Responding to Disruptive or Threatening Student Behavior:
A Guide for Faculty and Staff

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

INTRODUCTION

Occasionally, the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign (UIUC) experiences threatening or disruptive behavior on the part of some students, a trend paralleled nationally at other campuses. As a faculty or staff member, you may find yourself having to contend with a disruptive or emotionally disturbed student at some point during your career. Student behaviors that you may encounter range from simple disruptions in class or in a campus office to ongoing harassment or verbal and physical threats.

The guidelines in this booklet are designed to: 1) assist your area in thinking through its response to situations in which students may behave in unusual or unpredictable ways; 2) help you handle an actual threat; and 3) assist you with referral, protocol, and procedures. When your department has prepared its faculty and staff adequately for such situations, the chances of serious disruption may be lessened.

DEFINITIONS

A student is considered disruptive when he or she engages in behaviors that interfere in a significant way with your normal teaching or administrative duties as a staff or faculty member, or that significantly erodes the learning environment for other students. Disruptive behavior may sometimes threaten or endanger your physical or psychological well-being or safety or that of others. Disruptive behavior can assume many forms, including students who:

- Persistently arrives late to class or leaves early in a manner which is disruptive to the regular flow of the class.
- Talks incessantly while you are delivering a lecture.
- Loudly and frequently interrupts the flow of class with inappropriate questions or interjections.
- Responds inappropriately, disrespectfully, or with anger to the comments or opinions of others in the classroom.
- Displays highly confused, disoriented or delusional thinking, speaking, or writing.
- Whose use of personal electronic devices or food consumption causes a disruption to the regular flow of the class.
- Brings individuals to class who are not enrolled, including infants/ children.
- Exhibits inappropriate conduct while on field assignments or off-campus placements connected with a course.

- Uses obscene or profane language.
- Is under the influence of alcohol or another controlled substance.
- Persistently calls your office and hampers your ability to continue normal work or to assist other students.
- Becomes belligerent when you confront his or her inappropriate behavior.
- Verbally or physically threatens you, another faculty or staff member, or another student.
- Writes you a threatening letter, email, or leaves a disturbing message on your voicemail.
- Attempts to contact you at your home in inappropriate ways or otherwise attempts to contact you outside the boundaries of your professional role.
- Displays behaviors indicating a romantic or other obsessive interest in you.

THREE LEVELS OF THREATENING OR DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR

For the purposes of these guidelines, disruptive and threatening behavior have been categorized into three different levels.

- The first level, which is the least serious, includes any situation that can be initially addressed informally between you and the student, potentially leading to resolution. It may also involve consultation with your department chair, who often has unique insights into classroom culture and conflict management. Supervisors are also familiar with relevant campus procedures and practices that can aid staff.
- The second level involves an ongoing problem, or a more serious incident. In addition to consulting with your department chair or supervisor, you should also consult with the Office for Student Conflict Resolution (OSCR) at (217) 333-3680, which will assist you in evaluating and resolving the situation directly through the student conduct process, refer you to the Counseling Center, Student Assistance Center, and/or notify the student Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT) .

  The purpose of the BIT is to proactively identify, assess and offer a coordinated institutional response to students whose behavior is concerning, extremely disruptive or who pose a potential risk to others and/or the campus community.
- The third, and most serious, level is reached when a student's language or behavior is threatening, violent or escalating toward violence such that their is an imminent risk of danver. If this occurs, you should call University Police immediately.

LEVEL ONE
INFORMAL RESOLUTION

a) In the classroom

As the course instructor, you serve as the primary source of authority in your classroom. You are authorized to establish appropriate academic and behavioral standards. There are a number of ways you can influence how individual student behavior impacts the learning environment.

It is helpful if you clarify behavioral and other expectations at the beginning of a course, and reach an agreement with students on standards for classroom conduct. When you are establishing guidelines for behavior in your course, it is important that you only articulate the standards that you are willing to enforce. Apply these standards fairly and consistently. Students will quickly recognize and resent perceived unfairness.

