wants to fit in with the “cool black kids,” it is important that they like and feel comfortable with her. She can continue to perform blackness, adopting the language, music, and cultural expression as her own.

Leave the Organization

If Amanda does not feel comfortable around her peers, she has the opportunity to leave and find a different network to join. Although she finds minority solidarity useful and important, she does not feel comfortable or valued in all black circles.

Outcomes

What might happen if she does that?

➡ While the members of the organization may feel more comfortable around her as a result of her performed racial identity, Amanda is at risk of dishonoring her true self and never feeling wholly comfortable around this friend group.

➡ Amanda will not be a part of this network that she thinks is important and had expected to enjoy. As there are no other culturally specific black organizations available to her that she knows of, she may never find a cultural network, although she is free to find other networks of support built on different interests.

Thoughts from the ThinkTank

- ▷ Many students on campus who feel like they don't fit in because of their racial or ethnic identity say that talking about it with other people can be an important first step in actually facing that challenge. And discovering they are not alone.
- ▷ However, you will run into people who just assume that there is no problem with racial/ethnic/cultural stereotypes on *campus*. What do you do then?
- ▷ People say that the best advice is to “be yourself.” But it's difficult when you feel you don't “fit into” a racial group that you value and would like to be a part of. Should you just not limit yourself to that group? If you act proud of your culture and hold to your values, will others relate to you and appreciate your identity as it is? Or should you learn to “code switch” — to read the situation and fit in? Can you do both or not?
- ▷ Other people say, it's not just about “identity” but about knowing your resources. There is more than one group on campus or in Pittsburgh that relates to you and your values. Talk to your advisor, RA, or look around. Make the effort even if you feel uncertain. But get connected.



How's Your Decision Making?

These real life scenarios suggest that there are alternative ways to handle the problems of fitting in and stereotypes. Looking back, how would you rate your ability to analyze problems — to imagine rival Options, test them with insightful Outcomes, and predict what the Story Behind the Story might be for someone else? Rate yourself as a Sharp Analyst who sees the Big Picture on a scale of 1-10 (10 being Awesome)...then see how you do on the next Decision Dialogue.

DIALOGUE 2

Negotiating Relationships



Scenario 1: Relations at Home

Coming to Carnegie Mellon presents a unique set of challenges for integrating academic and family life. Independent students give us a special insight into some of the challenges of balancing the desire to fit in, the need to work out your own identity, and still avoid unintentionally distancing yourself from your family. Scenario 1 lets you consider how you would respond in tense family situations and develop strategies if you should face similar situations during your undergraduate career and beyond.

To get started, choose one partner to play the role of Isabella and one partner to play Isabella's Mom. Then perform the situation aloud together.

Setting

Isabella is finishing up her first semester at CMU. She calls her Mom because she's trying to decide whether to sacrifice Thanksgiving break to work on a final project for a course she might want to major in or travel home to help work in her family's small convenience store.

Isabella: Hi Mom, I'm glad you called. I miss you guys.

Mom: We miss you too! How has school been?

Isabella: It's been good! Busy. That's why I wanted to tell you about my project and talk to you about break.

Isabella: *Busy is an understatement. My engineering classes are really demanding and I've been working extra shifts at my job to save enough money to go home for Christmas. I can't do both because I won't have enough money and I'm falling behind on my classes.*

Mom: We can't wait for you to come home! I got your room all ready and Papa could really use your help at the store. With the holiday coming up a lot of people took off.

Isabella: *I wish I could have a break like everyone else. My parents don't understand that I work as a student and at my job. I want to help but I think doing well my first semester here is really important otherwise I might lose my scholarship.*

Isabella: That's great, mom. . . but I'm not sure if I can come home for Thanksgiving.

Mom: Why not? Don't you want to see us?

Isabella: Of course I want to see you, Dad, and Lorenzo...but I need to work on my MechE Car project. It's due the Monday after break and I really want to do well on it.

Isabella: *I can't do it all. If I go home to work, I'll get even more behind and it won't even be a break. They'll expect me to spend all my time with them and they won't understand that I have homework to do. I'll just end up hurting their feelings.*

Mom: Mech-what? You are a good student. You know how important spending the holidays with family is. We haven't seen you all semester, and your dad really misses having you around the house. And you know how much your brother misses you.

Isabella: *This is so frustrating. She has no idea how much pressure I'm under without her adding to it. She never went to college. She doesn't know what it's like and she shouldn't guilt-me for wanting to do well.*

Isabella: Well, this project is really important to me. I think that I might want to major in Mechanical Engineering, and I have to do well on this project to get an A in the class. It's only one break, and I'll be home in a few weeks for Christmas.

Mom: You're not the only one who works hard. We work hard for you to go to school. It's ungrateful of you not to come home. I just don't understand. You're in school all the time. You've had your school time. Now it's your family time.



PAUSE AND CONSIDER: YOUR TURN

If you were Isabella, how would you respond?

Isabella: Hi Mom, I'm glad you called. I miss you guys.

Mom: We miss you too! How has school been?

Isabella: It's been good! Busy. That's why I wanted to tell you about my project and talk to you about break.

Mom: We can't wait for you to come home! I got your room all ready and Papa could really use your help at the store. With the holiday coming up a lot of people took off.

Isabella: That's great, mom. . . but I'm not sure if I can come home for Thanksgiving.



CONSIDER THIS

How would you respond if you couldn't go home during break?

Mom: Why not? Don't you want to see us?

Isabella: Of course I want to see you, Dad, and Lorenzo...but I need to work on my MechE Car project. It's due the Monday after break and I really want to do well on it.



