

# University of Minnesota Duluth

## Responding to Behavioral Disruptions in the Classroom

### Faculty and Staff Information

#### Introduction

*UMD is committed to providing a safe learning environment for faculty, staff, and students.* Disruptive, disrespectful, and even violent student behavior has become a national trend at universities. This document has been created to help instructors respond to classroom disruptions as the number and severity of incidents of classroom disruption on our own campus have increased.

Students are responsible for conducting themselves in a manner that is respectful of the instructor and other students in the classroom, is civil in language, tone and behavior, and is receptive to ideas and other points of view.

Instructors are responsible for establishing and maintaining a civil, respectful, productive and stimulating learning environment. When this environment is damaged by disruptive student behavior, it is essential that you take appropriate and immediate steps to curtail this behavior, that you remain calm and that you model effective communication skills.

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## **1. Examples of Disruptive Classroom Behavior or Concerns**

### *Disruptive Behavior*

Disruptive classroom conduct is a violation of Section V, Subdivision Two of the UM Student Conduct Code ([www.d.umn.edu/conduct/](http://www.d.umn.edu/conduct/)) and is defined as follows: “Disruptive classroom conduct means engaging in behavior that substantially or repeatedly interrupts either the instructor's ability to teach or student learning. The classroom extends to any setting where a student is engaged in work toward academic credit or satisfaction of program-based requirements or related activities.”

Examples of disruptive behavior in the classroom include, but are not limited to:

- making loud and distracting noises
- monopolizing classroom discussions
- talking when the instructor or others are speaking
- using cell phones or pagers
- inappropriate or inordinate demands for time and attention
- exhibiting erratic, irrational behavior
- persisting in speaking without being recognized
- behavior that distracts the class from the subject matter or discussion
- refusal to comply with faculty direction
- repeatedly leaving and entering the classroom during class without authorization
- making hostile remarks to or about other students in the class, other groups of people or the instructor
- making physical or verbal threats to the faculty member or fellow classmates
- targeting individuals with disparaging comments because of their membership in a particular group

## **2. Discouraging Disruptive Classroom Behavior**

### *Freedom of Expression*

Freedom of expression on academic topics is encouraged and to be respected by both students and faculty. While this allows for the expression of disagreement and debate, classroom behavior is expected to reflect the values of civility and respect.

### *Clear Expectations*

Instructors are responsible for the management of the classroom environment. At the beginning of the semester, clearly state your expectations and that you will not tolerate behavior that interferes with academic or administrative functions. Students may not see their behavior as uncivil, rude, or disruptive. It is up to you to clarify expectations. Clear expectations, courtesy, fairness, and consistency are key elements as you work through progressive discipline. By articulating what you expect from students, you will encounter fewer problems. Be as specific as possible. For example, do you want students to raise their hand for permission to speak? Do you want students to inform you if they need to be late for class or have to leave early? Do you want cell phones turned off? Explain the reasons for your classroom expectations, and encourage student comments and suggestions. Add their suggestions to your list. Most students want to help you create a positive, safe, and productive learning environment. Enforce your expectations consistently; this helps students avoid harsher consequences if

misbehavior continues. Verbally express this to students in class, and incorporate it in to your syllabus.

### *Syllabus Suggestions*

The UMD Uniform Syllabus Policy provides guidelines for the content of your syllabus. Link to [www.d.umn.edu/catalogs/current/pol\\_proc/registration.html](http://www.d.umn.edu/catalogs/current/pol_proc/registration.html) and scroll down to Uniform Syllabus Policy. Including a clear statement of your classroom expectations in your syllabus can be very helpful in minimizing classroom disruption. If you find it necessary to make changes to your written syllabus, clearly communicate the changes to students.

In addition to clearly outlining your expectations (e.g., cell phones turned off, raise hand before speaking), you may want to incorporate the following statements in your syllabus. These are examples, which may be modified to fit the philosophy or expectations of your class.

#### Civility in the Classroom

The following is based in part on suggestions made by Lynn Weber Cannon in "Fostering Positive Race, Class, and Gender Dynamics in the Classroom," published in *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 1990: 1 & 2, pp. 130-132.

We can assume that discrimination exists in many forms (e.g. sexism, racism, classism, ageism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, ableism, etc.). Any critical understanding of these various -isms means that we need to recognize that we have been taught misinformation about our own group as well as about members of other groups. This is true for both dominant (e.g. white, male, upper class, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc.) and subordinate (e.g. people of color, women, poor and working class, gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender, disabled, Jew, etc.) group members.

- Based on these assumptions then, let's agree that we cannot be blamed for the misinformation we have learned, but we are responsible when we repeat misinformation after we have learned otherwise.
- People and groups are not to be blamed for their subordinate positions.
- Let's assume that people are always doing the best they can.
- Let's actively pursue information about our own groups and those of others.
- Let us share information about our own groups with other members of the class, but never demean, devalue, or in any way put down people for their experiences.
- We each have an obligation to combat actively the myths and stereotypes about our own groups and other groups so that we can break down the walls which prohibit group cooperation and group gain.
- Let's create a safe atmosphere for open discussion.

