Responding to Disruption in the Classroom

UF Crisis Response Team
Spring Semester Workshop 2008
Helping the Disruptive Student

The intersection between sustaining the instructional/learning environment and providing supportive intervention for the student

What is Disruptive?

- Examples of disruptive behaviors may include:
  - Repeated interruption of classroom process by exaggerated late entries of early departures
  - Persistent talking without recognition or repeated selective interruption of peers or instructor
  - Using abusive language
  - Engaging in ad hominine attacks
  - Repeatedly using cell phones or pagers
  - Confrontational behaviors towards peers or instructor
  - Making physical threats towards self or others

What is Disruption?

- How do we define what is "disruptive":
  Gary Pavela describes classroom disruption as behavior a reasonable person would view as being likely to substantially or repeatedly interfere with the conduct of the class. We may also think in terms of the learning endeavor. That is, behavior that by its nature and expression interferes with the collaborative teaching and learning environment. (Pavela, G. (2001). Synfax pp. 2024 – 2025)

Recognizing the Severely Troubled and Disruptive Student

- Less likely to accept help and may view efforts as intrusive and unwanted
- More intense expression of emotions with little regard for classroom decorum or deference to the role of instructor
- Poor self-care and lack of empathy for others
- Exaggerated attendance problems, tardiness and sense of entitlement
- Verbally antagonistic to peers/instructor
The Severely Troubled and Disruptive Student cont.

- Unwilling to collaborate with team members and assuming responsibility
- Difficulty communicating, slurred speech or confused content
- Confused sense of reality, highly suspicious
- Stalking behaviors, inappropriate forms of contact such as veiled or threatening e-mails
- Hyper-vigilant and reactive to others
- Veiled references or overt suicidal or homicidal thoughts (May be in oral and written formats)

Tips for Responding: First Steps

- Goals for intervention:
  - De-escalate the intensity of an incident
  - Confine concerns to manageable issue
  - Consult with and refer to resources
  - Process
    - Attend to your personal need for safety
    - Maintain a safe physical distance
    - Request the person respect the distance
    - Avoid touching the person or allowing them to touch you

Tips for Responding: First Steps cont.

- Attempt to maintain a calm demeanor
- Avoid escalating voice level and use of provocative language
- Attempt to "contain" the disruption by offering to talk later, move the discussion away from trigger topics
- Keep bystanders/observers from becoming involved

Tips for Responding to the Severely Troubled and Disruptive Student

- Use consultation resources
  - Dean of Students, Counseling Center, Student Mental health
- Develop a plan
  - Work with your supervisor or department chair
  - Have someone meet the student with you
  - Meet in an area where resources are available
- Document your interactions and any follow up
  - If you think the student may become physically agitated, contact campus police at (2-1111) and have them present
Basic Helping Skills

- Listen to what the student says and convey an attitude of sincerity
- Do not assure the student confidentiality
- Focus on an aspect of the problem that can be managed
- What needs to be changed?
- Identify resources
- What has worked in the past that is helpful?
- Avoid giving advice or making promises

Helping the Suicidal Person

- Listen to the person; Allow time
- Ask the question
  - Are you thinking about killing yourself
  - Are you thinking about not wanting to live
- Promote the idea of getting help
- Refer to campus and community resources
  - Counseling Center (2-1575) or Student Mental Health (2-1171)
  - After Hours: Alachua County Crisis Center 264-6789
  - If an emergency, call UFPD at 392-1111
- Consult with your supervisor and document your interactions and efforts to help

Helping Skills cont

- Encourage the student to use help and offer ways to access the resources
  - Have your resource list available
- Allow the student time to talk
- If concerned, ask the student if s/he is considering suicide – Often the person is looking for someone to notice their suffering. If yes, get help
- Discuss your experience with your supervisor; Plan for next steps
Example Classroom Behavior Statements for your Syllabus

1. Classroom attendance is a necessary part of this course. You are allowed no more than x number of unexcused absences.

2. Classroom participation is a part of your grade in this course. To participate you must attend class having prepared the materials for the day. Questions and comments must be relevant to the topic at hand.

3. You are expected to be on time. Class starts promptly at x. You should be in your seat and ready to begin class at this time. Class ends at x. Packing up your things early is disruptive to others around you and to myself.

4. Raise your hand to be recognized.

5. Classroom discussion should be civilized and respectful to everyone and relevant to the topic we are discussing. Everyone is entitled to their opinion. Classroom discussion is meant to allow us to hear a variety of viewpoints. This can only happen if we respect each other and our differences.

6. Any discussion from class that continues on any listserve or class discussion list, should adhere to these same rules and expectations.

7. Any continued disruption of class will result in a report to the Director of Student Judicial Affairs for a conduct code infraction. After one warning, if the disruption continues, you will be asked to leave the classroom for the remainder of class.

8. You are expected to do your own work. Cheating, plagiarism and any other forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Please refer to the University of Florida Student Honor Code by which all students are expected to abide. Grade penalties that will be issued to you should you be found responsible of an honor code violation will be (E in course, E on assignment, 1 letter grade lower in course, redo assignment, etc.)