CONSIDER THIS

How would you respond if you had to choose between spending time with family and fulfilling your school responsibilities?

Mom: Mech-what? You are a good student. You know how important spending the holidays with family is. We haven't seen you all semester, and your dad really misses having you around the house. And you know how much your brother misses you.

Isabella: Well, this project is really important to me. I think that I might want to major in Mechanical Engineering, and I have to do well on this project to get an A in the class. It's only one break, and I'll be home in a few weeks for Christmas.

Mom: You're not the only one who works hard. We work hard for you to go to school. It's ungrateful of you not to come home. I just don't understand. You're in school all the time. You've had your school time. Now it's your family time.

Options and Outcomes

Before you look at what the ThinkTank said, come up with your own predictions for what Isabella might encounter. Then, considering the whole set of possibilities, what would you say to Isabella as a friend?

Options

What can Isabella do?

Ex. Isabella begins avoiding communication with her family.

Outcomes

What might happen if she does that?

➔ *She tells them they don't understand and ignores their attempts to reach her.*

Some Options

What can Isabella do?

Outcomes

What might happen if she does that?

Isabella stays at school the whole break to work on her project.

➔ She tells her parents that if she goes home she'll get distracted visiting with everyone and she needs to do well on her project to get into the major she wants.

➔ She feels isolated from her peers who all head home and upset that her extended family will be disappointed in her decision not to come home over the holiday.

Isabella goes home for the whole break and helps at the store.

➔ While she's at home she visits with family, catches up with friends, works at the store, and at the end of the day is too tired to devote much time at all her MechE project.

Isabella splits her break between school and home.

➔ Isabella decides she will spend Thanksgiving with her family but go back to school on Friday to devote the weekend to her project. The compromise alleviates some tensions with her family.

LET'S TALK: WHAT IS YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE WITH RELATIONSHIPS AT HOME?



The ThinkTank described some ways students and their friends often feel about family tensions. Your own family situation may be quite different, but have you experienced anything like the interactions below? If so,

- 1) What do you think your own family was thinking or feeling?
- 2) How would you describe your strategies for dealing with your own concerns - or responding to your family's?

- ▷ Students don't know what to do if they are not getting the desired support from their families.
 - **Student says:** For certain people in my family CMU seems like a scary thing. They know they're supposed to be proud but sometimes they don't even know how to ask about my life here. It becomes harder to see the family unit as supportive because they don't know how to help. How do I ask my family to support me if they've never been in my shoes?
 - **Family says:** We know this is an amazing opportunity for our student, but he/she cannot forget where they come from either. I have seen a few kids over the years get out of the neighborhood and go on to have amazing careers, but they come back with money and think they are better than where they grew up. They forget about their families and their values in exchange for fancy jobs and money.
- ▷ Students don't want to alienate family members who haven't gone to college.
 - **Student says:** The idea that I made different life choices can put a lot of distance there. I still want to be close to my family but the more I learn, the bigger the distance between us seems. I don't want to make them feel inferior.
 - **Family says:** I know he/she is busy with their schoolwork, but they cannot spend all their time on schoolwork, that's no way to live a life. I've balanced working, raising a family, being involved with the church, and plenty more. How you spend your time is a personal decision, it's sad to see them lose track of the importance of family just because they go on to a great school.

- ▷ Students feel tension about who they are and where they came from.
 - **Student says:** Sometimes I feel so proud of my culture and the struggles that have made me stronger. Other times, I feel ashamed to be first-generation and I don't want anyone to know where I'm from or how I grew up.
 - **Family says:** We are very proud of where our student goes to school, but we worry about the divide it causes in our family and community. We know our student worked hard to get where they are, but it wasn't without sacrifice from the rest of the family and sometimes he or she seems to forget about all the effort we put in to make their dream a reality.
- ▷ Relationships become strained when students feel like they have to defend their choices.
 - **Student says:** I feel like I'm constantly justifying why I'm doing this or why I can't be there for things. This makes it harder and harder to want to stay connected because my family doesn't always feel like a source of encouragement.
 - **Family says:** When are you going to be done? When are you coming home? When are you going to move back? Do you think you're better than us just because you went to college?



Scenario 2: Relations at School

If you have ever been part of a group, but for some reason still didn't quite fit in, you will know what it means to have to *negotiate* these relationships. Independent students give us real insight into the decisions that can suddenly come up. This scenario invites you to walk through a story with multiple decision points and compare your choices with some rivals proposed by the ThinkTank. To get started, choose who will play the roles of John and Andrew, read the Setting below, and start the dialogue.

Setting

Andrew is a freshmen independent, working student at Carnegie Mellon University. His floor-mates in his dorm, including his best friend John, go on weekly dinners. However, Andrew can only afford to go once a month due to his financial situation. Recently, John has stopped inviting Andrew to their dinner outings, as John is unaware of Andrew's financial situation and thinks he is putting less effort into their friendship. Andrew struggles with having to tell John the truth. Let's begin!


John: Is everybody ready to go? Our Uber is here and I want to beat the rush. [*turns to Andrew*] Oh hey Andrew, I didn't see you there. Sorry, I would have invited you, but I haven't seen you around at all, and I never know if you want to go to these things... But I am sure they can add one more to our table. Are you free now? You should come, we'll just need another car.

DECISION POINT


How should Andrew respond to John's request to go out? And what do you predict the outcome would be?

Rivals from the ThinkTank


Here are some ways Independent students and faculty responded. What do you think about these outcomes?

 "I don't want people to feel bad for me...I would rather just appear normal than to tell them the truth."

- Student

 "Peers can start to understand the struggles of independent students if they are more open."

- Student

 "Some students may feel like the odd one out and would rather not engage."

