

# Excerpts from Preventing Disruptive Behavior in Colleges

In national surveys of the public's attitude toward K-12 education since 1974, disruptive classroom behaviors, "discipline problems", have been cited as a major problem...

now disruptive behavior with college students, especially in the first few semesters of higher education. Bulletins, memos, website, reports, workshops, college faculty meetings...are now discussing a growing frequency of disruptive behavior in college classrooms, especially in the undergraduate years....

A recent survey examining student learning in the college classroom found disruptive student behavior to be a major learning inhibitor. Compounding this is the realization that most college faculty are ill prepared to handle this problem....

## C. Why Is This Happening ?

What are some of reasons for this increasing problem in our colleges?

1) Society tends to "define deviancy down", such that what was deviant a decade ago is pushed toward the norm. What was once "unacceptable behavior" often gives way under this tendency.<sup>18</sup>

2) Teachers are generally doing poorly at handling high school student disruptive behavior. Fifty percent of public school teachers quit the profession within five years. When asked why they left, the most frequent reason given is the stress around classroom disruptive behavior.<sup>19</sup>

These behaviors, not handled in the high schools, come into our college classes as high school teachers are pressured to pass these troubling students on.

3) In many colleges, entrance standards are being lowered to increase enrollment figures in order to boost registration to deal with shortfalls in the college budget. Often, a college goes for an immediate gain in enrollment by lowering admission standards in order to have to solve short-term cash flow problems. This is done rather than go for long term quality standards; the latter might help the college economically in the long run, but some campuses cannot wait that long. This short term gain in enrollment often brings with it students who are not only academically deficient, but also inadequately socialized to behave appropriately in college classrooms.

4) In conjunction with the above, to save money, colleges often increase class size. Thereby, a troubled student, without much attention in a large class, easily gets “lost”, and/or disruptive.

5) The college instructor is then left to handle many more students and classroom management often beyond his/her know-how.

6) Also, with economic cuts needed, often college services for students are the first supports that fall by the wayside. Students who are in need of such absent services carry their unattended problems and frustrations into the classroom.

7) As college populations become more multicultural and multilingual, diverse students can be intolerant of each other’s culture, language and values, or accidentally insult the “other.”

8) Students who came out of the “free” public schools may have the attitude: “Now I am paying for this college education, so now I have more freedom to do/say whatever I want.”

9) K-12 teachers have *some* training in pedagogy, classroom management, and teaching methods when they are hired. However, a college teacher is often hired on the basis of only his/her knowledge of the subject matter; often, little attention is given to the professor’s pedagogical skills.

10)...

11)...

... We need to take a look at all these behaviors and consider the best way to both prevent their occurrence and how to handle them.

Here is how we will proceed:

- A. First, it will be helpful to characterize the students who tend to be disruptive into categories. These descriptions of types of students will give us a better understanding of the causes of these behaviors, besides the specific behaviors themselves. Of course, any brief description of a group is an over-simplification; but such will provide us with a perspective to guide our constructive reactions to disruptive behaviors. And, it should be said explicitly in case I may be misunderstood below, that ethnicity, race, or economic class has no correlations with membership in these student categories.
- B. We will discuss specific disruptive behaviors typical of each of these student categories.
- C. Then, we will identify college disruptive behaviors that may arise regardless of the student category.
- D. Finally, we will discuss some extreme disruptive behaviors....

## **A. An Important Distinction:**

Not all behaviors that *you* find disruptive should be handled with an assertive response from you, especially in front of the class. Or, not all behaviors that are disruptive to you are: “discipline problems.” Some disruptive behaviors, if handled that way, are what I will call: *miscalls*: They should not be “gone after on the spot;” Instead, they should be handled a different way. And these “miscalls” when acted out by the teacher are often more disruptive to the teaching/learning of the class than the behavior that the teacher reprimanded in the first place.

To help us nail down this new way of seeing things, one has to re-form our understanding of when a behavior is a real disruptive behavior: “discipline problem”. Again, this is not easy to do – since we all tend to teach the way we were taught. And, we have been taught this *miscalling way to react* for years and years, ever since we were in kindergarten, or before, in our families....

## **B. An Online Video Demonstration: *Noticing Miscalls***

The best way to *nail down* [or should I say: *screw down*] this distinction, is to watch the mistake being made on this video....

