



**RESPONDING TO
DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR
IN THE CLASSROOM**

Although faculty may not want to think about the possibility of students being disruptive, it happens and there is a need to address such student behavior in a timely way. To facilitate your efforts in managing disruptive incidents in the classroom, the following guidelines are offered for your consideration.

RESPONDING TO DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR IN THE CLASSROOM

Who defines what constitutes disruptive behavior?

The course instructor defines disruption by establishing the nature of the learning environment and what is not permissible behavior. The class environment includes any class section, lab, traditional classroom or online class.

CONSIDER THIS DOCUMENTED EXAMPLE OF DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR:

Discussion for a course takes place online. A student assigned to a discussion group sends notes to other group members that are insulting and have nothing to do with the course topic. The students approach their instructor because they fear that the group's work and grade will suffer due to the one student.

INSTRUCTOR'S RESPONSE:

The instructor identifies the disruptive student and discontinues the student's sign-on for the class. The instructor informs the student of this action and communicates directly about what is considered appropriate behavior for class and class discussion. The instructor also clarifies the student's role in the assigned group. The student indicates that he/she had been kidding and promises not to make inappropriate remarks in future discussions. The instructor re-activates the student's sign-on for the online section of the course. No further incidents are reported.

How can an instructor set appropriate “ground rules” for class behavior?

Setting the classroom tone is done through the syllabus and during discussion of course requirements on the first day of class. It is recommended that specific information be included in the syllabus about classroom expectations. Include in writing and state in the first class your expectations regarding topics including:

- Use of laptops in class
- Absences, excuses, lateness (and their impact on grades)
- Use of cell phones (texting, for example)
- Speaking in class, as well as preferred mode for classroom participation
- How you prefer to handle disagreements with class guidelines, mandates, assignments.



CONSIDER THESE EXAMPLES/TOPICS FOR INCLUSION IN YOUR SYLLABUS:

- Be in the classroom before the class starting time. Late arrivals and early departures are very disruptive. To be sure, there are times when lateness is unavoidable, but chronic lateness will have an effect on your final grade.
- There will be times during class discussions when views *will* be expressed that are different from your own. Discussion, debate and disagreement, done with respect, are an important part of the academic process.
- Having private conversations during lecture and class discussions is disrespectful to the instructor and other students. It's also very distracting. Singling someone out in class can be embarrassing, but if he/she is being disruptive, it will be done.
- Any question that is seriously asked will be seriously considered. There really are no dumb questions. Everyone is encouraged to participate, but it's also understood that some are not comfortable speaking in class, and that's also respected.

Although these guidelines may seem obvious, it is important to list basic rules and requirements. If there is occasion to confront behavior that is disruptive, or there is a question regarding final grade and grading guidelines, what you list in your syllabus becomes the standard from which you work. Do not include or list anything that you are not willing or able to enforce. The very first instance of disruptive behavior requires action or your authority may be compromised and students will not take the rules seriously. In addition, it is best to apply rules consistently for all students.

We recommend that you quote University policy or direct students to where these guidelines may be found online.

EXAMPLES FROM AN ACTUAL SYLLABUS:

- The **textbook is required**. Do not try to take the course without your own copy.
- **No phones – texting – websurfing – PSP'ing – DS'ing, etc. during class**. Use will result in being marked absent for that class. Use during a test will result in a failing grade for the test.
- **Students are expected to take a major responsibility for their own learning in this course. I will not review the entire chapter under discussion each week**. The focus will be on those aspects of the chapter that are difficult to understand and those that have real-life implications.
- **Code of Conduct, Section 1, Rules of Student Conduct #17 states that the following behavior is prohibited:**
Disorderly or disruptive conduct that interferes with the normal operations of the University or infringes on the rights of others and the University **Bulletin**, under Classroom Discipline, states: Any instructor may exclude from attendance any student who, in the instructor's judgment, has seriously impaired the class's ability to achieve the objectives of the course. The student may appeal the instructor's action to the department or school via the department's grievance procedure. If the student is not satisfied with the ruling or recommendation emerging from the grievance hearings, an appeal may be brought to the appropriate dean.
- School closing — In the event that school is officially closed or class is canceled for any reason, be prepared to make up all missed work. **If school is closed on an exam day, be prepared to take the exam at the next regularly scheduled class meeting.**

- If you need special accommodations or adaptations, come see me with the necessary documentation from the Services for Students with Disabilities Office. It is the student's responsibility to inform the instructor of needs/accommodations ___ days before the assignment or grade is due. This will ensure that proper arrangements are made
- I will always make time for a student who wishes to meet with me. **Very, very important: If you are having trouble in the class, see me right away. Don't wait until a week before the end of the semester.**

When student behavior disrupts class, how can/should the behavior be addressed?

