

MAINTAINING A CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT CONDUCIVE TO LEARNING

Responding to Disruptive or Threatening Student Behavior

On any large metropolitan college campus, the task of creating and maintaining productive contexts for student learning can be a challenge. Within the classroom, good teaching and students who are interested in learning are central to the educational process. However, today more than ever before, faculty find it necessary to consider the impact of student behavior as an additional element in the learning process. The publication "Responding to Disruptive or Threatening Student Behavior: A Guide for Faculty" at http://www.csun.edu/studentaffairs/pdfs/responding_to_disruptive_students_feb2011.pdf was written to assist you in developing strategies to manage inappropriate student behavior in a classroom setting. The goal of this resource is to provide you with clear responses to the kinds of questions that arise when you have encountered a concern that must be immediately addressed.

What is disruptive behavior within a classroom or other learning environment?

Disruptive behavior is any behavior that in your view substantially and materially disrupts a classroom or other learning activity such as field or lab work. Examples of disruptive behavior include challenging the instructor's authority (vs. ideas); excessive talking; unauthorized use of personal electronic devices such as pagers, cell phones, and PDA's; coming to class under the influence of drugs or alcohol; and threats of physical harm to others.

How can disruptive behavior be discouraged?

Set and communicate both academic and behavioral expectations (including the Student Conduct Code) through classroom discussion and a well-written syllabus. Model the behaviors students are expected to exhibit. Firmly and fairly address disruptive behaviors when they first emerge.

As the instructor you are the primary source of authority in your classroom. Appropriate behavioral standards fairly applied are strongly supported by students. If you observe inappropriate or disruptive behavior, a "word of caution" will be a good start. Refer to the syllabus and comment on the importance of maintaining a civil and respectful classroom learning environment (e.g., "We have too many private conversations going on right now, so let's all try to focus on the same topic.").

If the behavior in question is irritating but not disruptive, consider speaking with the student after class. Some students are unaware of distracting mannerisms or habits that could appear intentionally offensive or disruptive.

What should I do when faced with persistent disruption?

A student who persists in being disruptive can be directed to leave the classroom for the remainder of the class period. The student should be told the reason(s) for this action, and be given an opportunity to

discuss the matter as soon as practicable. Inform your department chair of the situation and report the incident as quickly as possible to the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs. Typically, a student who has been asked to leave class should not be permitted to return until the student has communicated with the Student Conduct Coordinator.

What should I do if the disruption is serious, including actual or threatened physical harm to others?

If a student refuses to leave class when directed, or the student threatens the well being of others or him/herself, consider adjourning the class and immediately contact University Police for assistance. In all such cases, notify both your department chair and the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs.

What should I do if I believe the disruption is caused by a student who appears in psychological or emotional distress?

Although uncommon, disruptive behavior can occur when students are experiencing emotional disturbances or a disabling psychological condition that is not being effectively managed. While the above strategies may work to control the immediate problem, a more lasting solution may require the assistance of other campus colleagues. University Counseling Services is willing to consult with you in instances such as these.

Should I report an instance of disruptive behavior that appears to have been resolved?

A fair and firm response will often be sufficient to bring an end to disruptive behavior and no formal reporting will be necessary. This is particularly true when dealing with new students who may be immature and primarily in need of guidance. However, some behaviors are so inappropriate that they warrant documentation with the University, even though the situation appears under control. While there is no hard and fast rule, if the behavior was "alarming" to you, send an email or personally contact the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs to report what occurred. Reported disruptions are typically discussed with the members of the University's Student Behavior Intervention Team, which includes representatives from University Counseling, University Police, Student Housing and the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs.

Resources:

Student Conduct Coordinator

(818) 677-2391

University Police

(818) 677-2111

University Counseling Services

(818) 677-2366

Based in part on "The Well Mannered Classroom" by University Counseling Services, University of Iowa.