



## How To Series

### Classroom Management

January 2015

# How to Handle Disruptive Students

## The Nature of Disruptive Behavior

### It Starts With The Syllabus

An instructor's ability to successfully handle disruptions in the classroom begins with establishing a culture of civility and respect. Such a culture is established with students through multiple means to include: the tone of the syllabus, the integrity the instructor brings to the classroom, the voiced expectations for student behavior, expressing an interest and caring about student success.



The syllabus is crucial in setting a culture of civility and respect. Here the instructor has the opportunity to reflect on how the class will operate, what is expected of students in terms of common respect, civility, and active encouragement of diversity of thought and ideas. The harsh tone of a syllabus focused solely on penalties injects a negative aura just as the class is getting started. A balanced, professional approach reflects an environment of mutual respect. While it should include responsibilities (both for students and the instructor) and consequences for inappropriate behaviors (e.g., missing exams, lack of attendance, academic dishonesty), the syllabus should be balanced with encouragement (e.g., a section listing a process for successful student performance), and the instructor's perspective on reinforcing a desired constructive environment for learning (e.g., a section on the desired classroom environment and/or culture).



There are many types and causes of disruptive student behavior. The University has a [standard of conduct](#) that reflects disruptive behavior.

At times disruptive behavior may be easily attributed to a trigger while at other times the behavior seems to just “come out of the blue.” The nature of disruptive behavior can be active (e.g., constant interrupting of others) or passive (e.g., sleeping in class) reflecting both verbal and/or non-verbal behavior. It can be of a rebellious nature, often intentional, or simply reflect a negative emotional reaction.



While some disruptive behaviors are of a relatively mild nature (e.g., side conversations during a lecture) and should be recognized as such, some can be intense and have a strong impact on student learning (e.g., a student confronting another student inappropriately, a student distracting others by playing games on a computer, students cheating on an exam).

Sometimes without realizing it, the instructor may trigger the disruptive behavior by their actions. Students commonly complain about and become frustrated with teachers who:

- Are rude to students, especially in front of the entire class
- Frequently cancel classes or arrive late to class
- Fail to show up for announced office hours
- Fail to stop students from cheating
- Fail or are delayed in responding to emails or phone calls
- Require purchasing, and then ignore expensive textbooks
- Test them on material not covered in the book or in class



These types of actions by the instructor may lead to significant frustration on the part of students. Sometimes students have not gained the maturity to handle frustrations in a professional manner. Sometimes emotional response gets in the way of rational behavior, leading to immature disruptive behavior.



Because the classroom is a social context, disruptive behavior may be triggered by other students' disrespect, incivility, or needing to appear superior. Students who are on the receiving end may not know an appropriate way to respond and thus respond in a disruptive manner.

Regardless of the cause, disruption in the classroom, indeed, disruption of the learning process, must be confronted.

## How should disruptive behavior be confronted?

Disruptive!

... continued

Confronting disruptive behaviors in class can be thought of as a staged process. Where you enter and exit the stages may be a function of the severity of the disruption. The key is to remain calm, non-threatening, and respectful. You are the model. If you need to reinforce consequences, do so in an objective, matter-of-fact manner and refer to the agreed upon class standards.

**Stage 1:** Inform the class as a whole that this behavior is not appropriate and that it takes away from the learning of others. Remind them of agreed upon class standards.



**Stage 2:** During class, ask the disruptive student(s) directly in a calm and non-threatening manner to refrain from the behavior, that it is inappropriate and it is disrupting the

learning of other students. Remind them of agreed upon class standards.

**Stage 3:** Request a meeting with the student(s) during office hours. During the meeting, begin by acknowledging the student's emotion (e.g., frustration, anger, worry). Carefully and explicitly explain why the behavior is disruptive and how it is impacting the class environment. Then ask the student to reflect on their behavior by asking, "What do you think about what I have said?" Listen carefully as the students might provide a number of insights into their behavior including personal problems or health conditions. Do not argue with them, simply and clearly express the consequences of continued behavior of this nature and ask that it cease.

**Stage 4:** Follow up the meeting with a memo to the student documenting the nature of your conversation.

**Stage 5:** When the behavior continues, notify the appropriate resources (please refer to the next section).

## Method and resources to help with persistent or severe disruptive behavior

**Persistent disruptive behavior:** If employing the stages mentioned earlier do not appear to terminate the disruptive behavior, then a report filed with the [Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards](#) (SCSC) is the next step to take. Submitting an [incident report](#) or an [academic dishonesty report](#) is straightforward. This also applies to distraught students about whom you might have concerns. The SCSC staff handles these reports immediately and with confidentiality. General concerns about students (e.g., falling behind, lack of motivation) can be addressed this way as well.

**Angry or threatening disruptive behavior:** In the case of an angry or threatening student behavior, the following protocol is recommended.



1) If appropriate, attempt to lessen the intensity by acknowledging the emotion (e.g., anger, frustration), recommending that the parties involved take a deep breath and take turns explaining why each is upset (or a single individual is upset). Ask each person to paraphrase what the other person said and then react to what they heard. Reinforce a civil and mature response. Ask how we can professionally resolve the differences so that each person's interests are considered.

2) If the above calming strategy does not work, ask the individual(s) involved to leave the classroom and require them to visit with you in your office before they come back to class. Be firm but respectful.

3) If the student(s) refuses to leave, inform them that if they don't leave, your next call will be to UT Police (974.3111) and if appropriate, request that you and the remaining students exit the class. It is important that the other students not continue to be subjected to or threatened by a severe disruption. Report this behavior immediately to SCSC.