

# **Handling Disruptive Students in the Classroom**

**Provided by Luzerne County Community College, Campus Safety & Security**

On college campuses, the term “disruptive behavior” is most commonly associated with large-scale demonstrations and protests. There is another form of misconduct on campus which is seldom reported by the media, but causes individual faculty members considerable personal turmoil: disruptive behavior in the classroom.

The climate of higher education has changed over the past few decades, and faculty are now faced with serious issues of classroom behavior that were previously of little concern. Unfortunately, instructors sometimes fail to address the disruptive behavior of students because they may: (1) be unsure how to handle the situation, (2) fear legal or physical retaliation from the student, (3) be afraid the student may become more agitated, (4) conclude that reporting the disruptive behavior will cause emotional pain to an already fragile or unstable person and/or (5) fear that confronting student misconduct may result in negative student evaluation of the course. However, failure to address disruptive behavior is likely to encourage further disruption, and it sends the message that such behavior is not problematic and that college personnel are indifferent to it.

Our goal is to help you to confidently, fairly, and safely address incidents of disruption in a systematic manner that discourages such behavior in the future while retaining the dignity of the classroom environment.

## **Examples of Disruptive Behavior**

Disruptive behavior is defined as behaviors that hamper the ability of instructors to teach and students to learn. Common examples of disruptive behaviors include, but are not limited to:

- Eating in class
- Ringing cell phone
- Monopolizing classroom discussions
- Failing to respect the rights of other students to express their viewpoints
- Talking when the instructor or others are speaking
- Constant questions or interruptions which interfere with the instructor’s presentation
- Overt inattentiveness (e.g., sleeping or reading the paper in class)
- Creating excessive noise with papers, book bags, etc.
- Frequently entering class late or leaving early
- Use of cell phones or other electronic devices in the classroom
- Inordinate or inappropriate demands for time and attention

More extreme examples of disruptive behavior include, but are not limited to:

- Use of profanity or derogatory language
- Intoxication or other suspected substance impairments
- Verbal abuse (e.g., taunting, badgering, intimidation)
- Harassment (e.g., use of “fighting words,” stalking)
- Threats to harm oneself or others
- Physical violence (e.g., shoving, grabbing, assault, use of weapons)

It is important to remember that conditions attributed to physical or psychological disabilities are not considered a legitimate excuse for disruptive behavior.

## Guidelines For Dealing with Disruptive Students

### *An Ounce of Prevention...*

**The best thing faculty can do to address disruptive student behavior is to create an environment in which it is unlikely to occur. For example, an instructor should:**

- Serve as a model by demonstrating appropriate, respectful, and responsible behavior in all interactions with students.
- Use the class syllabus to inform students in writing of standards and expectations for classroom conduct and of possible consequences for disruptive behavior.
- Devote time during the first class to review this information in the syllabus.
- Consult with the Student Development Office and Counseling as situations occur to discuss potential options and referrals.

## Responding to Disruptive Behavior

**Some general suggestions for dealing with disruptive student behavior are:**

- A general word of caution directed to the class rather than at an identified student may effectively deter the disruptive behavior.
- Deal with the disruptive behavior immediately. Ignoring behavior will likely cause it to increase.
- Work against the human tendency to take the disruptive behavior personally. The behavior usually has little to do with you, and you are simply the unfortunate target.
- If the student's behavior is irritating, but not particularly disruptive, consider talking with the student privately after class. If you feel unsafe being alone with the student for some reason, request that a colleague or your department chair attend the meeting.
- If it is absolutely necessary to deal with a student's behavior during class, you should calmly but firmly inform the student that the behavior is disruptive and ask that it be stopped. Example: "Your use of your cell phone is disrupting the class. Please end your conversation now and refrain from in-class phone calls in the future."
- If the disruptive behavior continues during either the present or some future class, meet with the student in private to discuss that the continued behavior may result in student disciplinary action. Always document the incident and any conversations with the student in writing and forward the documentation to the Student Development Office at 570-740-0344 and the Center Director, if applicable.

If the student continues the disruptive behavior despite receiving a warning, inform the student that he/she will be referred for disciplinary action and instruct the student to leave the classroom. Following the class, the instructor should contact the Student Development Office (x7344), the Department Chairperson and the Center Director and provide pertinent information about the student's behavior.

- If the student refuses to leave the classroom after being instructed to do so, the instructor may choose to adjourn class for the day.
- Keep a log of the date, time and nature of all incidents of disruptive behavior and any meetings you have with the student. Document incidents and meetings immediately while specifics and details are still fresh in your memory. **Remember, undocumented disruptions never happened.**

## **If the Student Seems Dangerous.....**

**If you sense that a disruptive situation is escalating and that a student may pose a physical threat to you or other students:**

- Maintain a safe distance, and do not turn your back to the student.
- Unless you are under physical attack, do not touch the student or the student's belongings. Initiating physical touch may be interpreted by an agitated student as an assault.
- Use a calm, non-confrontational approach to defuse the situation.  
Example: "Please lower your voice. We can't continue to talk if you threaten me."
- If a threat of harm is present, do not threaten disciplinary action or police intervention. If you have already mentioned these, work to refocus the student's attention away from the future consequences of her/his behavior. Example: "You've raised some important issues. I need to consult with my department chair to see what we can do. In the meantime, you are excused from the rest of class for today until I am able to address your concerns".

**If the disruptive student threatens to harm you, other students, or her/himself:**

- Immediately dismiss the class and contact Campus Security (ext. 7304) or the Center Director. Campus Security and/or the Director will investigate the threats, warn intended victims if necessary, and determine whether the student may have committed a criminal offense warranting law enforcement involvement.
- After the danger has passed, consult with the Student Development Office regarding the process, and determine the appropriate actions to be initiated.
- If a student's behavior is disruptive or threatening to the point there is a faculty request to administratively withdraw him/her from the class, the case will be reviewed by the Student Development Office to determine the outcome. The outcome could include a recommendation of withdrawal from a class and other more serious sanctions.

Always remember that instructors have the absolute right to tell a student who is disrupting class to leave the class for THAT particular class period. In extreme cases, Campus Security or police can be called to assist in removing the student. Instructors may not remove a student from the entire course without due process for the student.

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