9. Identify on your syllabus what your students can expect from you. Being prepared for class, being on time, not leaving early, being respectful toward your students and their opinions, are all examples.

No snow policy - in writing
TOP 10 WAYS TO RESOLVE SITUATIONS WITH DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS

10. Don’t assume students know how to behave in your class. Tell them what you expect.

9. List all of your expectations in your course syllabus. Be as specific as possible. Remember; an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

8. Tell students what will happen if they don’t meet your expectations. Discuss possible consequences with them.

7. If students are engaging in (relatively) minor disruptions such as reading the newspaper, make a general announcement about how that is disruptive to your teaching and disrespectful.

6. If the disruption continues, ask to speak with individual students outside of class. Focus on remaining respectful even if the students aren’t.

5. Follow up this discussion in writing. Summarize the key points that you made and the consequences for the student if they don’t comply.

4. If you are ever concerned about your safety or that of other students in your class, don’t hesitate to contact the University Police Department.

3. If you can, try not to think of these students as “problems” or as “difficult”. Instead, try and think of these students as students who are in need of assistance. Many times when we address these situations, we find that there are a variety of issues that can be contributing to the student’s behavior. Most of the time, it is not the case that a student is intentionally trying to disrupt the class.

2. Don’t be afraid to ask for help. This is not a sign of weakness or lack of classroom management skills. It is what the University expects of you. The more time you spend trying to address the one student who is causing problems, the less time you have to spend on the rest of the class. Consult with others. They may have already dealt with a similar situation.

1. Don’t hesitate to call the Dean of Students Office for advice. There is always a staff member on availability that has been trained to respond to a variety of classroom disruption issues who can talk you through a variety of ways to deal with your unique situation. They can be reached at 392-1261. Just ask for the staff member on availability.
# FACULTY & STAFF “911” GUIDE
## HELPING STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

### Students in Distress
The Division of Student Affairs has developed this informational guide to aid faculty and staff in assisting students that are experiencing difficulties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergency: 911</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University Police Department: 392-1111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dean of Students Office: 392-1261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling Center: 392-1575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Health Care Center: 392-1161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ombudsman Office: 392-1308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim Services: 392-5648</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol &amp; Other Drug Programs: 392-1161, x4281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing &amp; Residence Education: 392-2161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you are dealing with students in distress:
- Be aware of the location of the nearest telephone, whether it is within the building or a personal cell phone.
- If you are concerned for your safety or that of others, call 911 immediately.
- If the student is causing a disruption to the classroom or office environment but does not pose a threat:
  - discuss the situation with the student to address the inappropriate behavior.
  - ask the student to leave the room.

If in doubt, call the UF Police Department!

### Disruptive Student
A student whose conduct is disruptive or dangerous, verbal or physical threats, active threats of suicide and resisting help.

#### Potential Harm to Self or Others
- On Campus: UPD 392-1111
- Off Campus: GPD or ASO - 911

Then

### Troubled Student
A student who is troubled, confused, very sad, highly anxious, irritable, lacks in motivation and/or concentration, demonstrating bizarre behavior or thinking about suicide.

#### Consultation or Questions
- Counseling Center: 392-1575
- Student Mental Health: 392-1171

### Administrative/Judicial
- Dean of Students Office: 392-1261
- After Office Hours: Request Emergency Dean 392-1111

### Consultation or Emergency Counseling
- Counseling Center: 392-1575
- Student Mental Health: 392-1171

### Academic Status
- Assoc. Dean - College
- Department Chair or Program Coord.
Disruptive Student Behavior
The Student Conduct Code outlines the standards and expectations for students' conduct and behavior at the University of Florida. website: http://www.dso.ufl.edu/judicial/conductcode.php

Class Attendance
The university recognizes the right of the individual professor to make attendance mandatory. After due warning, professors can prohibit further attendance and subsequently assign a failing grade for excessive absences. Clearly communicate your attendance policy in your course syllabus. Absences count from the first class meeting.

In general, acceptable reasons for absence from class include illness, seriousfamily emergencies, special curricular requirements (e.g., judging trips, field trips, professional conferences), military obligation, severe weather conditions, religious holidays and participation in official university activities such as music performances, athletic competition or debate. Absences from class for court-imposed legal obligations (e.g., jury duty or subpoena) must be excused. Other reasons also may be approved. Students may be required to provide appropriate documentation to support their absence.

Students cannot attend classes unless they are registered officially or approved to audit with evidence of having paid audit fees.

Notification Letter from the Dean of Students Office
Students that experience a family or personal emergency (death in the family, unplanned hospitalization, etc.) may contact the Dean of Students Office and request notification letters be sent to their professors. The Dean of Students Office will issue notification letters to a student's faculty members if the situation will result in the student being absent for three or more days. Such letters are not excuse letters, as these absences have not been verified, but instead are courtesy letters for students that have reported an emergency and are unable to contact faculty members prior to their departure. Students are required to provide faculty members with appropriate documentation to support their absence.