Describing basic behavioral standards in the course syllabus will assist you in discussing them the first day of class. Information should specify what behaviors are prohibited, how you will manage behavioral issues, and any consequences that may result. A statement in the course syllabus might read:

"Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students' ability to learn and an instructor's ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office for Student Conflict Resolution for disciplinary action."

It is also common to include a statement of warning about cheating and plagiarism and the consequences of these forms of misconduct.

When a student is disruptive in class:

- Address the behavior by speaking with the student in private and as soon as possible after the disruptive behavior. There are students with diagnoses which can make behavioral regulation (excessive talking) more difficult to manage and private conversations allow this type of information to be disclosed.

- If it becomes clear that a student is unable or unwilling to amend the behavior, inform him or her that they will need to attend your office hours or schedule an appointment with you prior to the next class meeting. If the behavior is so disruptive that it is impeding the learning of other students, you may direct the student to leave the class and schedule an appointment with you prior to the next class.

- If the student does not cease the behavior and refuses to follow your direction, notify University Police for assistance.

- It is appropriate to call police any time a disruptive behavior escalates, or when it is reasonable to interpret behavior (including verbal statements) as threatening or harassing to you or to other members of the class.

- It is important that you report any immediate class removal to your department head. OSCR should also be notified of this action at (217) 333-3680. The chair and/or OSCR can assist you in developing a plan of action to be taken prior to the next class meeting. The plan may include a conversation between the student and the chair and/or OSCR staff, which will focus on the conditions for the student's return to class, strategies the student can pursue to participate appropriately in class, the consequences of further disruptive behavior, and referral to university resources.

Meeting with the disruptive student:

If you feel secure, it may be helpful for you to meet privately with a disruptive student following a confrontation or removal from class. You may also wish to request a meeting with a student who has displayed unacceptable behavior even when a confrontation has not resulted.

In either case, the meeting is an opportunity for the student to understand the inappropriateness of his or her behavior, and for you to discuss strategies that will enable the student to continue in the class. It may also serve as an opportunity for you to educate the student about campus resources (e.g. DRES, CC, MHC, etc.) which may help him/her more effectively manage the behavior. You may consider having a third person present, or leave the door open so that someone in the office can assist you if the situation becomes confrontational.

In the meeting:

- Remain calm. This may be difficult if the student is agitated. However, your reasoned response will assist the student in addressing the behavior in question.

- Do not take the student's behavior or remarks personally, even though they may be directed at you. Disruptive behavior generally results from other life problems or general academic frustration.

- Be specific about the inappropriate behavior that the student has exhibited. Describe the behavior; do not focus on the person. Explain why the behavior is problematic.

- Ask questions and summarize what you hear the student saying. Respectful concern may enable you as the educator to help the student be successful both in your class and in his or her general university experience.

- Focus on areas of agreement between you and the student.

- Recommend additional resources on campus, such as the Student Assistance Center, Counseling Center, or other appropriate services. If you and the student are comfortable, offer to escort the student to the appropriate office or to have the student call in your presence.

- Conclude by summarizing any resolution and by articulating expectations for the future. Be clear that continued inappropriate behavior will be referred to OSCR.

b) Outside the classroom, or in a department or office:

You may encounter disruptive behavior by students in a campus office, during office meetings, before or after scheduled classes, or in spontaneous encounters on campus. Should this occur, strategies for responding to the student generally are the same as those outlined previously.

In general:

- Remain calm, and speak in a controlled manner. This will prevent the situation from escalating and may diffuse the tension.

- Identify a more appropriate place and time to discuss the matter if the problem is disrupting normal business operations or professional duties. Remember you may ask a student to leave an office if you're unable to assist them or their behavior is inappropriate.

- Suggest a short break or a "time out" to allow the student to regain composure, or explain that if the student cannot maintain composure, you cannot discuss the issue at the present time.

