Classroom Disruption An Advisory from the Dean of Students Office

Classrooms, whether they are online or held in person, deserve to be free of disruption. The classroom could extend to those course-related discussions between an instructor, teaching assistant, or graduate assistant and a student during office hours. In an effort to be proactive and support education in the classroom, the Dean of Students Office offers the following advisory to assist instructors who may encounter a disruptive student.

What is disruptive behavior?
Disruptive behavior is behavior that a reasonable person would view as substantially or repeatedly interfering with normal class activities. This includes in-person and online classes, and course-related discussion between a student and instructor/teaching assistant/graduate assistant during office hours.

Examples of Disruptive Behaviors
- Repeatedly entering and leaving the classroom without authorization.
- Making loud or distracting noises.
- Persisting in speaking without being recognized.
- Resorting to physical threats or personal insults.

How should I respond to a student who is being disruptive?
Remain calm and know who to call for assistance. Find someone to stay with the student while calls are made. Remember that it is NOT your responsibility to provide the professional help needed for troubled or disruptive students. You need only make the necessary contact on their behalf.

The Dos
- Share with your students your explicit expectations for conduct in the classroom, sooner rather than later.
- Serve as a role model for the conduct you expect from students.
- If inappropriate behavior is occurring, offer general words or caution (e.g., we have too many conversations happening at the moment. Let’s all focus on one topic).

The Don’ts
- DON’T make it a public argument or use harsh language.
- DON’T blame, ridicule, or use sarcasm.
- DON’T use force or threats of force (except in immediate self-defense).
- DON’T ignore your own limitations.

If the behavior is inappropriate, but not disruptive, speak with the student after class. Give the student a specific example of the behavior you want them to modify or eliminate.
- In the rare case when you need to address the student during class, do it firmly and with respect.
- A student who persists in disrupting a class may be directed to leave the classroom for the remainder of the period.
- If disruption is serious, and other reasonable measures have failed, the class may be adjourned and the University Police called (852-6111).
- Document and report disruptive incidents promptly, even if they seem minor.

Examples of Disruptive Behaviors
- Excessive absences or inconsistent attendance.
- Unusual or changed patterns of interaction—avoiding participation, excessive anxiety when called upon, domination of discussions.
- Other characteristics that suggest the student is having trouble managing stress—depressed, lethargic, or rapid speech; slurred speech; red eyes; marked change in personal dress and hygiene; sleeping during class.
- Repeated requests for special consideration, prompting the request.
- New or repeated behavior which interferes with the instructor’s effective management of the immediate environment.
- Unusual or exaggerated emotional responses which appear inappropriate to the situation, irritability, or outbursts of anger.

What are some signs that a student may be in distress?
A student in distress may not be disruptive to others, but may exhibit behaviors which indicate something is wrong. Behaviors may include:
- Serious grade problems or a dramatic change in performance.
- Excessive absences or inconsistent attendance.
- Unusual or changed patterns of interaction—avoiding participation, excessive anxiety when called upon, domination of discussions.
- Other characteristics that suggest the student is having trouble managing stress—depressed, lethargic, or rapid speech; slurred speech; red eyes; marked change in personal dress and hygiene; sleeping during class.
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What types of warning signs are most serious?
Severely troubled or disruptive students may exhibit behaviors that signify an immediate crisis and necessitate emergency care such as:
- Highly disruptive behavior (e.g., hostility, aggression, violence).
- Inability to communicate clearly (e.g., garbled, slurred speech; unconnected, disjointed, or rambling thoughts).
- Loss of contact with reality (e.g., seeing or hearing things that others cannot see or hear; beliefs or actions greatly at odds with reality or probability).
- Stalking behaviors (threatening behavior, unwanted advances or communication).
- Inappropriate communications (e.g., including threatening letters, e-mail messages, harassment).
- Overly suicidal thoughts (expression of a specific plan including referring to suicide as a current option or in a written assignment, statements of hopelessness, death allusions, thoughts of burdening others, and/or not belonging).
- Threats to harm self or others.

How should I respond to a student that is troubled or showing signs of distress?
For students who are mildly or moderately troubled, you can choose to respond to them in the following ways:
- Deal directly with the behavior/problem according to classroom protocol.
- Address the situation privately with the individual(s).
- Consult with a colleague, Department Head, the Dean of Students Office, the Counseling Center, or Campus Health Services.
- Refer the student to an appropriate University resource. See referral phone numbers in this publication for help.

When a student expresses a direct threat to themselves or others, or acts in bizarre, highly irrational, or disruptive way, call University Police at 852-6111.