

# California State University, Fresno

## *Responding to Behavioral Disruptions Inside and Outside of the Classroom*

### **Faculty and Staff Information**

*Resource document used with permission of University of Minnesota- Duluth*

### **Introduction**

*Fresno State is committed to providing a safe learning environment for faculty, staff, and students.* Disruptive, disrespectful, and even violent student behavior has increased at universities throughout the nation. This document has been created to help employees respond to disruptions as the number and severity of incidents of disruption in the classroom and other education settings on our own campus have increased.

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

Instructors or advisors are responsible for establishing and maintaining a civil, respectful, productive and stimulating 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 Behavior or Concerns

### *Disruptive Behavior*

Disruptive classroom conduct is a violation of Academic Policy Manual (APM 419), Policy on Disruptive Classroom Behavior. In addition, Title 5 § 41301 of the California Code of Regulations clearly identifies standards for student conduct. The following information also applies to extensions of the classroom, including off campus events and faculty advising of student clubs and organizations.

Examples of disruptive behavior in the classroom or in educational settings 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 Behavior

### *Freedom of Expression & Academic Freedom (See APM 419)*

Students and faculty must be free to pursue truth as well as personal and intellectual development. A necessary condition for such pursuit is an acceptance of the spirit of inquiry and an appreciation for diverse ideas, viewpoints, cultures, and life-styles. This condition must exist in both the classroom and the overall campus environment.

While the University gives great weight to the responsibility of preserving academic freedom, it does so within the context of respect for law and the reasoned consideration of others. Academic freedom and freedom of speech are intended to protect the expression and exploration of ideas; they do not protect conduct that is unlawful, disruptive of the classroom environment, or disruptive of the University itself.

### *Clear Expectations*

Instructors are responsible for the management of the classroom environment and other educational settings in which students participate. At the beginning of the semester or activity, 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 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 and incorporate it in to your syllabus or statement of expectations (for non-classroom activities).

### *Syllabus Suggestions*

Templates for syllabi provide guidelines for the content of your syllabus. The link for these templates may be located at: [www.fresnostate.edu/academics/tilt/resources/syllabus-template.html](http://www.fresnostate.edu/academics/tilt/resources/syllabus-template.html)

Including a clear statement of your expectations in your syllabus can be very helpful in minimizing classroom disruption. If you find it necessary to make changes to your written syllabus or statement of expectations, 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 and other Educational Settings*

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 acts or beliefs 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 chair, dean of your collegiate unit, and the director of the Office of Judicial Affairs. 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 or Other Educational Settings**

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 the class/activity or during your office hours.
4. Avoid direct confrontation with a student. 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 the class/activity or during your office hours.
  - a. If appropriate, have your Chair 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 educational environment.
  - 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) and Services for Students with Disabilities.
  - 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/activity 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/activity for the remainder of the period/activity.
  - 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/activity each time there is a disruption or make a referral to the Dean of Student Affairs/Judicial Affairs 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 Dean of Student Affairs/Judicial Affairs. 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 Judicial Affairs.
9. **If you feel threatened or alarmed, or there is unlawful behavior, call 9-1-1 or the University Police Department at 278-8400.**

## 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.
- 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 and Get to a Safe Location*

- **Call 9-1-1 or the University Police Department at 278-8400** 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 the class/activity, 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 your 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.
- At times, faculty and staff who are trying to "stay cool" while responding to a student's behavior may feel like they need a confidential source for support. The Office of Employee Assistance & Wellness is a professional, confidential place where faculty and staff can talk about their experience and gain support for managing the situation. There is no charge to the employee for this service.

## **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 **call 9-1-1 or the University Police Department at 278-8400.**

- 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.**

It is important to direct students to the broad range of confidential mental health services available on campus via the University Health and Psychological Services website at: [www.fresnostate.edu/studentaffairs/health/psychological/](http://www.fresnostate.edu/studentaffairs/health/psychological/)

### *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. Fresno State has free counseling services available by calling 278-6738 or direct students to Psychological Services walk-in hours between 9-11 a.m. or 2-4 p.m. Monday through Friday. 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 Psychological Services at 278-6738 or University Police at 278-8400 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 a general 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. For concerns about a student's mental health or for ideas to talk with a student individually, call Psychological Services at 278-6738 and ask to speak with a counselor.
3. If your attempts at resolving the matter are not successful, file a report with the Dean of Student Affairs/Judicial Affairs. The telephone number is 278-2541 and e-mail address is ccoon@csufresno.edu. Disruptive classroom behavior is a violation of APM 419.
4. If the behavior is an ongoing concern, the campus C.A.R.E. team 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 Dean of Student Affairs/Judicial Affairs (278-2541; ccoon@csufresno.edu) or Office of Faculty Affairs (278-3027; mcaldwell@csufresno.edu).

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