Address behavior in an open manner with the student, preferably one on one. Ask the student to stay after class to discuss his/her behavior, or ask the student to come to your office hours to discuss the behavior. Give the student an opportunity to address and redress the behavior. The student needs to hear what action will be taken if the behavior recurs. It is not uncommon for students to rant about something on e-mail, only to be embarrassed and chagrined when confronted about the inappropriate content and its impact on others. If there are questions, do not hesitate to consult with others such as the Office of the Ombudsman or the Dean of Students Office. Instructors often expect that the student will understand behavioral norms. However, success is optimized if you address disruptive behavior in a direct manner. If you are not comfortable seeing the student alone, have someone sit with you in the meeting. This often helps when needing to confirm information conveyed to the student.

A common mistake is to ignore the tone of an e-mail or series of notes, and to address only the specific question or content. Note the inappropriate tone of the communication if you choose to address the behavior in writing. Grant the student an opportunity to discuss the behavior with you if the student continues to communicate in a belligerent or disrespectful manner. Since it may be possible that the student is not able to assess the impact of his or her communication style, have another person with you as you meet with the student. Again, set clear and concrete expectations and the norm expected. Give examples of how the student's question might be appropriately phrased.

EXAMPLE OF RESPONSE:

Thank you for meeting with me. Let's talk about your recent notes to me. (Build rapport with student and then note the impact of the e-mails.) I found that the tone of your e-mails is out of line with what we expect of the student-instructor relationship. Would you tell me what you are trying to convey? I need to ask that you keep your comments to me and others specific to the class project. We will talk again and determine what you may need if it is difficult for you to communicate as needed. Are we in agreement? If you wish to discuss this with someone else, feel free to contact _____ (chair of department or program chair).

How should an instructor address behavior that does not improve?

If you have addressed the issue and the disruptive behavior continues, you may ask student to leave the class. This is done while the student is in the class. Follow up with an e-mail to the student and inform the department chair so that your follow up of the incident is properly documented. The department may need to consider moving the student to another course or section, or some other arrangement (e.g., referral to Student Conduct Office, or other). If an argument ensues, refer the student to your syllabus, and/or the University Bulletin for policy. If the student does not leave, you may need to call University Police.

EXAMPLE OF A VERBAL REQUEST:

Mr./Ms. A., I have asked you numerous times today to refrain from yelling out answers and comments. We need to continue this class. I must ask you to leave at this time. I will ask you to meet with me before you return to this class. (Wait until student leaves before continuing class.)

NEED FOR A WRITTEN FOLLOW-UP:

It is recommended you write a formal note to your department chair and/or dean that you asked the student to leave class due to disruptive behavior. Resolving the behavior involves determining with others whether the student is able to control/change behavior, and how you will reintegrate the student after his/her exit from the classroom.

CONTINUUM OF BEHAVIOR

Distressed vs. Disturbing vs. Disruptive vs. Dangerous

General warning signs of students in distress are listed below. It can be helpful to think of students in the following categories, which may overlap:

- **Distressed:** The student is upset but not beyond a normal level and not having a particularly significant affect on many others. With these students, it can be helpful to have a brief conversation indicating that you see that they are upset, and mention the possibility of counseling (see section below on referral).
- **Disturbing:** The student is clearly having significant problems in functioning, is behaving in an unusual way, or is highly distraught. The student may be upsetting to others around him or her, but it is not necessarily disrupting the overall academic environment. In this situation is important not only to encourage the student to seek help for his or her own sake, but also to address his/her impact on others. This can be done initially through individual conversations about his/her impact on others and discussions about appropriate guidelines for, or limits on, behavior. It may also be helpful to contact your department chair or the Counseling Center at 777-2772 for further consultation.
- **Disruptive:** The student's behavior is interfering with the academic environment for other students or for the instructor. Examples would include yelling in class, preventing other students from doing lab work or dominating class discussion without responding to limits set by the instructor. Minor disruptions can sometimes

be handled through classroom management strategies. Handling more significant disruptions may involve requiring a student to leave the classroom, filing a report with the appropriate dean or department head to assess permanent removal from class or to consider other modifications, and/or referral to the Office of Student Conduct. It may be helpful to bring this situation to the attention of the Students of Concern Committee by contacting the Dean of Students Office if you are unsure about next steps at dos@binghamton.edu or 777-2804. If the situation involves intense disruptions, consider contacting University Police by dialing 911 from a cell phone or 777-2393 from a campus phone.

