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Dealing with Disruption

Increasingly, faculty members are called on to deal with behavioral problems with students (or, on occasion, with non-students). It is important for you to be prepared to deal with occurrences as they arise: to exercise good **judgment**, to **communicate** to the appropriate colleagues and offices, and to **document** the details of any interactions that have occurred.

Disruptive Behavior

As faculty, we have a responsibility not only to maintain the academic integrity of our teaching and research, but also to maintain an orderly environment for the learning process.

The Florida Administrative Code specifically states, **6C5-4.002 (1) (a) Disruptive conduct is that conduct which interferes with the orderly operations of the University. Disruptive conduct may result in disciplinary action.**

(Note: The full text of this and related statutes can be read in the current Student Code of Conduct, or on the link <http://www.fau.edu/dean/Forms.php>. That text includes an extensive categorization of disruptive practices and procedures for filing complaints with the University).

Disruptive conduct might include such things as:

- Cell phone use: receiving or making calls, or text messaging during class (the latter is emerging as a new method of cheating during exams)
- Reading newspapers or magazines during class
- Late arrivals or early departures from class
- Conversations with other students during lectures
- Discussions not related to the topic of the class, such as political or religious topics
- Offensive profane or obscene language
- Inappropriate dress
- Abusive or otherwise inappropriate behavior during encounters inside or outside of class

There is, of course, a level of discretion and judgment involved in many situations. One student may arrive late to a class, or may need to leave early, and is discreet in the movement, providing little disruption; another student may make quite a ruckus with his/her arrival or departure. A faculty member should be aware of how student behavior affects others in the learning process and maintain control, so that all students have a fair opportunity to learn without distraction. In such situations, it is important to communicate with your colleagues. Your department Chair can provide good, experienced counsel to help you respond to unusual situations.

If you feel strongly about particular kinds of behavior, it is advisable to include that information in the course syllabus, so that students are aware of what is expected of them from the beginning of the semester. Feel free to consult with your department Chair for assistance in creating an effective syllabus.

If you do include guidelines in your syllabus, it is a good idea to set out what is expected rather than what is forbidden. If you try to enumerate all types of unacceptable behavior, students may come up with disruptions that were never mentioned. A sentence such as “you are expected to be attentive to the lecture and discussion, respectful of others’ questions and arguments” covers behavior quite effectively without setting a confrontational mood. The important thing is to communicate expectations early. It is easier to establish customary expectations than to correct deviations.

When you do encounter a problem with disruptive behavior, the first action will usually be to talk **privately** to the student in question (but **never** in an office with the door closed). Many students are not aware that their behavior is disruptive and, once it is pointed out, will adjust their behavior appropriately. If you are uncomfortable approaching a student directly, please work with your department Chair.

How does one handle a situation in which the student does not respond or responds in a hostile manner? If you encounter this, you should conclude the discussion and document what you said, when you said it, and how the student responded. Discuss the matter with your department Chair so that you can decide upon the next step in the University’s response to the problem. It is particularly important to document the step that you have taken to deal with the situation, so that if there is a persistent problem that requires the student be removed from class, there is documentation of your efforts to communicate with the student. The documentation should be a factual description of the incident, rather than a record of your feelings. It should, ideally, be written close to the time of the incident and emailed to your department Chair and to yourself, in order to provide a dated document.

If the student refuses to change his/her behavior, a variety of responses are available. The student can be removed from class and, in extreme cases, banned from the University grounds. If the situation deteriorates to such a point, please work with your department Chair who will then work with the Dean of Students and, if necessary, with the FAU Police Department to enforce the decision to discipline the student.

Students, as well as faculty, have the right to due process. They do not have the right to continue disruptive behavior, but they may appeal disciplinary decisions. This process is managed through the Dean of Students Office Judicial Procedures. For information on standard procedures, see the Student Code of Conduct at <http://www.fau.edu/dean/Forms.php> or contact the Associate Dean of Students, Susan Fulks, 7-3547, SU 226, sfulks@fau.edu.

Threatening Behavior

If you encounter behavior that you believe endangers you, your students, or any University employee, you must use good judgment and respond swiftly. If you find yourself in such a situation, you must immediately contact University Police, 7-3500, after which you must contact your department Chair. Your first priority should be your own protection, that of your students, and/or that of University employees. Such situations might include:

- Verbal threats of violence
- Use of weapons of any sort
- Angry and abusive language and actions
- An actual physical attack

Once the University police has been contacted, make sure that you document the situation and confer with your department Chair about the situation. The department Chair will then contact all appropriate authorities within the University community, including Associate Dean Barclay Barrios and the Dean of Student Affairs, and will follow up with the University police.

Sexual Harassment

The University has specific guidelines on sexual harassment, which are posted in full at <http://wise.fau.edu/eop/>, under the title “Regulation 5.010, Anti-Discrimination & Anti-Harassment”.

Sexual harassment is defined as any unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other communication or physical conduct of a sexual nature from any person when:

1. Submission to such conduct or request either is made explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of academic achievement; or
2. Submission to or rejection of such conduct or request by an individual is used as the basis for an employment or academic decision affecting such individual; or
3. Such conduct or request unreasonably interferes with an individual's work or academic performance or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment for working or learning, or
4. Submission to such conduct or request either is made explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment.

Note: The definition of sexual harassment excludes the use of sexual material in a classroom setting for academic purposes. If you need advice about how to present sexual material in classrooms or how to respond to student concerns about such material, contact your Chair or Associate Dean Barclay Barrios.

Faculty sometimes experience sexual harassment from students when a student offers “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other communication or physical conduct of a sexual nature” that interferes with the faculty member’s “work ... or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment for working”.

If you believe that you are experiencing sexual harassment by a student or by a University employee, please make sure to discuss the matter with your Chair. If your discussion leads to the conclusion that you are, indeed, experiencing harassment, University policy requires a report to the Director of Equal Opportunity Programs, Paula Behul (7-3004, ADM 291, pbehul@fau.edu). Director Behul has responsibility for investigating such reports and resolving such situations.

In some circumstances, faculty also may observe the sexual harassment of students or other members of the University community. Such harassment must be reported to the Director of Equal Opportunity Programs, Paula Behul, or to one’s department Chair who then will contact Ms. Behul. Consult the URL above for a more complete discussion of the policy.