## **C. Fifteen Typical Miscalls:**

### **1. The withdrawn student**

If a student is withdrawn while you are teaching, but not disrupting either the learning of the rest of the class or you as teacher, to reprimand this student in front of the class...

### **2. The overreacted to rule**

A rule is obviously a restriction that has been generalized to cover many situations. However, many rules originate from one instance that is obviously appropriate, and then are spread over too many instances inappropriately...

3....

## **What should we do about *these*?**

- (i) Students who argue about their lateness, absence, or your grading with great excuses and sob-stories to bolster whatever wrangling they can come up with to bend you.**

### **lateness:**

As I said above, you may want to save some empty seats near the entrance door to your classroom for latecomers to sit in when they arrive late. This will guard against these latecomers

parading in front of you as you are teaching. Then, if the student comes to class late, but sits in a seat near the entrance to the class then it would be a miscall to call attention to this student. Also, you may want to tell them that 3 lates = 1 absence [See below].

**absence:**

You may want to inform students in your Course Syllabus that, e.g., 3 absences = a 5pt. lower of their grade, and that, e.g., 3 lates = 1 absence. And/or they are marked absent once they have come in late when you have already taken attendance. If they want the “absence” fixed to a “late” they must see you after class, not during the class. If they forget: they are/were marked absent.

Another method...

**Campus-wide:**

The rest of the disruptive behaviors listed below are not only disruptive to the class but can also be dangerous campus-wide.

**18. (S) Students who threaten to harm themselves or others.**

Again, such behavior should not be discussed or handled during your class. Instead, ask that the student see you after class or at an office hour.

- If the student is threatening, e.g., suicide, your first stance should be to just listen. Allow the expression of self anger, depression, loss...and do not try to argue with it. Logic usually has no leverage here, and is often construed as, “You don’t understand.” After showing understanding about these feelings and showing care, make an appointment to see the student again, soon – that is if you think that the suicide is not imminent. Eventually, when you think he will go, refer this student to professional help.

Referring to professional help is an art. Follow these guidelines:...

**19. (T) Students who are physically violent, carry weapons...**

**20. (U) Are sexually assaulted/raped**

College students are more likely to be sexually assaulted than any other age group; in fact, four times more likely!<sup>5</sup> The best way to prevent and handle...

**21. (V) Do binge drinking**

College presidents agree that binge drinking is the most serious problem on campus...

## **What can each individual professor do?**

A professor can...

## **What can be done college-wide?**

Individual students almost always believe that most others on campus drink more heavily than they do; and the disparity between the perceived and the actual behaviors tends to be quite large. In short, they do not realize the seriousness and the consequences of their own drinking. Therefore, by....

## **Being Congruent. What is this? How?**

Students are more disruptive to a teacher when they feel an “enemy” relationship with that teacher, when they feel that the teacher is not “for them”, or is on the other side of the “fence”. Conversely, if students feel that the teacher is “for them”, is “with them”, allied in helping them, students tend to work with this teacher and be less disruptive.

One way to form an this “allied” relationship with students is by “being congruent” to them, and with them. ...

### **A. Using the Course Syllabus as a “Contract”**

Many disruptive behaviors in college classrooms can not only be handled but *prevented* by having an effective, clear Course Syllabus. Your Course Syllabus should be given out as the first order of business at the first meeting of the class. As with the college catalogue, this Course Syllabus should be a “contract” with your students. It should specify how students will be graded, what you will generally cover in the course, and the standards you will enforce in general in your course, including some behavioral standards.

The Course Syllabus has weight because the students in your course are paying [or their families are paying] for their college education. And, since this is not compulsory education as it was in K-12, your students signed up for this course. Their time is valuable [they may have a job, family obligations]. Thus, passing your course and heeding your requirements in your Course Syllabus gives you power to prevent disruptive behavior, if it is designed and thought out well.

You can decide how extensive you want it to be. You should design one that is congruent with your teaching style, your rules, procedures, and your department’s requirements. It should even contain some behavioral norms that should you want to be heeded during your course. You should explain each item in your Course Syllabus carefully and ask if there are any questions for each item. If there are any arguments about your course policies, e.g., grading, you should be able to refer them to this clear Course Syllabus “contract”. Therefore, it is essential that you clearly state your limits and standards well here.