### **3. Maintaining Confidentiality**

Information obtained while speaking with a disruptive student privately should be handled in a confidential manner. You may only discuss allegations against identifiable students with individuals who have a role in the disciplinary process or a legitimate need to know. Examples include your department head, dean of your collegiate unit, and the director of the Office of Student and Community Standards. Do not share personally identifiable information from a student's education record (e.g., grades, reports of misconduct) with those who have no educational interest in the information.

### **4. Responding to Disruptive Behavior in the Classroom**

1. Immediately address any behavior that is inappropriate, before it escalates. It is often a mistake to assume that disruptive behavior will cease on its own.
2. Some behavior is more irritating or distracting, as opposed to disruptive. Students are often unaware their habits or mannerisms are distracting.
3. Speak to the student after class or during your office hours.
4. Avoid direct confrontation with a student in the classroom. Rather, use a general word of caution in a positive manner. For example, "We have too many conversations taking place. Let's focus on today's topic." Or, "please raise your hand if you have something to say." Be calm, respectful, and nonthreatening; do not become defensive.
  - a. Another option is to casually walk toward the student (or general area) where disruptive behavior is occurring. Your presence in the area may be enough to curb the behavior.
  - b. In rare circumstances, you may find it necessary to speak to a student during the class regarding disruptive behavior. Try to do so in a positive, courteous manner, indicating that you can meet after class to discuss the situation in private.
5. If a student is persistent in his/her disruptive/problematic behavior, hand the student a note to see you after class or during your office hours.
  - a. If appropriate, have someone present to serve as a witness.
  - b. If you feel threatened by the student, keep your office door open or meet in a safer location. Let someone know where and when you will be meeting.
  - c. Discuss the problematic behavior with the student early on.
  - d. Carefully and explicitly explain why you believe the behavior is disrupting the learning environment in your classroom.
  - e. Allow the student a chance to respond and explain his/her behavior.
  - f. Listen to the student, as there may be personal problems or serious health concerns contributing to his/her behavior. While this does not condone their behavior, you may be able to refer students to campus resources. Examples include Health Services (medical and counseling), Disability Resources, or First Year Experience (FYE).
  - g. Consider creating a "behavior contract" with the student.
  - h. Depending on the outcome of the meeting, you may want to warn the student that you may ask him/her to leave the classroom if the misbehavior continues.
6. If the inappropriate behavior continues after having spoken with the student, you may ask the student to leave the class for the remainder of the period. A faculty member cannot

make the sole decision to drop a student from the class, but may recommend, in consultation with the dean, that the student's registration be canceled.

- a. Be prepared to hand the student a note asking that he/she leave, rather than having a confrontation in the classroom.
  - b. In private, inform the student the reason(s) he/she was asked to leave.
  - c. When meeting with the student, express what concerns you have. Give the student an opportunity to explain his/her behavior. To avoid misinterpretation, repeat what you think the student has said. Brainstorm with the student on possible solutions to the problem.
  - d. Explain the consequences if the change does not occur. For example, you may ask a student to leave a class each time there is a disruption, withdraw a student from the class (in consultation with your dean), or make a referral to the Office of Student and Community Standards for a possible violation of the Student Conduct Code.
  - e. When you have reached an agreement with the student, clearly articulate this to the student. You may want to put this in writing to the student.
7. **Document all serious instances of classroom disruption.** Documentation should include what happened, the names of any witnesses, the date and time, and what steps you have taken to address the problem. Be as factual and objective as possible, and try to avoid judgment words that may misinterpret what actually occurred or was spoken. This documentation is important should there be a referral for disciplinary action through the Office of Student and Community Standards. The documentation becomes part of the student's educational record, and the student is entitled access to this information.
8. **Save any threatening or offensive e-mail or voice-mail messages.** Forward these to University Police and/or the Office of Student and Community Standards.
9. **If you feel threatened or alarmed, or there is unlawful behavior, call 9-1-1.**

## 5. Meeting with the Student

The following are **helpful** suggestions on how to meet with students, both in and outside of the classroom. In most cases, situations will be resolved at the stage one level.

### *Stage One: Address the Situation*

- Don't wait for a problem to clear itself up. The sooner it is addressed, the better.
- Listen. If you are able to listen and hear the student's frustrations, the person may calm down.
- Reflect that you heard the student's feelings and perspectives.
- Maintain a posture that is poised and non-threatening.
- Maintain a tone of voice that is calm and matter of fact.
- Use clear, assertive statements of consequences.
- Be direct, set boundaries, and do not tolerate abuse (e.g., "Please stand back, you are too close." "Our discussion would be more effective if we speak in calm voices.")
- A positive approach is more effective. Let students know what you **can** do, not what you **cannot** do.
- Explain that there are rules you need to follow, and you would like to help the student understand them.