- Faculty member

Possible Paths

Here are three distinctive paths Andrew could take. As you walk down each path in turn, *describe* how you think Andrew should respond then *predict* what you think the Outcome of that decision might be. How many of the Rivals raised by the ThinkTank did you *anticipate*?

The Evasion Path: Andrew lies to John and tells him he already has plans with another friend.

The "Go Along" Path: Despite not budgeting money for this dinner, Andrew decides to go out with John.

The "Open Up" Path: Andrew tells John he wants to talk to him after he gets back from dinner.



The Evasion Scenario #1: Made Plans

Andrew: Oh... um no, don't worry about it. Guess I didn't realize these dinners were a thing anymore so I already made plans for dinner with Simon.

[Three hours later, **John** knocks on Andrew's door and **Andrew** let's him in.]


John: Thanks for letting me in, look we need to talk. I texted Simon to say how bad I felt about not inviting you to the dinners recently, and he told me that you guys never had plans for tonight. He actually said that you have been acting strange recently. I am worried. If you have a new group of friends you don't have to be secretive about it. Who did you actually have dinner with?

DECISION POINT


How should Andrew respond to John's question?

Rivals from the ThinkTank

Here are some ways Independent students and faculty responded. What do you think about these outcomes?

 "I don't think it'd be beneficial to open up. Other people can't really help you, right? They won't just start throwing money at me."

- Independent Student

 "Opening up can really help create a social support system that can lead to great results for students."

- Faculty Member



The Evasion Scenario #2: The White Lie

Andrew: Why are you talking about me behind my back? There is no new group of friends. It's really none of your business, but if you want the truth, I just used a block and I've been here all night trying to do homework.

John: If that's what you wanted to do, you should have just said so. I just miss the way things were during orientation. Now that the semester has picked up, you seem like a completely different person.

Andrew: Maybe I am just busier than you, okay? It's not like I'd rather be doing homework alone than having fun with you guys. You just don't understand.

John: Alright, obviously this isn't working out. I'm sorry I invited you out tonight when you had so much homework. If you want to hang out, you know where to find me.


[**John** walks out of the room and slams the door behind him.]

DECISION POINT


How should Andrew respond to John's walking out?

Rivals from the ThinkTank


Here are some ways Independent students and faculty responded. What do you think about these outcomes?

 "Everyone has a lot going on. Independent students just have more to juggle. When I complain to my friends I feel better, but I still end up having to sit down and do the work eventually."

- **Independent Student**

 "It can become a strain for independent students to maintain these relationships if people always question their choices."

- **Faculty Member**

 "It's really hard for students to discriminate between chronic and acute stress, so opening up could especially help independent students with their stress."

- **Faculty Member**



The Evasion Scenario #3: Avoid Contact

[A week passes and **John** is leaving the dorm with a group of his floormates.]

John: Is everybody ready to go? The Uber is here and I don't want to be late again.

[**Andrew** walks by the group. They make eye contact.]

John: OK everyone let's go! Excuse me Andrew.

[**Andrew** moves out of the way as the group passes. He watches as they go into the Uber and drive off.]

Andrew: Ah, who needs them anyway...

[**Andrew** walks into the dorm and slams the door behind him.]

LET'S TALK: YOUR PREDICTIONS AND YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE



- 1) Looking back, what was your biggest take-away?
- 2) How good would you say you were at predicting possible outcomes (given the ThinkTank's experience)?
- 3) Do any of the ThinkTank Rivals seem especially insightful or surprising to you - or problematic?
- 4) Finally, the big question: How does this situation come up in your own, perhaps somewhat different, experience? When you think about the decisions you made (or are making), what were the Outcomes (or what do you predict could happen)?



The Go Along Scenario #1: How Far?

Andrew: Thanks for the invite man! Yeah, I guess I can come along!

Andrew: *I sure hope we aren't going somewhere expensive...I'm not sure if I'll have the money for this...*

[A half hour later, **John**, **Andrew**, and the rest of their group are sitting at a table. Everyone is eagerly perusing through the menu, as **Andrew** looks at the prices nervously. A waiter comes over to the table.]

Waiter: Are you boys ready to order?

John: Yeah, I'll have the steak! Medium-rare, with potatoes on the side please, thanks!

[**Andrew** glances at the steak on the menu, and his eyes bug out at the price. Even worse, nothing is cheaper!]


Waiter: [turning to **Andrew**] And you?

DECISION POINT

How should Andrew respond to the waiter? How will each action affect each character?

Rivals from the ThinkTank

Here are some ways Independent students and faculty responded. What do you think about these outcomes?

 “It makes me upset to have to spend my money among my different friend groups, and it only leaves me with spending a little with each group.”

- Independent Student

 “I just don’t want to feel like an outcast.”

- Independent Student



The Go Along Scenario #2: Hedging to Save Face

Andrew: Yeah...I think I’m going to go with the burger.

Andrew: *Oh man, this is really going to take a hit from my budget*

[After an hour the group returns home. Everyone goes back to their respective dorms.]

John: Hey Andrew, hold up!

Andrew: What’s up man?

John: It was great going out with you tonight. I just wanted to make sure everything was ok, you haven’t been coming out with us as much, and this was our first hanging out in a while. Is everything cool?

Andrew: Thanks John, but really everything’s ok. I’m just busy with school and everything. You know how crazy this place is.

John: Yeah I understand. Just let me know if you ever wanna talk about anything.

[**Andrew** goes back to his dorm and falls onto his bed.]

Andrew: *I hate lying to John about this, but I just don’t think I’m ready to open up. But he obviously is noticing something’s up, and obviously cares about our friendship a lot. I think in the future I’ll be able to tell him, but I’m just not ready yet.*

DECISION POINT

What do you think of Andrew's decision?



