

Dealing with “Problem” Students

Dealing with students whose in-class conduct is unacceptable or undesirable presents unusual challenges. Methods necessarily vary depending upon the personality of the instructor, the classroom environment, and the exact nature of the behavior. Consultation with department chairs and senior faculty members should be pursued both proactively and when dealing with existing problem students.

When a student’s classroom conduct becomes a matter of concern, it is useful to determine if the conduct is merely irritating, is disruptive, or is dangerous. Conduct which distracts other students and/or interferes with the orderly conduct of the class is *disruptive*. Ultimately, the best solution is to seek to prevent students from displaying disruptive behavior. One way to discourage such behavior is for the instructor to state clearly on the first day of class exactly his/her expectations are regarding classroom conduct. This can be done through the use of an appropriate provision in the course syllabus that will serve as a starting point for a detailed discussion of what is and what is not acceptable behavior. To emphasize the importance of appropriate behavior in class, such a provision can reference the potential of both disciplinary and academic sanctions for disruptive behavior. An example of such a provision is as follows:

Classroom Conduct: All class members will be expected to treat others with civility and respect and to conduct themselves during class sessions in a way that does not unreasonably interfere with the opportunity of other students to learn. Intentional disruption of or interference with class activities constitutes misconduct under the University’s Student Code of Conduct and may subject the student to disciplinary action. It may also result in a deduction of up to ____ points from the student’s final average for the course.

Some observers recommend involving students in setting the rules for classroom conduct, while others suggest having students sign a “contract” specifically agreeing to abide by stated rules of conduct.

Probably the most common example of disruptive classroom behavior involves students who talk among themselves, typically about matters unrelated to the class. At a minimum, these “discussions” serve as a distraction to other students in the vicinity. In some cases, it may be sufficient for the instructor to simply look at and/or walk toward those students. If that response fails to stop the talking, consideration should be given to addressing the class at large, reminding them that, if students have a question, they are to raise their hands to be recognized so that their questions can be answered in an orderly fashion permitting everyone to benefit from hearing both the question and the answer. Conversations among students should be deferred until after class.

If the “discussions” continue, the instructor might communicate directly with the offending students by e-mail or by a hand-delivered note, indicating that the conduct is regarded by the instructor as in violation of classroom conduct standards. Finally, the instructor might arrange a private meeting with the students to make it clear that the activities are considered

distracting and that they are interfering with the primary purpose of the class, teaching and learning.

If, despite the use of remedial measures mentioned above, a student persistently engages in disruptive conduct or if a student without a prior history engages in severely disruptive actions, more serious responses should be considered. These might include a written warning informing the student of the consequences of such conduct, negotiation of a voluntary withdrawal from the course, and/or referral of the matter to the student Judicial Affairs Officer in the Office of the Dean of Students for disciplinary proceedings under the Code of Student Conduct. In an intolerable case of disruptive behavior, the student may be ordered to leave the classroom. Such a measure should rarely be invoked and should be for the duration of that class only. Ordering a student to leave the classroom must be followed by immediate consultation with the department chair and others, as appropriate, in order to develop a proper plan to resolve the situation. In such cases, it is also recommended that assistance be obtained from the Dean of Students, the Counseling Center, and the Office of Counsel.

Dangerous behavior involves actions, including serious threats, that create a risk of harm to students and/or the faculty member. When confronted by dangerous behavior, the Campus Police should be called at once and the class dismissed. Following such an incident, several options should be considered. First, the matter should ordinarily be referred to the Judicial Affairs Officer for the initiation of disciplinary charges, such as “disruption of University activity,” “physical abuse or violence, etc.” The processing of disciplinary charges ordinarily follows a “regular” track under which a resolution of the charges may take several weeks or longer, depending on whether a hearing is required. An “expedited” track is available, however, based upon “exigent” circumstances in which the student’s continued presence on campus “poses a substantial threat to persons (including himself/herself) or property or to normal institutional functions.” Under this track, the Dean of Students may suspend the student on an interim basis pending the outcome of the normal disciplinary proceeding. If a student has been suspended and continues to present problems, a “last resort” option might be to seek a criminal trespass order that will subject the student to criminal sanctions if found in specified areas of the campus. The Office of Counsel should be consulted to evaluate whether such an order is appropriate and for assistance in obtaining the order.

The most seldom used response to disruptive behavior is the University’s mental health withdrawal policy. This policy provides for involuntarily withdrawing a student’s enrollment where his/her disruptive or harmful behavior is caused by a mental or emotional disorder. Both non-emergency and emergency procedures are provided for under this policy. Resort to use of this policy requires coordination with the Dean of Students, the Counseling Center, and the Office of Counsel.

Finally, on the other side of the spectrum is student behavior that does not rise to the level of directly interfering with teaching or learning efforts but is nevertheless annoying or ***irritating*** to the instructor. A student’s reading of a newspaper or magazine, sleeping, “texting” on a cell phone, playing games or surfing the web on a laptop computer, etc. might fall within this category of conduct. One option for the instructor, of course, would be to simply ignore the

behavior. An instructor who feels that it should be addressed, however, may choose again from a range of possible responses. General reminders to the class as a whole about standards of classroom etiquette, perhaps citing the conduct at issue as one among several examples of non-compliance, may be helpful. Sending an e-mail to the same effect to the entire class via ANGEL is another option. If further action is necessary, a more pointed e-mail to the particular student, or a face-to-face meeting with the student may be effective. An instructor who does intend to enforce standards in this area would be well-advised to include a further statement in the syllabus, perhaps as follows:

Students should also understand that other behavior, while perhaps not directly interfering with the rights of others to a positive classroom experience, such as sleeping in class, reading non-class materials, habitually coming to class late, etc., are impolite and do not show proper respect for the instructor or other students. The instructor reserves the right, after informing a student about such inappropriate behavior, to penalize the student if it continues by deducting up to ____ points from the student's final numerical grade.

Managing classroom misbehavior by students is neither a simple nor a pleasant task. However, there are ways to reduce the likelihood of such conduct and a wide range of responses. The key is to prepare in advance and to respond consistently and appropriately. Wise counsel from colleagues can be most helpful.