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Working with Disruptive Students

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The recent tragedies at Virginia Tech, Louisiana Technical College, and Northern Illinois University have sparked national dialogue regarding how the higher-education community may increase safety on campus while preserving the integrity of the learning environment. Much of the dialogue has focused on institutions addressing student mental-health issues, developing emergency plans, and using technology in the event that such threats present themselves on another campus. While all of this discussion is useful in addressing major disruptions on campuses, it is important to remember that many of these major disruptions begin with minor acts or even questionable disruptive behaviors that can be prevented early by faculty and staff. Here, we discuss what educators can do to address disruptive student behavior in a way that not only will preserve the learning environment at our institutions but also may assist students in their growth and development. Specifically, we will focus on addressing disruptive behavior inside the classroom.

Understanding Disruptive Behavior

Having a thorough understanding of what constitutes disruptive student behavior is critical before faculty can effectively address such behavior. Displayed in many different forms, disruptive student behavior can be defined as any behavior that causes interference in the teaching and learning environment. This behavior includes less severe actions such as sleeping in class, tardiness, and talking among peers to more severe actions such as cheating, fighting, verbal, physical or suicidal abuse, or threats. Some of the less severe behaviors are tolerated by some faculty members, but not by others. As each faculty member designs his/her learning environment, attention has to be given to what student behaviors will and will not be considered disruptive.

It is important to note that although some behaviors can lead to conflict between students and faculty or other students, they may not necessarily be disruptive. Cultural differences, the need for additional time or attention for a specific reason or problem, situational frustration or stress, and disagreements or

differences of opinion may often manifest themselves within the classroom setting (Coombs & Duncan, 2006). For instance, in some cultures, sharing information is common and often occurs in the academic setting. Although this is not customary in the American higher-education learning environment, this cultural difference can lead to conflict between the student and faculty. In addition, needing additional time or attention for a specific reason or problem should not be viewed as disruptive unless the student's demands become unreasonable and excessive. However, this type of behavior may be the symptom of a condition with which a student must live, such as a learning disability. In many instances, these types of behaviors do not result in substantial disruption of the learning environment and can be easily addressed by a conversation with the student displaying the behavior.

Preventing Disruptive Behavior

The most effective method of addressing disruptive behavior is prevention. There are multiple approaches faculty can take to accomplish this. The first approach is to determine what behavior is acceptable in class. It is critical that this information is clearly and firmly communicated to students on the first day of class; this information should also be included in the course syllabus (Carbone, 1999; see Appendix). Because each faculty member designs his/her learning environment differently, the behaviors that are considered unacceptable vary from faculty to faculty. As students engage in various learning environments, some confusion can arise as to what behavior is unacceptable in each learning environment. In many instances, early definition of unacceptable behavior and the consequences of engaging in that behavior will deter classroom disruptions. It is also important to review with students any institutional policies that address student behavior, including the code of conduct and academic-honesty policy.

Secondly, we live in what has become a gaming society with environments in which frequent interaction is commonplace. Because of this, faculty are encouraged to make classes not only challenging but also interesting (Amada, 1999). Amada writes, "If instructors teach with a certain passion and zeal for their subject and can impact their intellectual excitement and idealism to students, it is likely to make an important difference in fostering a positive, non-disruptive classroom environment" (p. 51). This can be accomplished by engaging students in educational exercises that involve active learning and collaboration. As students become more engaged and involved in their learning experience, the likelihood for disruptive behavior may decrease.

Thirdly, it is important for faculty to model the behavior that they expect. For example, if a faculty member has determined that tardiness is unacceptable, it is important for him/her to arrive to class and be ready to instruct on time. Disruptive behavior can sometimes stem from students sensing that they are being

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held to a higher behavioral standard than the instructor or staff member. Obviously, it is unacceptable for faculty or staff to expect a behavioral standard of students that they are not willing to adhere to themselves.

In addition to what is listed above, faculty are encouraged to

- make class personable (Carbone, 1999);
- determine if there are student needs beyond what the institution can provide (Kuhlenschmidt & Layne, 1999) and work with local agencies to help students receive the assistance they need;
- be responsive to students' need for assistance; and
- if needed, use assigned seating (Carbone).

Managing the Disruptive Student and Situation

Taking preventive measures may reduce disruptive behavior. However, these measures will not eliminate all such behavior. So, what is it that we can do to address this behavior? Like preventing disruptive behavior, addressing disruptive behavior can be done in a variety of fashions.

Depending on the situation, the disruptive behavior may require immediate attention. If inside the classroom, the instructor should address the student committing the disruption immediately. Immediacy positively influences student attitudes towards teacher communication, course content, the course in general, and the course instructor (Anderson, 1979). Further, immediacy assists with managing student behavior across racial and cultural lines (Sanders and Wiseman, 1994). Whether asking the student to step outside of the classroom in order to address a situation or addressing the situation immediately inside the classroom (Kuhlenschmidt and Layne, 1999), faculty should speak in a calm but firm voice.