The Open Up Scenario: Facts and Awkward Feelings

[**Andrew** and **John** sit in Andrew's room.]

Andrew: Hey John, thanks for meeting with me. I know things have been a bit weird recently, but it's not because of you or anything you did. It's just some personal stuff. I feel weird talking about it, but I think if you understood where I was coming from a bit more, you may get why I act the way I do.

John: Ok, so what's up?

Andrew: Well do you know that I have been working two jobs?



LET'S TALK: YOUR PREDICTIONS AND YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE

- 1) Looking back, what was your biggest take-away?
- 2) The big question: How does this situation come up in your own, perhaps somewhat different, experience? When you think about the decisions you made (or are making), what were the Outcomes (or what do you predict could happen)?

DIALOGUE 3

Dealing with Setbacks



Scenario 1: Managing a Second Chance / Self-Advocacy

In a challenging university setting, we all face setbacks that may start out as academic, financial, or social, but soon spill over into one another. If you don't have a safety net already in place, you find it is suddenly up to you to *manage a second chance* and become your own *self-advocate*

For instance, ThinkTank members have said:

- ▷ Having demanding classes and balancing a job is a tough load. Students fearing failure may actually shy away from actively seeking help as a way to avoid what feels like yet another academic or personal burden.
- ▷ The stakes of failure are raised if a student has to retake the course or, even more significantly, stay for an extra semester before graduating, when there is no guarantee that they will be able to afford the extra time.
- ▷ When the going gets rough, students may feel they don't belong (it's so common it is called the imposter syndrome.), So seeking assistance may be interpreted as a sign of weakness or inadequacy by the students themselves or others.

When you read the following scenario out loud, see if you can predict the “story behind the story” from different points of view.

Michael is a first year student in an upper-level engineering class which will eventually be a prerequisite for his major – and he feels that he is struggling. He knew a class intended for juniors and seniors might be difficult, but now he is even more worried at the prospect of failing the class and (as a working independent student) having to pay to take it again later.

Prof. Finch: [Moving through her slides quickly] Okay class, so here is how we go about designing this operating system in a way that uses energy sustainably (moves to next slide). Did everyone get that? One of the biggest tenets we're looking at is waste management, the next...

Michael: [Thinking to himself]: *Wait, what? I didn't even finish looking at the last three slides. Is anyone else behind? Oh, man, everyone is nodding along like they*

understand her. I must be the only one that doesn't get it. Oh, shoot. She's on another slide. Pay attention! Write faster!

[**Prof. Finch** closes her lecture, and begins handing back the students' first graded exam before adjourning class. Michael and his friend Tina are looking at their grades.]

Michael: Hey Tina, what did you get on your test?

Tina: Augh, I can't believe it... 42 percent! Guess I'll have to study harder next time. How did you do?

Michael: Not much better. I got a 46 percent. I really thought I was going to pass this one... I studied hard for it and everything!

Tina: Have you gone to any of the Academic Development tutoring sessions for this class?

Michael: No, not yet. I know that it's offered, but I've never tried it. I don't have much time with all my other classes, my job, and, you know, trying to have a life! Hopefully the next test just won't be quite as difficult. This class moves so fast, though! We try to cover so much material in so little time it makes my head spin.

[**Tina** glances over at their professor, who is packing up her things.]

Tina: Have you ever tried talking to Professor Finch?

Michael: No way! She is way too intimidating. She's, like, operating on a whole other level of smart – I don't even know how I would strike up a conversation. And even if I did, she probably doesn't have time for me. It seems like she's more concerned with helping the juniors and seniors with applying the concepts from this class to their own research. If I asked her to slow down and explain things, she probably wouldn't give me the time of day!

Tina: Yeah, I know what you mean. I'm not too concerned, though, I guess. I've got other important classes to worry about this term – if I have to take this one again next semester, no big deal! I've got friends who have taken this class twice, and they're doing just fine.

Michael: *I hadn't even thought of that... what if I fail this course and have to take it again next semester? Even worse, what if this completely derails my major course of study? What if I have to take an extra semester to graduate?*

Where is the money going to come from for all that? I've got to do something to fix this while it's still early in the semester...but what can I do?



PAUSE AND CONSIDER: YOUR TURN

Does the answer to Michael's problem seem obvious to you? "Go get help!" But the truth is many people don't do that - or do it way too late. Why do you think this happens?

What is the problem?

- 1) Given the reasons Michael gives what might he be thinking?
- 2) What is Professor Finch likely to be thinking?
- 3) What is Tina Assuming?



LET'S TALK: WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH MANAGING A SETBACK?

- ▷ What happened?
- ▷ Was it academic, financial, social, or a tangle of all three?
- ▷ Were there any significant decisions you made or didn't make?
- ▷ What did you do?

Rivals from the ThinkTank

It turns out people at the ThinkTank sessions described some very different approaches. Read the three options with each other and consider...

- ▷ Which would you choose now?
 - ▷ Which option did you actually take in your situation?
 - ▷ Why was that?
-

Option #1: the “Proactive-Collaborative” approach

- ▷ Create a plan of action (i.e. a contingency plan: “What if I don’t pass?” Who do I need to talk to, and what will I need to do?”)
- ▷ Self-Advocate: reach out for help by building a network of support.
 - Speak with Academic Advisor.
 - Speak with Academic Development tutor.
 - Speak with professor or teaching assistants.
 - Work with classmates.
 - Speak with employer to negotiate balance between school and work.