## **B. What the Course Syllabus Should Contain**

If you want to be sure to curtail disruptive behaviors before they start, it would be best to include at least the following items in your Course Syllabus, designed congruently with how you really feel about these:

1. The course's catalogue number.
2. The name of the course.
3. Your name as instructor.
4. Your office hours.
5. The meeting times of the course.
6. How many credits are earned in this course.
7. A clear statement of your rules regarding certain behaviors.
8. A policy regarding cell phones, Ipods, etc.
9. Your grading policy regarding quizzes, tests, Exams, field work.
10. How class participation counts in the course.
11. Standards, and due dates.
12. The correct format for the Final Papers.
13. The competencies or "exit requirements" for completing the course.
- 14.
- 15.
- 16.
17. ...

Then, you can also state the: **Format Requirements for the Term Paper** in your Course Syllabus. Such, can save you a lot of work and student arguments. These below are only my recommendations. Of course, revise these to fit your own congruence:

- 1.
- 2.....

## **A. Teaching Methods: Pitfalls**

It's simple: If the students turn-off and tune out, they are more apt to act-out. If they are engaged in your teaching, following the train of what you are teaching, they are less apt to get off that train and cause problems. You need to use methods so that students act into the learning, instead of acting out.

An ineffective delivery style of teaching, your teaching methods, the way that you teach – can fuel disruptive behaviors. Usually a lecture plan that has these pitfalls below can fuel disruptive behavior:

- A. You only lecture; you do not involve the students in your teaching. You...

- B. Your teaching pace slows down, perhaps due to your handling too many student distractions/questions, such that students start to leave “the train of your lesson.”
- C. The class cannot...
- D.
- E.
- F. ...

**B. Repairing Pitfalls: 35 Engagement Methods**

If you can mend these pitfalls A. – H., students will be less likely to “turn off”, “tune out”, and then “act out” in your class. Here are some teaching methods that you may use to mend each of the above pitfalls:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4....

**A. FACTORS THAT WEAKEN ASSERTIVENESS**

**B. WORKING ON YOUR BLOCKS TO ASSERTIVENESS**

Another way to *prevent* disruptive behavior is for the class to see that you follow- thru with what you say in class and in your Course Syllabus. Do not fool yourself: it is easy to just not bother to do what you said you would do. But, if you take this easy tact, if you do not follow-thru, your credibility will wane with your students, and they will slowly know that you do not really mean what you say or warn. Then, you will plant the seeds for behaviors that may become very bothersome, more bothersome than following-thru.

One problem here is that often teachers lack the strength to assert themselves to follow thru. All the advice discussed in the past chapters will not be implemented well unless the instructor has the ability to assert him/herself. Some people can take stands, step up to the plate and assert themselves when the need arises, while others are torn, afraid and/or weak in this area.

If this is a problematic area for you, your students can usually tell. So, no matter how well you understand the previous chapters, you may be prone to have many class disruptions if you do not have the ability to assert yourself well.

However, we can locate the causes that weaken and block your assertiveness and remedy these. Here’s how:....

**LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS**

As you think about the application of some of the suggestions in the above chapters, you might find it useful to have some familiarity with legal parameters. Below are brief summaries of laws that may be relevant for you and your college. These parameters...

## **TRAINING EXERCISES and CHECKLIST**

Below are some Exercises and a Checklist that will help college instructors/administrators implement the concepts and skills that have been discussed in the previous chapters....

### **Checklist: 1-25**

**Before you start each semester, you might check these reminders:**

1. Are you inappropriately losing your patience with: "the well-to-do," "the immature," or "the learning disabled" students? [Chapter 2]
2. Can you distinguish the manipulators ("the game players") from the, e.g. "the immature"? [Chapter 2]
- 3...
- 4....

## **THIS BOOK AS A HANDBOOK**

**Appendix A. INDEX OF DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIORS and THEIR SOLUTIONS**

**Appendix B. USEFUL QUESTIONNAIRE FOR  
DEANS/CHAIRS/PROFESSORS:  
ASSESSING FREQUENCY/KINDS OF  
DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIORS**

**Appendix C. FREE ONLINE CONSULTATION  
WITH THE AUTHOR**

**Appendix D. GENERAL INDEX**