Student Death Notification
In the event of the death of a currently enrolled student, an official notification of Student Death will be issued by the Dean of Students Office. Records pertaining to this student will be restricted or any other conduct that places another individual in reasonable fear of his or her safety through words or actions directed at that person, or substantially interferes with the working, educational or living environment of the individual, including stalking and racial harassment.

2. Sexual Harassment. Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for favors, and/or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when:
   a. Submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment or status in a university activity, or
   b. Submission to, or rejection of, such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment or decisions affecting such individual's employment or status in a University activity, or
   c. Such conduct has the purpose or effect of interfering with an individual's work or academic performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive employment or academic environment.

This publication adapted with permission from the University of Central Florida, Faculty 911 Guide.
### Q. What are some signs that a student may be in distress?

A student in distress may not be disruptive to others, but may exhibit behaviors which indicate something is wrong, show signs of emotional distress and indicate that assistance is needed. They may also be reluctant or unable to acknowledge a need for personal help. Behaviors may include:

1. Serious grade problems or a change from consistently passing grades to unaccountably poor performance.
2. Excessive absences, especially if the student has previously demonstrated consistent attendance.
3. Unusual or markedly changed patterns of interaction, i.e., avoidance of participation, excessive anxiety when called upon, domination of discussions, etc.
4. Other characteristics that suggest the student is having trouble managing stress successfully e.g., a depressed, lethargic mood; very rapid speech; swollen, red eyes; marked change in personal dress and hygiene; falling asleep during class.
5. Repeated requests for special consideration, such as deadline extensions, especially if the student appears uncomfortable or highly emotional while disclosing the circumstances prompting the request.
6. New or repeated behavior which pushes the limits of decorum and which interferes with effective management of the immediate environment.
7. Unusual or exaggerated emotional responses which are obviously inappropriate to the situation.

### Q. How should I respond to a disruptive student?

1. Remain calm and know who to call for help, if necessary. Find someone to stay with the student while calls to the appropriate resources are made. See referral numbers on the front of this publication.

2. Remember that it is NOT your responsibility to provide the professional help needed for a severely troubled/disruptive student. You need only to make the necessary call and request assistance.

3. When a student expresses a direct threat to themselves or others, or acts in a bizarre, highly irrational or disruptive way, call the University Police Department at (352) 392-1111.

### Q. How should I respond to a student that is troubled or showing signs of distress?

For students that are mildly or moderately troubled you can choose to handle them in the following ways:

1. Deal directly with the behavior/problem according to classroom protocol.
2. Address the situation on a more personal level.
3. Consult with a colleague, department head, Dean of Students Office professional, or a campus counseling professional at the Counseling Center or Student Mental Health Care Center.
4. Refer the student to one of the University resources. See referral phone numbers in this publication for help.
Q. How should I respond when a student is disrupting my class?

Faculty members have broad authority to manage their classrooms and establish reasonable guidelines for class discussions that ensure everyone has an opportunity to participate in an orderly manner. If you believe a student's behavior is inappropriate, consider a general word of caution rather than singling a student out or embarrassing the student. "If the behavior in question is irritating, but not disruptive, try speaking with the student after class. Most students are unaware of distracting habits or mannerisms, and have no intent to be offensive or disruptive. There may be rare circumstances where it is necessary to speak to a student during class about his or her behavior. Correct the student in a manner, indicating that further discussion can occur after class." (Pavela, 2001, ¶ 5).

If a student's behavior reaches the point that it interferes with your ability to conduct the class or the ability of other students to benefit from the class, the student should be asked to leave the room for the remainder of the class period. The student should be provided with a reason for this action and an opportunity to discuss the matter with you as soon as is practical. In such situations, consultation and referral to the Dean of Students Office may be appropriate.

This item adapted from ASJA Law & Policy Report, No. 26, ASJA & Gary Pavela, 2001.

Q. What are warning signs of disruptive student behavior?

Severely troubled or disruptive students exhibit behaviors that signify an obvious crisis and that necessitate emergency care. These problems are the easiest to identify. Examples include:

1. Highly disruptive behavior (e.g. hostility, aggression, violence, etc.).
2. Inability to communicate clearly (garbled, slurred speech; unconnected, disjointed, or rambling thoughts).
3. Loss of contact with reality (seeing or hearing things which others cannot see or hear; beliefs or actions greatly at odds with reality or probability).
4. Stalking behaviors.
5. Inappropriate communications (including threatening letters, e-mail messages, harassment).
6. Overtly suicidal thoughts (including referring to suicide as a current option or in a written assignment).
7. Threats to harm others.

Q. How to make a referral

While many students go to counseling or to the Dean of Students Office on their own, your exposure to students increases the likelihood you will identify signs or behaviors of distress in a student. What can you do?

- Recommend campus services to the student.
- Determine the student's willingness to go to a helping resource. Reassure the student that it is an act of strength to ask for help.
- Dispute the myth that only "weak or crazy" people go for counseling or use others for help.
- Remind them that campus counseling resources are free and confidential services.
- Offer to help make the initial contact with the helping resource.