Option #2: the “Go-It-Alone” approach

- ▷ Plan to create a compromise between “having a life” and doing academic work.
- ▷ Active planning: prioritize items in a planner/schedule.
- ▷ Making a list: “putting it all on paper” to stay organized.
- ▷ Reliance on own abilities to “study harder” and plan for success.

Option #3: the “Wait-it-out” approach

- ▷ Defer immediate responsibility: “I’ll study harder for the next test.”
 - ▷ Shift responsibility/blame to others: “Hopefully the class will get easier.” “I just can’t do the work because of my job/other classes.”
 - ▷ Avoid the stigma of asking for assistance. “I never had trouble in high school.” “I can’t face the thought of failure, no way.”
 - ▷ Just be realistic and accept it is hopelessness. Success looks distant, and failure seems unavoidable. “I’m going to fail anyway, because of my outside circumstances (work, other classes, sense of academic preparedness).” “Getting an ‘F’ early on in a course is an indicator that things are not likely to get better.”
-

LET'S TALK: YOUR PERSONAL PLAN OF ACTION

Let's see if we can apply this discussion to a "live" problem or one you can imagine.



Personal and academic setbacks can be difficult to deal with in the middle of a busy semester, but having a plan of action at the ready can help reduce the stress of making difficult decisions.

So test your on-the-spot decision making. Use this sheet to create an expert's plan of action for dealing with a problem you have named. Does it look like you are ready to deal with it?

One setback or challenge I could face this year:

Personal inventory of people who can help me:

This is who
I will meet
with first

What kind of assistance can this person provide?

What will I say to this person?

This is who
I will meet
with second

What kind of assistance can this person provide?

What will I say to this person?

This is who
I will meet
with third

What kind of assistance can this person provide?

What will I say to this person?



Scenario 2: Working with an Advisor as a Self-Advocate

This scenario is a case-study of mentor-facilitated self-advocacy and network building—based on one person’s experience. However, each decision point involved multiple options:

- 1) How would you evaluate each of Austin’s choices and the reader’s comments?
- 2) What would you say makes an interaction with an advisor successful?
- 3) In this situation, what would you have done?

How to Become a Self-Advocate Who Uses Networks

Austin has been a straight-A student since High School but, now, as a second semester freshman at Carnegie Mellon, he struggles to balance his job as a waiter/server at Avenue B in Shadyside with his schoolwork. His parents expect him to pay his phone bill and rent, as well as provide his own spending money, to relieve financial pressures on the rest of the family.

This means he needs to work at least 15-18 hours every week of the month, and has less time to focus on schoolwork. After his first semester working the job, he received a 2.3 QPA, including an R in his 15-112 class. Because his grades have dropped to below a 3.0, he is in danger of losing his position in his fraternity, which requires a minimum QPA of 2.7 for membership, and he is in danger of losing his financial aid, which requires that he complete 80% of all taken units (failing 15-112 did not satisfy this). Given all this, Austin considers his options.

DECISION POINT ONE: SCHEDULING THE MEETING

Austin knows that his grades from last semester aren’t good enough. He isn’t sure if this is normal (CMU is hard) or if it’s actually a problem. He hasn’t had as much time to study so:

Austin decides to ask a friend

Austin asks his friend Carter about what he should do, but Carter is in good-standing academically, and is studying for an exam anyway, so he says he “can’t help.”

- ▷ *Reader Comment:* While friends offer moral support, faculty have dealt with a variety of situations. Academic advisors serve a variety of purposes, and they are connected with a variety of resources. Their job is to care about you, and make sure you complete requirements to graduate. For any academic issues it is important to involve your academic advisor.

Austin emails his Academic Advisor

His academic advisor, James, answers promptly and sets up a meeting time with Austin.

- ▷ *Reader Comment:* Academic advisors have gone through a slew of situations with students which leads them to have invaluable experience. If they are unable to help, Advisors usually will place students in contact with the appropriate resources.

Austin gives his parents a call

His parents aren't thrilled about his grades. They tell him to work harder and stop partying so much. They also remind Austin that they are paying too much for his tuition for him to squander this opportunity.

- ▷ *Reader Comment:* Families are dealing with their own lives in addition to paying for education. They are great support network, but it's best to bring up positive things. It would be best if Austin sorted out his grade situation before confronting his parents with the issue. This way he has a plan moving forward when he informs them.

Experience Says:

Academic advisors work on many fronts and can tap a whole network of resources for you. Their job, in fact, is to care about you and make sure you complete requirements to graduate. For any academic issues, it is smart to check in with your advisor when you first hit a setback.

- 1) So the obvious question is, how well do you know your Advisors (in the College, your Department, Student Life)?
- 2) How would describe your experience with them?

Austin's Story Behind The Story Raises Some Good Questions:

What prompted Austin to schedule the meeting? What other time commitments did this meeting have to compete with in Austin's schedule? Could this meeting have happened earlier, for example, during the semester that Austin failed the course? Why do you think he might have waited until it was too late to have the discussion?

Students say that the hardest part of being an advocate for yourself is scheduling the initial meeting. They feel nervous about addressing these issues or they prioritize other things until it is almost too late. Sometimes when office hours are limited, it even takes effort to get in contact with the mentor/professor they would like to meet.

DECISION POINT TWO: WHAT SHOULD I REVEAL?

What do you think of the choices Austin and the Advisor are making?

[**Austin** enters office to see **James** sitting at desk]

James: Hey Austin, have a seat. What are we taking a look at today?

Austin: Thanks for meeting with me. My schedule has been crazy, but I did want to talk before we got into the full swing of classes.

James: Of course. So what's been going on?

Austin: Yeah...I don't know. I...I've been going through a lot recently. And I really wanted to just talk about my classes. It's been rough.