- Non-students are not allowed in the class unless by permission of the instructor. Should anyone enter class (even to observe) the instructor may ask the person to leave the classroom. Contact University Police should they not do so in a reasonable manner.
- **Dangerous:** The student implicitly or explicitly makes comments indicating he or she is a threat to self or others. In this situation it is important to get assistance as soon as possible. Faculty and staff can call University Police by dialing 911 from a cell phone or 777-2393 from a campus phone. If the student has made a direct or explicit reference to harming him/herself or others, it is particularly important to contact someone for assistance immediately.

Unsure of what to do?

When you are uncertain of what to do, where to go or what policies apply, contact the University ombudsman to have a confidential conversation to assess options and to strategize about how to raise a systemic concern related to these types of issues. Conversations with the ombudsman are confidential and “off the record” except when there appears to be an imminent threat of serious harm. Contact the University ombudsman at 777-2388.

The Dean of Students Office (777-2804) is another place to start when exploring steps to take. The Dean of Students Office works to coordinate services for students, and communicates with various offices across campus to help assess the level of the problem and resources available to you and the student.

Follow-up planning

Work with your department or program chair to create a follow-up plan and/or to reintegrate the student into class. Document everything.

When the Code of Student Conduct is violated

University Police and the Dean of Students will refer behavioral issues to the Office of Student Conduct.

Undetermined situations

If you are uncertain of how to classify a situation, but you feel it needs to be addressed (i.e. behavior or reported behavior leaves you uneasy and concerned, you can't put a label on it, but it doesn't seem right), contact any of the above-noted offices. Start with where you feel the most comfortable and work from there. The most important thing is to trust your instincts and report the issue.

Be aware of your own limits

Individual faculty and staff may have personal limits to their comfort level in listening to others in distress. Faculty and staff may very well run into these limits before they hit the ethical or legal limits for giving help. If you are getting uncomfortable, pay attention to this sign and set limits with the student, and/or refer the student for counseling. Do not promise to keep secrets told to you by the student. Be alert to a student asking more of you than is appropriate. Keeping that student/professor boundary will help, especially if the student is disturbed or shows signs of not understanding normal boundaries. Share e-mails with your chair or department head and consult as needed.

Services and roles of the University Counseling Center

The University Counseling Center provides the following services that can be helpful in managing difficult situations with students:

- Crisis counseling
- Ongoing counseling
- Consultation to faculty and staff
- Mandated evaluation of students at the request of the dean of students

Confidentiality when consulting with the University Counseling Center

Confidentiality status of information students have given in counseling: This information is confidential and can only be disclosed with written permission to release information, or in the event of a life-threatening crisis or child abuse. If you are calling about a student who has told you she or he is in counseling, understand that the counselor who consults with you will not give any information *about the student*. However, a counselor can still provide consultation to you based on the information YOU give to them.

What resources are available to help instructors when students exhibit disruptive behavior?

Determining what resources are appropriate for an individual student may help him/her change behavior. You are not able to mandate assessments or reports from others to help determine next steps, but you can refer the student to resources and consult with others about how or when to reintegrate the student into class.

AVAILABLE RESOURCES INCLUDE:

- Chair or department head: to document behavior, strategize management and assist in confrontation of behavior.
- Dean of Students Liz Droz at 777-2804, or Assistant Dean of Students Milton Chester at 777-6210: to help strategize management and determine if further administrative action is needed.
- Ombudsman Dawn Osborne-Adams at 777-2388: if you wish to discuss what administrative supports are needed or to strategize how to use all University resources to assist. The ombudsman's office may be helpful if behavior seems manageable, but there is a need for reaching a "common ground" with the student.
- University Counseling Center at 777-2772: when there is a sense that the student has a psychological disorder or disability. This should not deter you from confirming class norms with the student, but the Counseling Center can help facilitate a referral for the student. See pamphlet on how to help a student who is disruptive and may have other issues affecting behavior at www.binghamton.edu/counseling/faculty/faculty-guide.html.

- University Police at 777-2393: when you don't feel safe. When you want help assessing threat level or safety needs. University Police will investigate situations, document any complaints and assist with assuring safety measures as needed. The police can work with you on any safety plan required.

For more information, contact Dean of Students Elizabeth Droz, Binghamton University, UUW-204 at droz@binghamton.edu or 607-777-2804.

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