- Explain to the student that you will call police if inappropriate behavior persists or if a threat is made. Of course, it is important to differentiate between student behavior that is threatening or harassing, or is repeatedly disruptive, and speech that is uncivil, rude, or politically contentious. The latter does not generally warrant the intervention of police officers, however, if persistent and seriously disruptive, other disciplinary action may be warranted.

LEVEL TWO
DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR REQUIRING COORDINATED RESPONSE

If the disruptive behavior is not an immediate threat, but involves an ongoing problem that seems to be escalating or devolving into a situation that feels intimidating, harassing or threatening, you should discuss the situation with your department chair, supervisor, and the Office for Student Conflict Resolution at (217) 333-3680. If you or others feel unsafe, you can also contact University Police.

If necessary, OSCR may refer your concern to the BIT. A team approach will be employed to assess the situation and develop a coordinated institutional response. The Team will assess the level of disruption/danger to individuals and to the university community. The objectives of such an assessment include providing appropriate levels of support for you and others involved; demonstrating concern for other students who may be affected by the student exhibiting the

behavior in question and, deciding how to handle the student's behavioral problems. The BIT will notify you when it has made a decision regarding the course of action to be taken regarding the student's behavior and how it may support you in case of subsequent behavior issues.

The BIT membership includes:

- Office of the Dean of Students
- Student Assistance Center
- Office for Student Conflict Resolution
- University of Illinois Police Department
- Counseling Center
- McKinley Health Center
- Legal Counsel
- Housing

OSCR may follow-up with the disruptive student directly. Various disciplinary processes can be employed at this point, including, under certain circumstances, interim suspension of the student or the negotiation of behavioral expectations, pending a formal disciplinary investigation.

After hours concerns:
If you are concerned for the welfare of a University of Illinois student between the hours of 5:00pm and 8:30am and would like to consult, you may call the Emergency Dean at (217) 333-0050. The Emergency Dean is a full-time employee of the university who volunteers to be on call at home. If there is an imminent concern for the safety of the student or others, bypass the Emergency Dean and call UIPD at (217) 333-1216 or 911.

LEVEL THREE
LIFE THREATENING INCIDENT OR IMMEDIATE THREAT

Whenever there is an incident that risks the safety of any person or is life-threatening, you should always contact police immediately at (217) 333-1216 or 911. This includes behavior that could be classified as unlawful harassment, stalking, suicidality, or a threat of death or serious physical harm. University Police is staffed 24 hours per day and can dispatch law enforcement personnel to assist you at your campus location.

After a disruptive incident has occurred and a report has been prepared, police will work with the Office of the Dean of Students and other campus offices in responding to the incident. You can expect these and other offices to provide appropriate consultation and assistance on an ongoing basis when a serious problem has occurred.

When an incident is sufficiently serious and attracts media attention, senior officers of the Student Affairs Division and police will take the lead in communicating with the press, in conjunction with Public Affairs and other offices, as appropriate. If you are contacted by the media, please refer them to Public Affairs.

COUNSELING CENTER & SUICIDE PREVENTION

You can consult with the Counseling Center about a student who seems to be showing signs of emotional or psychological distress, suicidal thoughts, unusual behavior, or difficulty in adjusting to college life. The Suicide Prevention Team in the CC assesses the behavior of students who pose a potential risk to themselves. A Suicide Incident Report (link to form) should be submitted to the CC as soon as possible whenever a student has disclosed suicidal ideation, threatened or attempted suicide. If you are in the presence of a suicidal student, call UIPD at 333.1216 to request that a Crisis Intervention Trained (CIT) Officer be dispatched to your location to assess whether the risk the student poses to him or herself is imminent and warrants a more thorough mental health evaluation.

The Counseling Center is located on the second floor of the Turner Student Services Building, and can be reached at (217) 333-3704. Its experienced and well-trained staff of psychologists and counselors can assist you in determining an appropriate response to your concern. Counseling Center professionals are also available to present workshops for faculty and staff regarding assisting emotionally distressed students.