- Empathize with the student’s frustration by using such statements as: “I can see your frustration (or are upset by this).” “I would like to work with you in finding a resolution.” “This feels as if it is really important to you.”
- Maintain respectful eye contact.
- If possible, avoid using gestures.
- Avoid physical contact. Only have contact if you need to defend yourself.
- Leave an unobstructed exit.
- Be aware of your feelings.
- Remain as calm as possible.
- Do not insist you are right or contradict the student. Instead, help the student understand that you see the situation from a different perspective.
- If a student is threatening or verbally abusive, tell the student “We can work together better if we remain calm, keep our voices low, and take things step by step.”
- Inform the student of the behavior that needs to change. Set a timeline for when the change needs to be made.

It is **not helpful** to:

- become defensive while communicating with the student.
- get into an argument or shouting match with the student.
- become hostile, punitive, or make threats or dares toward the student.
- press for explanations of the student’s behavior.
- ignore warning signs, such as clenched fists.

*Stage Two: Get Assistance from Others*

- Tell the student: “Let me see if I can find someone who can help.”
- Talk about your concerns with your supervisor or with colleagues.
- Have a plan in place for dealing with aggressive student behavior. Identify who your back-up person is if you need help.
- See the following resources section in this document.

*Stage Three: Call University Police at 9-1-1 and Get to a Safe Location*

- Call University Police at 9-1-1—or ask someone else to do so.
- Retreat to a locked office or other safe place while waiting.
- Have a safety plan in case of violent or dangerous behavior. The plan may include dismissing class, contacting University police, having a code word that signals another to call for help, have an escape route planned, etc.

## **6. Modeling Effective Communication**

*We often forget that a primary task is to find ways to manage ourselves in the midst of confusion.*

- Conduct yourself in a manner you expect from your students; they will pick up on these cues.
- Acknowledge that the student is angry.
- Remain calm. If you can remain calm and not be visibly rattled by the situation, the students will be better able to steady themselves. Your behavior provides a holding

environment for the students. They can feel safe when you appear to be in control; this enables them to explore the issues.

- If you can show that you are comfortable with silence, a pause will also permit the student to reflect on the issues raised.
- Do not take remarks personally, even when they come as personal attacks. Such attacks are most likely made against you in your role as teacher or authority figure. Separate yourself from your role; it is not about you. By making this separation, this may enable you to see what a student is saying more clearly. It is about the student and his/her feelings and thoughts. Keep in mind that the student may not have thought through the situation or be able to articulate feelings and thoughts.
- Know your biases and what will cause your mind to stop. Every one of us has areas in which we are vulnerable to strong feelings. Knowing what those areas are in advance can diminish the element of surprise. You will have thought about what you need to do in order to enable your mind to work again.
- If you feel as if you cannot respond to the student's needs, offer to arrange for the student to meet with a supervisor. This may encourage the student to "cool down" before addressing the issue again.
- After you have met with the student, be sure to debrief with a colleague or supervisor and attend to your stress and your needs.
- Recognize that, while for some students empathy will transform the situation, for others, nothing you say or do will get through to them.

## **7. Identifying and Responding to Threatening Behavior or Mental Health Issues**

### *Dangerous or Aggressive Behavior*

An aggressive student may exhibit potentially dangerous or violent behaviors. Immediately report dangerous or aggressive behavior to University police at 9-1-1. Be alert for potential signs of trouble, which may include:

- expression of suicidal thoughts or threats
- expression of homicidal thoughts or threats
- engaging in a fight
- threatening behavior, such as violating other's personal space, raising his/her voice and seeming irrational, physically confrontational, stalking/harassing
- destruction of property
- out of control behavior; student is unable to be redirected or unable to deescalate
- presence of weapons

### *Mental Health*

A student may experience a range of issues that can cause barriers to learning, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug problems, feeling down, difficulty concentrating and/or lack of motivation. These mental health concerns or stressful events may lead to diminished academic performance or reduce a student's ability to participate in daily activities. UMD has services available to assist students with addressing these

and other concerns. It is important to direct students to the broad range of confidential mental health services available on campus via the UMD Health Services website at <http://www.d.umn.edu/hlthserv/counseling/>

#### *Emotional and/or Psychological Concerns*

Distressed students may also exhibit behavior that may indicate they are in need of assistance. Mental health concerns or stressful events may lead to diminished academic performance or reduce a student's ability to participate in daily activities. UMD has free counseling services available by calling (218) 726-7913. Information about the broad range of confidential mental health services available at UMD Health Services can be found at <http://www.d.umn.edu/hlthserv/counseling/>

Some examples of emotional or psychological concerns include:

- significant change in mood
- disorientation
- noticeable change in quality of work
- disheveled appearance or poor hygiene
- inappropriate outburst
- persistent unwanted contact
- inappropriate use of violent themes/subjects
- bizarre verbal or written statements
- self report of mental health issues or crime victimization (e.g., domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking)
- suspected or reported alcohol or drug abuse
- thoughts of violence toward self or others

If you are actively engaged with the student, deescalate the situation by remaining calm, monitor your voice control, address the behavior in a non-threatening manner, and seek a time out. If you are not actively engaged with the student, contact a UMD counselor at (218) 726-7913 or University police at (218) 726-7000 for advice.

