

Managing Disruptive Student Behavior On Campus

By Robyn Coombs, Psy.D. and Rodney Bowers, Dean of Students; Associate Provost for Student Affairs

Counseling and Psychological Services

National trends have shown an increase in disrespectful, disruptive, and even violent student behavior on campuses, which interferes with the quality of student life. Florida Tech is not an exception to these national trends, and the number of reported incidents of disrespectful and disruptive behavior has increased in recent years. Individual faculty and staff members are encouraged to provide a first-level response to problem student behavior unless they feel threatened or the behavior warrants more serious attention by the university. Therefore, it is important for us to be able to identify problem behaviors and determine the appropriate course of action. The primary goal should be to help prevent problems from initially occurring. However, if prevention fails, then faculty and staff should be prepared to identify, address, and attempt to resolve the problems. Furthermore, while the university environment is a place where the free exchange of ideas and concepts can take place in an atmosphere that allows for debate and disagreement, all classroom behavior and discourse should reflect the values of respect and civility. Both students and faculty/staff share the responsibility to maintain an appropriate learning environment that should reflect these values.

What is disruptive behavior...

- ✓ Frequent interference with the classroom environment
- ✓ Intimidating or harassing someone through words and /or behavior
- ✓ Threats of physical assault or retaliatory behavior
- ✓ Violation of syllabus expectations or rules
- ✓ Excessive and unreasonable demands for time and attention in and out of the classroom environment
- ✓ Inability to be redirected towards consistent appropriate behavior despite instructor feedback

Behavior that can be misinterpreted as disruptive...

- ✓ Cultural differences
- ✓ Needing additional time or attention for a specific reason or problem
- ✓ Situational frustration or stress
- ✓ Disagreements or differences of opinion

Some possible reasons for disruptive behavior...

- ✓ Confusion about classroom expectations
- ✓ Difficulty transitioning from pre-college classroom norms to university academic and classroom standards
- ✓ Underlying psychological condition
- ✓ Lack of experience with assertiveness skills

Preventing problematic behavior...

- ✓ Be knowledgeable about student conduct and behavior as indicated in the student handbook, as well as establish and enforce the standards for classroom behavior for all students, in conformance with the principles of academic freedom.
- ✓ Model the behavior you expect, such as coming to class on time and prepared.
- ✓ Treat students firmly, but with fairness and respect.
- ✓ Connect with students by learning their names, encouraging them to talk to you before or after class, and arranging seating so that you can move among the class.
- ✓ Spend time in class discussing student, faculty/staff, and the university expectations, such as expecting students to maintain high standards of personal integrity and to respect the rights, privileges, and property of other people.
- ✓ Elicit feedback from students and offer consistent, continuous feedback to students.
- ✓ Observe non-disruptive students for cues and feedback: Is the class following the material? Is a specific student's behavior affecting others? etc.
- ✓ Correct innocent mistakes and minor infractions gently
- ✓ Provide a general word of caution to the class

Preventative measures are simple tools in which you are able to provide clear communication, as well as impress upon students the importance of respectful classroom behavior and their responsibility for making the classroom a meaningful and productive place. Being proactive and directly confronting disruptive behavior can enhance student learning.

Addressing problematic behavior...

- ✓ Ask yourself if you have done anything to contribute to the conflict with a student, such as not making certain expectations clear in your syllabus.
- ✓ Address the behavior and never the student, and attempt to speak with the student during a private conversation. Provide a clear description of the problem behaviors, why it is a problem, expectations of future behavior, and the specific consequence(s) of continued problems.
- ✓ Consult with other instructors and/or university personnel about possible solutions if disruptive behavior exists, such as the department Dean, Dean of Students, Academic Support, or Counseling Center staff.
- ✓ Ask the student to leave the class, if desired, until the concerns are resolved.
- ✓ Document all problem behaviors in writing, including the dates, a clear description of the behavior, and the actions taken.
- ✓ Follow through on all stated consequences, as failure to do this encourages the continuation of undesirable behavior.
- ✓ Keep all interactions with the student calm and respectful.

Classroom disruption by students constitutes a significant breach of the behavioral expectations at the university. You should respond directly to these problematic behaviors that are disruptive to the academic environment. Experience indicates that despite the common fear that responding to problem behaviors will escalate the behavior, the opposite is true. Concurrently, other students have expressed gratitude when faculty members respond quickly and effectively to problem behaviors. However, if you feel threatened, seek assistance immediately from other faculty and staff, campus security, and/or university personnel.

Overall...

- ✓ Display openness to the student.
- ✓ Listen actively, with interest and concern, for requests and intentions.
- ✓ Avoid emotional reactions.
- ✓ Talk in a calm, even voice, despite the student's level of emotion.
- ✓ Repeat back the essence of what the student has told you.
- ✓ Avoid making judgmental remarks.
- ✓ Involve yourself to the extent that you are comfortable.

Many faculty and staff members generally find it helpful to consult with one of the offices below prior to confronting problem behaviors.

Rodd Newcombe	Academic Support Services	ext. 7110	newcombe@fit.edu
Rodney Bowers	Dean of Students Office	ext. 8080	rbowers@fit.edu
James R. Oelschlager	Counseling & Psychological Services	ext.8050	joelschl@fit.edu
Kevin Graham	Campus Security	ext. 8111	kgraham@fit.edu

Counseling & Psychological Services has additional resources for staff and faculty at www.fit.edu/caps/ including “**Recognizing Students at Risk**” that reviews problematic behaviors in greater detail as well as how to make a successful referral to campus resources.

In the next issue “Learning Disabilities and College Life”

Beyond the Classroom is a joint effort of
Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)
and the Office of Student Affairs

Florida Institute of Technology