



Coping with Disruptive Students in the Classroom

This handout provides faculty with appropriate, effective, and legally sound principles for dealing with disruptive student behavior, especially that which occurs in the classroom. The goal is to help faculty confidently, fairly, and safely address incidents of disruption in a manner that discourages such behavior while retaining the dignity of the learning environment.

Disruptive Behavior on the Rise

On college campuses, the term "disruptive behavior" used to be associated with demonstrations and protests. There is, however, another form of (mis-)conduct on campus which is seldom reported by the media but which causes individual faculty members considerably more personal turmoil: disruptive behavior in the classroom.

The climate of higher education has changed over the past few decades, and faculty are now faced with serious issues of disrespectful and inappropriate classroom behavior that previously were of little concern. Unfortunately, instructors frequently fail to address the disruptive behavior of students, because they may (1) be unsure how to handle the situation, (2) fear legal or physical retaliation from the student, and/or (3) conclude that reporting the disruptive behavior will cause emotional pain to an already fragile or unstable person. Failure to address disruptive behavior, however, is likely to encourage further disturbance, as it sends the message that such behavior is tolerated or that university personnel are indifferent to it.

Examples of Disruptive Behavior

Disruptive behavior is defined as repeated, continuous, and/or multiple student behaviors that hinder the ability of instructors to teach and students to learn. Common examples of disruptive behaviors include, but are not limited to:

- Eating in class
- Monopolizing classroom discussions
- Failing to respect the rights of other students to express their viewpoints
- Carrying on distracting side conversations
- Constant questions or interruptions which interfere with the instructor's presentation
- Overt inattentiveness (e.g., sleeping, reading the paper, using laptops for non-class-related activities)
- Creating excessive noise with papers, book bags, etc.
- Entering class late or leaving early
- Use of cell phones in the classroom
- Inordinate or inappropriate demands for time and attention
- Poor personal hygiene (e.g., noticeably offensive body odor)

More extreme examples of disruptive behavior include, but are not limited to:

- Use of profanity or pejorative language
- Intoxication
- Verbal abuse (e.g., taunting, badgering, intimidation)
- Harassment (e.g., use of "fighting words," stalking)
- Threats to harm oneself or others
- Physical violence (e.g., shoving, grabbing, assault, use of weapons)

An Ounce of Prevention...

Perhaps the best thing faculty can do to address disruptive student behavior is to create an environment in which it is unlikely to occur. For example, an instructor should:

- When class size permits, learn and use the names of your students.
- Serve as a model by demonstrating appropriate, respectful, and responsible behavior in all interactions with students.
- Use the class syllabus to inform students in writing of standards and expectations (e.g., respect, courtesy, timeliness, etc.) for classroom conduct and of possible consequences for disruptive behavior.
- Devote some time during the first class to review this information in the syllabus.

Responding to Disruptive Behavior

Some general suggestions for dealing with disruptive student behavior are:

- Deal with the disruptive behavior immediately. Ignoring the behavior will likely cause it to increase.
- A general word of caution directed to the class rather than at an identified student may effectively deter the disruptive behavior.
- Make direct eye contact with the student engaged in the disruptive behavior or ask a question of someone sitting close to him/her.
- Work against the human tendency to take the disruptive behavior personally. The behavior usually has little to do with you, and you are simply the unfortunate person who must address it.
- If the student's behavior is irritating, but not particularly disruptive, consider talking with the student privately after class to remind him/her of your expectations for classroom behavior. If you feel unsafe being alone with the student for some reason, request that a colleague or your department chair attend the meeting.
- If it is necessary to deal with a student's behavior during class, you should calmly but firmly inform the student that the behavior is disruptive and ask that he/she stop it. Example: *"Your use of your cell phone is bothering me and it is disrupting the class. Please end your conversation now and refrain from in-class phone calls in the future."*

- If the disruptive behavior continues during either the present or some future class, warn the student (perhaps in private) that such behavior may result in student disciplinary action. Example: *"I've already warned you about talking when I am speaking to the class. If you disrupt the class again in this manner, you will be referred to the Office of Civility and Community Standards ."*
- If the student continues the disruptive behavior despite being given a warning, the student should then be asked to leave the classroom. Following the class, the instructor should contact *Civility* and provide pertinent information about the student's behavior. The *Civility Office* will determine if a charge will be placed against the student.
- If the student refuses to leave the classroom after being instructed to do so, s/he should be informed that this refusal is a separate instance of disruptive behavior subject to additional penalties.
- If the student continues to refuse to leave the classroom, the instructor may choose to adjourn class for the day.
- Keep a log of the date, time, and nature of all incidents of disruptive behavior and any meetings you have with the student. Document incidents and meetings immediately, while specifics and details are still fresh in your memory.
- Keep your department chair informed as the situation develops. Ask for guidance and support from her/him and from colleagues.