#### *Potential Signs a Student May Need Assistance*

- being under the influence of alcohol or drugs
- not getting along with others
- complaints from other students
- signs of bruising or injuries
- being continually confused, irritated, or depressed
- missing several class sessions
- unusual patterns of coming late to class or leaving early
- sudden change in classroom participation
- not turning in assignments, which were previously turned in on time
- quality of work suddenly declines
- written work includes veiled or overt threats

### *Emergency Plan*

Develop an emergency response plan with your class (e.g., which might include dismissing the class). Consider a code word or signal to share with your students that indicate an emergency is occurring.

## **8. Resources**

1. Talk with more experienced faculty, your department head, and your assistant/associate dean of the college.
2. Instructional Developmental Service offers consultations and is willing to work with you on crafting appropriate responses to classroom disruption. Their telephone number is (218) 726-6355. Information is available on their web site at [www.d.umn.edu/ids/](http://www.d.umn.edu/ids/).
3. For concerns about a student's mental health or for ideas to talk with a student individually, call Counseling Services at (218) 726-7913 and ask to speak with a counselor.
4. If your attempts at resolving the matter are not successful, file a report with the Office of Student and Community Standards. The telephone number is (218) 726-8969 and e-mail address is [oscs@d.umn.edu](mailto:oscs@d.umn.edu). Disruptive classroom behavior is a violation of the Student Conduct Code.
5. If the behavior is an ongoing concern, the Student Behavior Management Committee meets regularly, and your concerns can be discussed at their next meeting. If there is very serious concern regarding a student's behavior, the committee will be convened to discuss and address the problem. To bring a concern to the committee, contact the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Support and Student Life at (218) 726-8501 or the director of the Office of Student and Community Standards at (218) 726-8969.

## **Contacting University Police**

Call 9-1-1 if someone:

- threatens or alarms you or others.
- appears to be on the verge of physically or verbally assaulting you or others.
- has physically or verbally assaulted you or others.
- appears to be a threat to himself/herself.
- destroys classroom furniture or property.
- is carrying a weapon.

Err on the side of caution and call 9-1-1 if you have reason to believe that a student poses an imminent risk of serious harm to you or others. If it is a non-emergency, and you would like to discuss your concerns with a University police officer, call (218) 726-7000. If there is any doubt, call 9-1-1.

**University of Minnesota Duluth  
Campus Resources for Consultation and Referral**

<i>1 = Initial Contact – coded in red</i>			Health Services						
<i>2 = Further Contact(s)</i>	UMD	Dept.	Counseling	Medical	Office of	Office of	VC for	Office of	Women's
<i>3 = Additional Consultation</i>	Police	Head or			Equal	Student &	Academic	Cultural	Resource
		Coord.			Oppor-	Communit	Support &	Diversity	& Action
	911		726-7913	726-8155	tunity	y Standards	Student		Center
							Life		
							726-8501	726-8444	726-6292
<b>You are concerned about a student who:</b>									
Brandishes a gun or other weapon	1	2					3		
Poses an immediate threat to self or others or is aggressive	1	2	2				3		
Writes or verbalizes a direct threat to another person	1	2	2				3		
Talks about homicide	1								
Is a victim of violence or stalking	1		2						2
Appears to have a medical incident in class (e.g., seizures, fainting)	1	3		2					
Talks about suicide	2	2	1			2	3		
Is a victim of sexual assault	2		1		2			2	2
Exhibits behavior that seems bizarre or out of touch with reality	2	2	1						
Displays anger or hostility inappropriately	2	1	2			2			
Seems overly emotional (e.g., depressed, demanding, suspicious)		2	1						
Comes drunk or high to class		2	1			2			
Shows signs of alcohol or drug abuse		2	1						
Continuously disrupts class and refuses to stop		1	3			2	3		
Is the subject of complaints by other students regarding class behavior		1	2			2			
Is a victim of intimidation			1		2				2
Is having difficulty due to illness or death in the family		2	1						
Makes disparaging comments because of their membership in a particular group		2			1			2	
Reports sexual harassment or civil rights discrimination		2			1				
Is suspected of cheating		2				1			