WHEN A COMPLAINT IS FORWARDED TO THE OFFICE OF STUDENT CONFLICT RESOLUTION:

When you report disruptive behavior (Level One, Two, or Three) to OSCR, staff will investigate the matter to determine if it constitutes a violation of the Student Code. Following receipt of your complaint, the student may be required to meet with a disciplinary officer to discuss her or his behavior. In some cases, the complaint may be resolved without further involvement on your part. In others, a formal disciplinary hearing before the appropriate subcommittee on student conduct may be appropriate. If this is the case, you may be invited to participate in the hearing as a witness. The purpose of the hearing is to discuss the facts of the case, to hear the accused student's perspective, and to determine whether a violation has occurred and, if so, how the university will respond. Students who are found responsible for a violation of the Student Code will receive one formal sanction and may also receive any number of educational sanctions, which include reflective essays, research papers, substance abuse education, violence prevention programming, community service, or other remedies designed to discourage future misconduct or deemed appropriate given the nature of the violation. Violations of a more serious nature may warrant dismissal from the university. Disciplinary decisions take into considerations the needs of both the campus community and the accused student, but the overarching goal is to promote an educational environment conducive to student success.

If you believe a student is experiencing difficulty exhibiting appropriate behavior because of a disability, please report the situation to Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES) so that they can provide appropriate assistance. As all students are expected to comply with the Student Code, the existence of a disability will not constitute an excuse for problematic behavior. Please note that your decision to forward a complaint to OSCR should be based solely on the student's behavior and not on your suspicions regarding the student's ability status.

REMOVAL OF A STUDENT FROM CAMPUS

While you, or University Police, may order a student to leave a class session in which he or she is displaying disruptive behavior, removal from campus cannot occur without a formal disciplinary investigation and is only considered in the most egregious of cases.

THE ACCUSED STUDENT'S RIGHTS AND SUPPORT

As always in situations involving students, you should observe appropriate confidentiality. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) protects the privacy of student education records (including disciplinary records), and the student may inspect only that information which relates to him/her. UIUC expects students to be treated as independent, responsible, and adult members of the university community. They also have due process rights that must be respected. A student who believes that he or she has been treated improperly in the aftermath of an incident may seek assistance through established departmental, school, division and university grievance procedures.

DOCUMENTATION

Resolving disruption can be helped if the specific behavior is documented, including dates, times, brief descriptions of what happened, and the names of witnesses who may have observed the behavior. Such documentation should always be factual and not include personal interjections.

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE FOR RESPONDING TO DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS

Disruptive student
A student whose behavior or conduct disrupts the learning environment or is directly or indirectly threatening to self or others.

Imminent threat to self or others:
Police:
911 (non campus phone)
9.911 (campus phone)

Potential harm to self or others:
Counseling Center: (217) 333-3704
McKinley Health Center: (217) 333-2705
Mental Health Clinic
Office of the Dean of Students: (217) 333-0050
Student Assistance Center Dean on Duty
After Hours Emergency Dean
UIPD: (217) 333-1216

To report recurrent disruptions and potential violations of the student code of conduct:
Office of Student Conflict Resolution: (217) 333-1216

Consultations or questions about how to respond:
Office of the Dean of Students: (217) 333-0050
Student Assistance Center Dean on Duty
Office of Student Conflict Resolution: (217) 333-3680
Counseling Center: (217) 333-3704

NOTES

This guide was adapted, with permission, from the following publications:

- University of Southern California, Disruptive and Threatening Student Behavior: Guidelines for Faculty and Staff
- California State University, Northridge, Responding to Disruptive or Threatening Student Behavior: A Guide for Faculty and Staff
- California State University, Los Angeles, Disruptive and Threatening Student Behavior: Guidelines for Faculty and Staff