James: Well, since we were meeting I looked to see how you were doing and I saw your grades from last semester *opens folder*. They are very different than what you've had in the past, has something else been going on?

Austin: Ugh...that semester was weird. My dad asked me if I could start to pay for some things here and there, like my phone bill and rent. I started working longer hours, solely because of the amount of money I need. I didn't realize how hard it would be to balance both school and work.

James: How many hours are you working now?

Austin: 15 - 20 hours a week, at the minimum. My rent is \$600 and my parents aren't helping me at all, and I need money if I want to have any semblance of a social life...it's stressful. And realistically, it's been hard getting consistent hours at work too. They kind of just call me when they need me. I sometimes have to leave campus on a whim whenever they call, because I really need the money.

James: Well that's a burden. School should be your top priority Austin, even though you need to pay for rent- your parents pay a lot more for you to come to school at Carnegie Mellon. Are you involved with other things on campus?

Austin: Well, I care a lot about my fraternity and to buggly when I can. I guess if I could I would be involved in AB Events, but I don't think I have the time.

How Austin Reads the Situation

Students sometimes report a feeling of miscommunication with professors or advisors when it seems they "just don't understand." There appears to be a difference in values when they advise a student to quit something they love or find necessary (such as employment). So what are the options? As a mentor, James could:

- ▷ *Tell Austin that his academic work is his most important responsibility: that he needs to drop everything else.* While this tactic could fix Austin's GPA, it does
-

not speak to the financial difficulty Austin is facing. This suggestion also potentially isolates Austin, if James suggests that Austin drop activities and events he is genuinely interested in.

- ▷ *Collaborate with Austin in order to find a solution in which he can be happy and succeed.* Because Austin cares about all of these activities, and he must work his job to pay for his housing, suggesting that he drop responsibilities is not the way to finding a workable solution.



PAUSE AND CONSIDER

- 1) Which option is most reasonable?
- 2) Of course, if James had more information he might find ways to support Austin. But what would Austin need to volunteer in order to be a smart self-advocate?

James: Hmm. Okay. Well, I know buggy can take a lot of time. But I'd bet you don't get to go very often given your work schedule.

Austin: Yeah you're right. I barely go anymore. I'm just so tired on the weekends that I just want to sleep as much as possible. To be honest, I don't even feel like doing homework. Sometimes I feel like I just can't keep up, and I'm a failure for getting that R. I've always been a straight A student.

James: Well, what sort of things did you do to try to remedy the situation? Did you ever reach out to the professor?

Austin: Honestly, no. I've always been the student who was successful by myself. I never needed assistance, I never really needed to study too much, and I was always top of the class. I barely know who I am anymore. It's weird with my parents now too, because they want to know why I'm not doing well, and they think it's because I'm just not going to class, or getting drunk and partying all the time. But I've always succeeded in the end. I don't need help. I'll get through it.

DECISION POINT THREE: I DON'T NEED HELP

Austin's claims, that "I don't need help. I'll get through it." Yet this rarely leads to success. So often, students returning for a second chance aren't sure what they can do to improve their situation and can fall into the naive belief that they "just need to work harder."

Where do you think this belief comes from? From families? Or does anything about the

CMU culture make students say you merely need to work harder to be more successful? How could a mentor combat that rhetoric, and help someone create a realistic and attainable plan?

James: But, realistically, how are you going to do better this semester if nothing has changed? Is that even possible?

Austin: With my own strength! I failed last semester, that's true, and I felt like a failure. I didn't know who I was, anymore. But I'm back, now, and...I don't know? I'll work harder. I'll...just do better. Now that I've experienced failing, I'm not going to let myself fail again.

James: And I respect that. But ultimately, something is going to have to change. You can't expect different results by doing the same thing over and over again. (Isn't that how people describe insanity!?) Seriously now, what steps are you going to take to do better this semester? I think we should work on those and come up with some very clear, realistic goals, that we can work towards. How is everything at the HUB?

Austin: Well, because of my QPA I lost my loans for the semester. I'm currently appealing, but either way, it means I need to do really well this semester. Actually I do have a form here that you and I need to complete together. The appeal process is annoying; it's a lot of work and is stressing me out.

James: Okay. Well, let's get this out of the way so you don't have it on your plate. I can't change anything about our financial situation, but could you maybe ask your boss for more consistent scheduling? I think if you tried some self-advocacy by explaining your situation, he might be more sympathetic. In general you can't rely on that in the workplace, but it wouldn't hurt.

Austin: I guess I can. I've been there a while now, and I always took what they gave me. Maybe I should speak up more. I'm the best worker there, I even know the secret cream sauce recipe.

James: Sounds like a plan! Also I want you to check in with me briefly every week, just so that I know you're doing well. Academically AND personally. So you retaking 15-112? What are you changing to do better this semester?

Austin: Well, I asked one of my brothers who is a CA in the course to tutor me privately. Because I've taken the class already, I hope it will be a little easier. If not, I know that I need to reach out to the professor early enough to be able to make a difference. I know I failed the class, but I'm the same Austin who had straight A's in high school. I'll make this work. If I do well, maybe I can the CA will hire me to work as a TA next semester.

There is no easy answer here. Austin is facing some real trade-offs. What would you do in his shoes?

LOOKING AHEAD: NETWORKING

In this situation, Austin has already started to build a problem-solving network (including James, a tutor, and his professor). However, many students say they don't know which way to turn when they hit a rough spot. What they may not realize is that these different sorts of mentors can give them access to past students, other professors, and many university resources. How would you rate your network—not just friends, but people who can help you solve a problem?