Furthermore, when addressing the student, faculty should only address the disruptive behavior (Kuhlenschmidt &Layne, 1999). For instance, it is better to address a student by saying, "When you speak out of turn without raising your hand, you do not allow other students the opportunity to speak" instead of remarking, "You are so impolite." Kuhlenschmidt and Layne contend that in addition to stating that the behavior is disruptive, the faculty should also explain what the student must do in the future. Addressing the disruptive behavior in this manner can decrease the likelihood that the student will become offended, which could lead to additional inappropriate behavior.

Progressive discipline should be used, as follows:

- verbal warning;
- written warning; and
- loss of credit, which should be clearly indicated on the course syllabus (see Appendix).

In conjunction with any level of discipline, a written agreement between the faculty and student can be made that outlines how the student is to behave in class and what consequences will be imposed if disruptive behavior continues (Tiberius & Flak, 1999).

If none of the previous levels of discipline curb the disruptive behavior or a situation occurs in class that is of a more severe nature, removing the student from class may be necessary to calm the situation before it can escalate. However, if the faculty member chooses this course of action, the student must be provided the opportunity to complete the assignment(s) that may be missed while the student is away from class.

During any one of these scenarios, it is important that faculty document the behavior when it occurs so that the documentation can be presented to the appropriate staff member who manages conduct issues in the event that the student is referred for a conduct violation.

Beyond the Scope of Faculty Responsibility

Although managing the classroom is primarily the responsibility of faculty members teaching their courses, faculty are not alone in orchestrating an effort to address behavior that may be disruptive and potentially dangerous. In instances where students are verbally or physically abusive and/or threatening, displaying unusual behavior, or appearing to be under the influence of a drug or alcohol, the faculty member should immediately leave the class or office and contact police or security to come to the class to remove the student. Alternatively, the faculty member can remain in the class and send a student to make contact with police or security. If contacting police or security is not an option for faculty members, then the faculty member should contact the staff member that manages conduct issues on campus or a student services staff member who can assist. However, in these situations, care should be taken in order to not elevate the situation further.

Cabello (2001) suggests the following when dealing with a crisis situation:

- Be empathic. Try not to be judgmental of a student's feelings.
- Clarify messages. Listen to what is being said. Ask reflective questions; use both silence and restatements.
- Respect personal space. Stand at least one-and-a-half to three feet from the disruptive student. Encroaching personal space tends to arouse people and escalate the situation.
- Be aware of body position. Standing eye-to-eye, toe-to-toe with the student sends a challenging message. Standing one leg's length away and at an angle off to the side is less likely to upset the student.

- Permit verbal venting when possible. Allow the student to release as much energy as possible by venting verbally.
- Set and enforce reasonable limits. If the person becomes belligerent, set limits clearly and concisely.
- Avoid overreacting. Remain calm, rational, and professional. How you respond will directly affect the student.
- Ignore challenging questions. When the student challenges you, redirect his attention to the issue at hand.
- Keep nonverbal cues nonthreatening. Be aware of body language, movement, and tone of voice.
- Use physical techniques as a last resort. Use the least restrictive method of intervention as possible. (p.16)

Explicit within the recommendation to contact another staff member is that other units within a college are available to assist faculty in addressing student conduct and/or performance in class.

Campus police and staff members who manage conduct issues can advise faculty on what legal options they have in removing students from class, assess threats, and/or other conditions affecting student behavior in class (such as mental-health issues or drugs and alcohol) and can advise faculty before situations escalate.

Faculty are strongly encouraged to become familiar with any institutional student-conduct or academic-honesty policies and procedures and to attend any trainings offered by campus police and conduct officers.

In Reflection

Faculty, administration, staff, conduct officers, police and security all play a crucial role in addressing disruptive student behavior. Because much of the disruptive behavior starts within the classroom, this paper examines how we might address the disruptive behavior and prevent situations from escalating. While properly addressing disruptive student behavior may not be the most desired role of any faculty member's job, it is a necessary and vital component. Through an understanding of what constitutes disruptive student behavior, how to prevent the behavior, and how to manage disruptive students and situations, faculty and staff will be able to assist in preserving the positive learning environments at our institutions.

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Appendix. Sample Syllabus Statement

Student Conduct

In order to achieve the best learning environment possible for this class, students are expected to adhere to the highest behavioral standards. No form of disruptive behavior will be tolerated in this course. Disruptive behavior can be defined as behavior that interferes with the teaching and learning process. As such, any disruptive behavior will be addressed by the instructor and/or reported to the dean/director of student services.

Types of Behavior Viewed as Disruptive in this Class:
- talking during lectures
- cell phones ringing in the middle of lecture
- arriving to class late
- arguing with other students in the class
- speaking rudely to instructor or classmates
- sleeping in class
- text messaging in class

In addition, please note that more than three incidents of disruptive behavior will result in a grade of zero for participation in your overall grade. Single incidents that are severe will result in removal from the class until you meet with me or the dean/director of student services and / or the loss of participation credit for the course.

If you have any questions regarding the conduct policy, please refer to the Student Handbook or contact the Student Services Office.