

# **Office of the VP for Student Life**

## **Best practices for managing disruptive behavior**

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### **Disruptive behavior in the classroom**

#### **Best practices for managing disruptive behavior**

### **Effective prevention**

Establishing norms helps prevent disruptive behavior and allows you to react effectively in the moment. In addition to using your syllabus to set academic expectations, you can also utilize it to create classroom behavioral expectations. The factors that constitute appropriate and inappropriate behavior are often dependent on the nature of class and faculty comfort level, and can vary widely from lectures to labs and across content areas. Faculty have found it helpful to:

- Outline both productive and disruptive types of behavior.
- Outline the process by which disruptive behavior will be addressed.
- Outline consequences for ongoing disruptive behavior.
- Verbally address classroom expectations regarding behavior on the first day of class. It is especially effective to talk about behavior you want to see, as well as the type that's disruptive.
- Model the type of behavior you expect from your class.

### **How to respond to a disruption, in the moment**

Your direct intervention will work for a majority of situations; however, some students and situations are ongoing and will require additional consultation and follow up. The departments and campus partners within Student Life are available to work with you on handling disruptive situations.

It is important to remember that if the disruption causes immediate concern for personal safety, do not hesitate to call UWPD.

### **What to do**

Stay calm and listen to student concerns – identifying the catalyst for disruption can help you address the situation in the moment or in a later meeting.

- Be steady, consistent and firm.
- Acknowledge the feelings of the individual.
- Remember that disruptive behavior is often caused by stress or frustration.
- Address the disruption individually, directly and immediately.
- Be specific about the behavior that is disruptive and set limits.
- Remove the student from that class session if the student does not comply with your actions. If the student does not leave after being asked to do so, you can call UWPD for backup.
- Ask the student to see you after class to address the disruption, explore the causes of the incident and discuss appropriate behavior.
- Pay attention to warning signs that the situation is nearing escalation toward violence.
- Be aware of your own limitations – operate within your own scope of comfort:
  - Faculty can contact UWPD and have the student removed from class.
  - Faculty can bring class to an end for the day.
  - Faculty can seek out additional resources and coaching to handle the disruptive student.

## What to avoid

- Do not allow the behavior to continue.
- Avoid making it a class issue – address only the student who is causing the disruption.
- Avoid an argument or shouting match.
- Do not blame or ridicule the student, or use sarcasm.
- Do not touch the student.

## Suggestions for intervening in a disruption

- Keep your focus on the student. Rather than say, “Class, we all know that talking during lecture is disruptive,” say, “Jane, your talking during class is disrupting the lecture and I need to ask you to stop.”
- Be clear about the behavior. If the student is talking out of turn, tell them. Rather than ask, “Do you have a question?” say, “Jane, now is not the time for discussion. There will be an opportunity for questions and debate at the end of the lecture.”
- Nip the situation in the bud, referring to the syllabus regarding expectation and behavior. “Jane, you will note that in the syllabus, talking during lecture is considered disruptive behavior. If I need to ask you to stop talking again, I will need to ask you to leave.”
- Distress is often the cause of a disruption. It is important to recognize the stress while still addressing the behavior. Rather than say, “John, you are clearly emotional right now and you

need to stop arguing,” say, “John, I can see that this topic has you upset; however, we need to bring this debate to a close.”

- If you need to ask the student to leave, do so clearly and directly. Rather than say, “Get out! Go! Get out of here!” say, “John, your behavior has exceeded what is acceptable for this class and it is time for you to leave. I will be in contact with you via email to discuss future class sessions.” At this point, it is a good idea to pause class until the student exits the room.

## What to do following a disruption

While many disruptions are minor and can be managed in the moment, it can be beneficial both to document the incident and follow up with the student. Documenting what you experienced and the steps you took will be helpful if you need to pursue a violation of the student conduct code. Clear communication with the student helps to set expectations and prevent further disruption. The following are suggestions to consider following an incident:

- Document the details about the incident, including the time/date/location, the behavior of the student, the actions you took and how the situation was resolved in the moment.
- For minor disruptions, an email can serve as both a tool to remedy behavior and to document the incident. In the email, you should include the observed behavior, your expectations for class and how they differ from the observed behavior, and the consequences of continued disruption.
- If the disruption is more egregious or a behavior is ongoing, you should contact your departmental leadership for appropriate next steps. Keeping them in the loop regarding behavior of concern is always recommended.
- In some cases, a meeting with the student is required to discuss the behavior in more depth, explore appropriate solutions and set clear guidelines and consequences. Often, you can find support for these meetings within your department or with Community Standards and Student Conduct.
- If additional support is necessary, please contact Community Standards and Student Conduct (CSSC): 206-685-6194, [cssc@uw.edu](mailto:cssc@uw.edu), [uw.edu/cssc](http://uw.edu/cssc)
  - CSSC provides consultation so you can address the student and the situation.
  - CSSC can take action on cases that violate the code of conduct.

*Many thanks to Ohio State University for supplying best practice guidelines for managing disruptive classroom behavior.*

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