LET'S TALK: A CASE STUDY OF ADVOCATING FOR YOURSELF

If you used Austin's case study to write your own, how would you describe your own skill as a self-advocate?



- 1) What are the best moves or choices you made in your story? The not-so-good? The outright bad?
- 2) What are the three best insights or strategies you can draw from this case?
- 3) Have you used any of them? Did you learn something?

DIALOGUE 4

Building a Network of Support

In the face of an opportunity or a crisis, successful college students know how to draw on a network of support. Whether dealing with setbacks or stress, managing requirements or finances, getting an extension or that perfect internship, the savvy decision maker uses the insight, advice, and aid of insiders. Yet, despite the academic, social, and professional value of such support, the challenge students often face is *building that network* in the first place.

Some students assume being “connected” is just a matter of personality. Others assume having a large network of friends and social media contacts is the same as having a *problem-solving network*. Unlike social contacts, problem-solving contacts are the people who help you work out a decision path and can often take action to help you get there. (In a university, it is often the *job* of these people to help you find solutions and make the most of your college experience.)

So how big, how diverse is your own *problem-solving network*? This Dialogue may open up some options and help you build a practical plan for building that network, before you need it.



ACT IT OUT!

To get started, choose one partner to play the role of Karen and one partner to play the roles of Advisor Brown, David, and Rachel. Then perform the situation aloud together.

Scenario: Building a Problem-Solving Network

Karen is in her seventh week of her first semester at CMU. She just received a call from her mother that her father had a massive heart attack and she needs to get home immediately. It's Wednesday morning. Karen's mother booked her a flight for first thing on Friday morning. In the next two days she tries to cope with what happened and find out what she should do next. She emails her academic advisor and requests an emergency meeting since she'll be missing an exam and assignment deadlines while she is home with her family.

Advisor's office

Karen: (visibly shaken and upset, holding back tears) I really need to be with my family and help my mom. But this is my first time with midterms and I don't know how to manage having to deal with this crisis and missing school.

Advisor: I'm so sorry about what happened. Thank you for letting me know. You seem upset so maybe you should make a counseling appointment when you get back. You'll also want to email all your professors to let them know what happened as well. I hope things get better.

Karen: Okay thanks. I'll do that.

Karen: [Thinks to herself] "I really thought she'd help me figure out what to say to my professors and what I should expect with having to miss my midterms. Actually, I don't think I really asked her for specific help with that. I thought it would be like high school, where she would just tell me what to do."

[On her way to the cafeteria she bumps into her friend, David.]

Cafeteria

David: Hey Karen, you look upset. Are you okay?

Karen: I'm having a really tough time, something terrible happened back home. I have to leave early Friday morning.

David: Jeez I'm sorry, that's terrible timing with midterms and everything. So sorry I've got to run, I have an exam review I need to get to so I don't fail Calculus.

Karen: [Thinks to herself] "Now what do I do? Everyone's so busy with midterms. Who else could help me?" As she walks to her dorm she passes her RA's room.

Karen's Dorm

Karen: (knocks on the door) Hey Rachel, may I come in?

Rachel: Sure. Is everything okay? I know midterms are really stressful.

Karen: Actually, um something happened and I have to go home on Friday and I don't know what to do.

Rachel: I'm so sorry to hear that. Have you let your professors know what's going on?

Karen: I haven't talked to them one on one before and I don't want to want to tell them personal stuff if they're not going to be able to help. I don't know how to ask for their help with my situation.

Advisor Brown is thinking

I'm glad Karen gave me a timely update. Since I mainly advise students about their courses, I suggested that she let her professors know what's going on and reach out to Counseling and Psychological Services. There are many people in Student Affairs who are much better equipped to handle her emotional situation.

David is thinking

I feel so bad that this happened to her. I wish I had more time to be there for her but I'm swamped with preparing for my exams next week.

Rachel is thinking

I want to connect her with people who can help her especially since first year students don't always know who to turn to or wait too long to ask for help.

Karen is thinking

I need to figure out what to do. How am I going to be there for my Mom? What am I going to tell my professors? How am I going to make up what I miss? I'm going to be so behind. I put myself in a vulnerable situation talking about this crisis because I expected my advisor to help me do something about it. During our meeting I didn't ask her exactly what I needed help with.



CONSIDER THIS

Here are three paths of action from the ThinkTank.

- 1) Which one sounds the most like you?
- 2) Which one is likely to build the best network.

Manage It Yourself: “If you find yourself in a situation like this, where you feel like you’ve really exhausted your resources, I say lay out everything you’ve attempted to do in front of the professor about the situation and then from there see what the professor can do. Given that you’re providing all this information to the professor they know that you utilized X, Y, and Z. Then the professor can side with you to say ‘what can we do together?’ or work with your advisor or another point of contact.” - *Independent Student*

Network Ahead: “We try to encourage Dietrich students to build relationships with us. If I have a little bit of a relationship and then the crisis hits and I need to jump in and help, that’s a totally different story. It depends on them, but yeah [that personal relationship] is huge.” - *Student Life Professional*

Go Directly to a Faculty Member: “I think it’s very important to get the direct message from the student when something happens. This is a learning opportunity to think about things like, ‘What do I say to my advisor? How do I ask my professor for an extension? How much do I disclose of my personal information?’” - *Professor*



PAUSE AND CONSIDER: WHY DON'T WE ACT?

If building a *problem-solving network* is such a smart move, why don't we do it more often? Here are four reasons the ThinkTank named.

- 1) Do any of these sound like you?
- 2) Could you describe two *actions a student could take* to get around these barriers?