What if a Student Reacts Negatively or Says He/She Has a Disability?

When a faculty member addresses disruptive behavior in the classroom, students sometimes accuse the faculty member, subtly or directly, of being rigid, unfair, insensitive, and/or uncaring. Such accusations often trouble faculty members who (probably accurately) perceive themselves as being flexible, fair, sensitive, and caring individuals. To provide support to and a rationale for the decision to address disruptive classroom behavior, faculty should remind themselves that college mental health professionals regard setting and enforcing reasonable behavioral limits with students as not just appropriate but as highly desirable.

Regarding the issue of disabilities, it is important to be aware that even such conditions as physical or psychological disabilities are not considered a legitimate excuse for disruptive behavior on a college campus. Prevailing law recognizes that students with disabilities can be held to the same reasonable behavioral standards as individuals without disabilities, even if a violation of institutional rules is the result of a disability. This practice accords each student with the dignity of a presumption that they have at least some personal accountability for their actions.

Possible Sanctions for Disruptive Student Behavior

The Student Handbook specifies the minimum level of conduct expected of every TWU student. These standards are higher than those imposed on all citizens by civil and criminal law and serve to foster an environment in which learning and scholarship can flourish. Students who are found responsible for policy violations due to their disruptive behavior face *Civility Office* sanctions including, but not limited to:

- Fines and/or restitution.
- Sanctioned programs specific to the incident and the needs of the individual. A variety of programs are in place to address alcohol, drugs, values, civic responsibility, and service learning.
- Disciplinary probation: Such status indicates that any future policy violations may result in more severe sanctions and/or suspension from the University.
- Dismissal from a course: The instructor may dismiss the student from the course. The department chair should be notified of the dismissal. The student has the right to appeal this decision to the department chair.
- Suspension: The student is prohibited from enrolling in classes or being on University premises for a specified period of time. Readmission is conditional upon reapplication and approval.
- Expulsion from the University: The student is permanently prohibited from enrolling in classes or being on University premises.

TWU Campus Resources to Help You Deal with Disruptive Students

[Student Life – Office of Civility and Community Standards](#) (Jones Hall 098 – Denton, Ph: 940-898-2968)

The *Civility Office* administers sanctions to students whose disruptive behavior violates the policies found in the Student Handbook. Sanctions serve to demonstrate to the student that s/he is responsible for the behavior and that disruptive behavior has predictable consequences. Further, educational sanctions address ways to prevent the behavior from happening again in the future.

Counseling Center

Counseling Center staff members can provide consultation and support for faculty/staff who are dealing with a disruptive and/or emotionally disturbed student. Psychologists and counselors can aid in the development of a more comprehensive understanding of the student's problem behavior and in the design of effective intervention strategies. Though you may encourage a student to voluntarily seek assistance at the Counseling Center, the Center does not provide services to students who are coerced or mandated into treatment.

[Department of Public Safety](#)

While not typically involved in most situations of disruptive student behavior, the University Department of Public Service is the primary source of immediate support when a disruptive student engages in threats or actions to harm her/himself or someone else.

More Info:

Office of Civility & Community Standards

J. Kyle Voyles, Executive Director
jvoyles@twu.edu Ph: 940-898-2913

Counseling Center, Denton - West Jones Hall

Main Phone (940) 898-3801

TWU T. Boone Pickens Institute of Health Sciences-Dallas Center

Chre Parnell, Assistant Director for Student Life
cparnell@twu.edu Ph: 214-689-6697

Dr. Linda Loudon, Counseling Services
lloudon@twu.edu Ph: 214-689-6655

TWU Institute of Health Sciences-Houston Center

Deb Unruh, Assistant Director for Student Life
dunruh@twu.edu Ph: 713-794-2158

Dr. Betty Duson, Counseling Services
dsuson@twu.edu Ph: 713-794-2059

Crisis Contact Info:

Call 911 or the campus police during regular business hours.

Denton: 940-898-2911

Dallas: 214-689-6666

Houston: 713-794-2222

Recommended Reading

Coping with Misconduct in the College Classroom: A Practical Model by Gerald Armada (1999). Asheville, N.C.: College Administration Publications, Inc.

“Coping with 7 Disruptive Personality Types in the Classroom,” edited by Bonnie Snyder, D.Ed., CCPS, Magna Publications 2010, http://www.northwestms.edu/library/Library/Web/magna_wp7.pdf

-- partially adapted from <http://www.jmu.edu/counselingctr/resources/faculty-staff/disruptive-students.shtml>