

STUDENT CONDUCT IN INSTRUCTIONAL SETTINGS

Policy Statement and Purpose

The University is a community of learners. Students, as well as faculty, have a responsibility for creating and maintaining an environment that supports effective instruction. In order for faculty members (including graduate teaching assistants) to provide and students to receive effective instruction in classrooms, laboratories, studios, online courses, and other learning areas, the University expects students to conduct themselves in an orderly and cooperative manner. Occasionally, faculty members find that they cannot provide effective instruction because of disruptions which may result from such conduct as loud or prolonged side conversations; exaggerated movement of papers, books or other materials; excessive displays of affection; disruptions in online conversations; and unnecessary or repetitive questions or comments which seek to delay the normal instructional process.

Recognizing that part of the University's mission is to provide instruction through classroom and online teaching, the following faculty guidelines are intended to supplement existing University policies and to suggest alternative methods of addressing student conduct in the classroom setting or in online courses or discussions. Because both University instruction and human behavior vary greatly, these guidelines are not intended to be exclusive. Accordingly, faculty members may and should exercise their best judgment in setting standards of conduct for their classes and taking a reasonable approach in responding to any disruptive situation that confronts them.

Procedures

Instructional Setting Management Strategies

A faculty member may wish to include in a course syllabus, and/or describe in an introductory lecture, expected standards for class conduct. The following are some suggested strategies for class management:

1. Indicate that University students are entitled to receive instruction free from interference by other members of the class, a premise which supports an expectation that courtesy and consideration will be extended to one's fellow students and the instructor. A faculty member may also find it useful to specify that particular conduct is likely to be disturbing and thus inappropriate in the instructional setting, e.g., side conversations or leaving one's seat during a lecture.
2. Designate the last row of classroom seats (or some other area) as the available space for late arrivals and early departures. While students are expected to attend classes during assigned times, a faculty member may wish to encourage use of designated seats when variation is necessary. If unusual attendance circumstances exist, students may be encouraged to discuss alternative arrangements with the instructor in advance.
3. Distribute, post, or place in the course syllabus, the section titled "Student Conduct in the Classroom" which appears in the Undergraduate Bulletin.
4. Incorporate on course syllabi a statement that invites students with disabilities to self-identify.
5. Explain procedures that the faculty member intends to follow if class disruption occurs.
6. Designate in the syllabus that participation is a course requirement, and that students may be penalized by a lowering of the participation grade for disruptive behavior (see **Other Considerations**).

Options for Responding to Disruptive Students

1. Discussion with the student: An obvious initial approach in dealing with a disruptive student is discussion with the student about the behavior causing the disruption. This discussion should not be conducted in public. Should a discussion with a student reveal or signal to a faculty member that substance abuse or psychological disturbance may be a factor in the student's behavior, the faculty member may refer the student to the University Counseling Services (UCS). If circumstances warrant, the faculty member may call and arrange an appointment for the student at UCS or accompany the student to the Counseling Center. Faculty members are encouraged to document the date and nature of conversations with students regarding unacceptable class behavior.

Should discussions with a student indicate that disruptive behavior might be related to a disability,

faculty may

- a. call the Coordinator for Services for Students with Disabilities;
- b. refer disruptive students to University Counseling Services and/or the Academic Success Center;

and

c. refer to *A Handbook on Educational Access: A Faculty Guide to Reasonable Accommodations and Academic Adjustments for Students with Disabilities* for further information.

2. Consultation with departmental chairperson or other resource personnel: if conversation with a disruptive student does not produce a change in behavior, or if an initial disruptive incident is severe, a faculty member may discuss the situation with his or her departmental chairperson. For other assistance in dealing with the student, the faculty member may contact the Assistant Dean of the school or college, Director of the University Counseling Services, or the Dean of Student Affairs. If appropriate, a staff member from one of these offices may attend a class to observe the disruptive behavior in question. Or, in the case of online courses or discussions, be invited to read the e-mails in question.
3. Provision of written warning: if disruptive class behavior by a student is repetitive or severe, a faculty member may provide a written warning to the student regarding the unacceptable conduct. Generally, a written warning is most effective if it includes the following:
 - a. the nature of the unacceptable behavior;
 - b. the detrimental impact of the behavior on the class and the instructor;
 - c. possible consequences if the behavior continues.

A written warning is not required as a prerequisite to filing formal charges against a student pursuant to the University's Rules and Procedures.

4. Options in the event of extreme disruption: Several options are available to faculty members in the event the nature of the student disruption is so severe as to make continuation of effective instruction impossible under the circumstances. In such instances, a faculty member may:
 - a. direct that a student leave the class for the remainder of the class period. In issuing a directive to leave, the faculty member is the sole judge to whether a student's conduct is sufficiently disruptive to warrant dismissal from the classroom;
 - b. recess the class and contact the University Counseling Services for assistance. This action is generally appropriate if the behavior of the student appears to indicate substance abuse or psychological disturbance;
 - c. recess the class and contact the VCU Campus Police for assistance. This action is generally appropriate if a disruptive student refuses to leave the class and assistance is required in order to remove the offending student from the classroom;
 - d. adjourn the class and seek such assistance as the faculty member deems necessary.

5. In the case of online classes and discussions:
 - a. set expectations for online discussions and enforce them. Delete inappropriate e-mail discussions and notify the student sending that their posting was inappropriate. For issues not directly related to the class but of interest to class members establish an online location, such as the "water cooler" or "parking lot;"
 - b. diffuse inappropriate e-mails privately;
 - c. confront disruptive students directly, either in person or by phone. e-mail is a written record available for grievance;
 - d. direct the student sending inappropriate messages to post assignments to only the faculty member;
 - e. limit the student's access for sending electronic messages to other students.

6. Submission of formal charges: The University's **Rules and Procedures** apply to all members of the University community, including students. Section III(A) (5) of the document provides that "[n]o person, either singly or in concert with others, shall willfully: a. Disrupt or prevent the peaceful or orderly conduct of classes, lectures, meetings or other university functions, or interfere with the lawful freedom of other persons, including invited speakers, to express their views." If a faculty member believes that a student has violated Section III(A) (5), a charge in this regard may be filed against the student by submitting a written statement to the Dean of Student Affairs of the appropriate campus. Section V of the Rules and Procedures describes in detail the procedures by which a charge under that document is processed and resolved within the University. (Faculty members are reminded that the Rules and Procedures also provide a mechanism for filing charges against students for their behavior on campus, but outside of the classroom.)

Other Considerations

1. Based on the assumption that the course grade should be a reflection of the student's mastery of the subject matter in the course, the faculty member may not penalize disruptive behavior by lowering the course grade, unless class conduct has been identified on the syllabus as a course requirement.
2. Although a student's behavior may cause a temporary disruption in a class, this does not justify action on the part of the instructor that is retaliatory or vindictive in nature.