STUDENTS AVOID HAVING TO RECOGNIZE THE PROBLEM OR ACTING TO FIND A SOLUTION

Student Life says: “Students often come to us when the crisis is no longer manageable. The sooner students come forward, the better the outcome will be for them.”

Student says: “I can handle it. It’s not that bad. I’ll be able to catch up.”

Professors say: “We appreciate when students ask for help early. If we don’t find out there’s a problem until the end of the semester, there’s not a lot we can do. We hear a lot of excuses so we’ll be more accommodating and understanding if we know sooner.”

YOU SAY:

STUDENTS DON'T KNOW WHO TURN TO IN THE MIDST OF A CRISIS.

Academic Advisors say: “I handle the academic side of things. In order to help students with their problems, I need to know what their problem is and what their expectations are of me.”

Students say: “I know my advisor. I thought she could help me figure out how to talk to my professors about my assignments but I didn't make that clear. I've never missed an assignment or asked for an extension before.”

Friends say: “I don't know whom to go to either.”

YOU SAY:

STUDENTS DON'T WANT TO MAKE THEMSELVES VULNERABLE

Students say: “I think I can figure this out on my own. I don't want anyone to know I'm struggling. It's personal.”

RAs say: “If we don't know you have a problem, we can't help you or connect you with other people who can.”

Student Life Staff Members say: “We see cases like Karen's all the time. Students shouldn't feel ashamed or embarrassed about asking for help. That's what we're here for. We have so many resources that students don't know how to navigate and they often wait until it's too late.”

YOU SAY:

STUDENTS DON'T KNOW HOW TO LEVERAGE THEIR CONNECTIONS

Students say: “I feel like no one else ever needs help. Everyone else seems like they have it under control. It's not always clear to me what I need help with let alone who could help me.”

RAs say: “I'm trained to help. If I don't have an answer, I should be able to find someone who does. It could open up a different network of support that students didn't even know existed.”

YOU SAY:



LET'S TALK: BUILD YOUR OWN ACTION PLAN

Let's put this Dialogue to use. Identify a problem, challenge, aspiration, or task you are facing.

Sketch out a map of the people (or resources) already in your network and what they can offer.

Then figure out how you could build a stronger, more diverse *problem-solving network*. Don't let yourself be vague: name the 1st steps; describe what you could actually do.

Now, actually jot down your plan, tell your intentions to a friend, and put a date on the piece of paper

DIALOGUE 5

Finding Your Place in a New Place



Have You Tried?

Before meeting in your respective mentor and partner groups, try going through this checklist to see how network-savvy you already are! These questions are inspired by suggestions from students and faculty to help connect you to useful resources!

Partners, have you tried...

- ▷ finding a mentor?
- ▷ reaching out to your HUB Liaison?
- ▷ going to an Academic Development session?
- ▷ learning about CAPS and their 12 free annual counseling appointments?
- ▷ reaching out to your college advisor?
- ▷ apply to campus jobs using TartanTrak?
- ▷ reaching out to your House Fellows and Resident Advisors?
- ▷ finding out about the Emergency Loan Program?
- ▷ attending the school fairs at the beginning of each semester?
- ▷ searching the Bridge for activities that may be of interest to you?
- ▷ going to a free Late Night Event in the UC?
- ▷ going to free Activities Board events on campus?
- ▷ meeting another independent student?
- ▷ attending a time-management workshop?

Mentors, have you tried...

- ▷ finding a partner?
 - ▷ attending a Carnegie Leadership Consultant mentorship workshop?
 - ▷ getting to know your partner's upbringing, interests, goals for the semester?
 - ▷ finding resources on campus to help your partner?
-

- ▷ acknowledging your own privilege, and discussing biases (race, gender, sexuality, etc.) that may affect your partner's success and relationships with others?
- ▷ contacting professors or community members in your field of interest?
- ▷ developing a plan for a successful semester?

Pittsburgh Bucket List

This is a list of activities you and a mentor or partner can complete together. The point is to get the two of you to experience some of the fun things Pittsburgh has to offer while becoming more familiar with your community--both CMU and Pittsburgh alike!

Activities to Try!

- Borrow a friend's bike (or pay a low hourly rate to use a "Healthy Ride" from a public Bike Share station) and explore the Three Rivers Heritage bike trail on the shore of the Monongahela River.
 - Take a tour of the Carnegie Museum of Art and/or Natural History (free with your CMU student ID!).
 - Take a bus to the Strip District on a Saturday morning. Find the Market Outlet - a discount grocery store - and pick up some fresh fruits or veggies for cheap.
 - Sign up for a free library card at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh to check out books, music, movies, and more for free.
 - On a warm fall day, hang out and wade in the Water Steps on the North Shore.
 - Pick a destination (any destination!) around the city, and use your student ID to hitch a free ride on a Port Authority Bus.
 - Use your student ID to see Phipps Conservatory for free. There is a Fall show in October and a Christmas show that starts after Thanksgiving.
 - Learn 3 Pittsburghese phrases (and use them in a conversation!).
 - Join a community service / volunteer group. Visit JustServe.org for some ideas.
 - Have a sandwich at Primanti Bros OR Try a food item "Pittsburgh-Style"
 - Go to the Oakmont Bakery or Peace, Love, and Little Donuts in Oakland or the Strip District
 - Use your CMU ID to ride the Duquesne Incline for free! See the great sights of Pittsburgh from the heights of Mt. Washington.
 - Hear the internationally-acclaimed Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra for only \$10 with your student ID.
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- Go to [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com) and find a Pittsburgh Meetup group that has interest similar to your own. It's a great way to meet new people who have similar interests.
- Together, come up with your own "bucket list" based on things you like to do!

My Pittsburgh Bucket List
