

# Faculty Guidelines for Responding to Disruptive or Threatening Student Behavior

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SUNY Fredonia Office of Student Affairs

**Faculty Guidelines for Responding to Disruptive or Threatening Student Behavior**

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Colleagues:

SUNY Fredonia is committed to a safe and supportive learning and working environment for all students, staff, faculty, and visitors. In the attached *Guide for Faculty*, you will find information about disruptive or threatening incidents in the classroom as well as resources for assistance in responding to these types of concerns.

We hope you'll find the enclosed materials useful. For additional information and to schedule an information session for your department or unit, you may contact the Office of Student Affairs (x3271) or the Counseling Center (x3424).

Thank you for helping to keep SUNY Fredonia a safe and welcoming community.

Yours truly,

David E. Herman, Ph.D.  
Vice President for Student Affairs

## Faculty Guidelines for Responding to Disruptive or Threatening Student Behavior

As the course instructor, you are the authority both in your classroom and in any class related interaction occurring outside of the class. You are obligated to establish appropriate academic and behavioral standards. There are a number of ways you can influence how individual student behavior impacts the learning environment. Some strategies that may prove helpful include:

- Set and communicate standards on your syllabus
- Personally model the behaviors students are expected to exhibit
- Firmly and fairly address disruptive behavior
- Hold students accountable for their actions
- Commend students for appropriate behavior

A learning environment that incorporates the above elements will better support students in their intellectual and personal growth while contributing to your own sense of safety and well-being.

### Establishing Expectations for Classroom Conduct

Disruptive classroom conduct on the part of students may be distracting, annoying, or intimidating to other students and should not be tolerated by the instructor. Behavioral standards that are thoughtfully developed and effectively communicated at the start of the semester, and reinforced when needed, may exert a positive influence on classroom conduct.

Behavioral concerns that, in your judgment, require special emphasis can be addressed in your course syllabus. It is quite common to include a statement of warning about cheating and plagiarism and the consequences of these forms of misconduct.

### Examples of other behaviors that may be addressed in your syllabus include:

- Intimidation or harassing behavior
- Inappropriate, disrespectful, or uncivil responses to the comments or opinions of others in the classroom or transmitted electronically
- Biased based behaviors (comments or harassment)
- Threats/challenges to do physical harm (even when stated in a joking manner)
- Use of obscene or profane language in the classroom or transmitted electronically
- Excessive talking
- Late arrival to, or early departure from, class without permission
- Use of personal electronic devices such as pagers and cell phones
- Refusal to comply with reasonable request from faculty or staff

When discussing standards at the beginning of the semester, you might want to consider an approach that does not discourage but rather *encourages* students to form and express ideas and opinions that are relevant to the course objectives.

### Establishing Expectations for Online Class Conduct and Electronic Communication

The number of students taking online classes has increased, as has the use of electronic communications tools, such as ANGEL. With the increase in use comes an avenue for disruptive and unacceptable behavior. Students may make comments electronically that they would not make in person-to-person contact. Just as faculty members establish classroom conduct, they must also establish expectations for students during online classes and through electronic communications. It

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is recommended that specific language regarding expectations for electronic communication be included on the syllabus for the course.

### *Sample Excerpt from Syllabus*

#### **ONLINE COMMUNICATION**

*Keep in mind that all electronic interactions (email, chats, discussion forums, etc.) are an extension of our classroom and should be treated as such.*

*Do not enter a chat room, send email, or participate in an online discussion under an alias, a false name, or as “anonymous.” This is an important rule that everyone must follow so that we may maintain a safe academic environment. Entering an academic space, whether it be online or in a traditional classroom, and misrepresenting yourself is a violation of the SUNY Fredonia Student Code of Conduct.*

*Class members will no doubt disagree with one another on various issues and articles discussed in class and online. That’s fine – disagreement and critique promote a deeper understanding. However, please take care to distinguish academic criticism and political debate from personal attacks.*

#### **Taking Action**

A number of factors, such as the severity and frequency of a student’s misconduct, influence the action that might be appropriate to a specific instance of disruptive behavior. Thus, the following measures do not constitute a fixed procedure that must be followed in each instance. Rather, these strategies should be pursued based on your own assessment of their suitability to the situation with which you are dealing. See *Appendix A* for a chart illustrating resources for consultation and referral of students.

- **Give a Warning**

A rare instance of rude, annoying, or irritating behavior could simply be a sign of a student’s immaturity or lack of familiarity with campus culture. When this first occurs, you might choose to ignore such behaviors, or address them by modeling the proper conduct, or use informal means to get the message to the student.

However, recurrent acts of disruptive behavior should be addressed in a direct manner. When disruptive behavior first becomes evident, consider reminding the entire class of the need to follow the applicable standard. If the disruption involves a behavior that has not been previously addressed, take the time to communicate your expectations

- Speak individually with any student who exhibits a **pattern** of disruptive behavior or who commits an incident of serious misconduct
- Ask the student to remain after class for a conversation or to schedule a meeting. A confidential meeting will provide the best opportunity to discuss your concerns while avoiding the embarrassment or defensiveness that student might display when publicly addressed. However, do not meet alone with any student you believe to be a threat to your personal safety (see section on *Responding to Threatening or Potentially Violent Students* on p. 7)

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- During the meeting, discuss the disruptive behavior, clarify your expectations, gain cooperation in adhering to class standards, and inform the student that you will submit an Incident Report.
- If a meeting cannot be arranged, don't hesitate to communicate by phone, email, letter, fax, or any method that allows you to reach the student before the next class session. Make a written record of any meeting to discuss disruptive behavior and provide a copy of the student, summarizing the conversation.

- **Involve Others as Appropriate**

Even when there is no threat of harm, it is important to involve your department chair or dean when meeting with a student to discuss seriously disruptive behavior. The Assistant VP and VP for Student Affairs (x3271) are also available for consultation. The added perspective of a campus official will serve to reinforce the importance of your standards and help keep the conversation focused on behaviors rather than personalities.

- **Voluntary Course Withdrawal**

In some cases, a student's withdrawal from a course provides the most expeditious way to end disruptive behavior and its corresponding conflict.

- Conversations with students to seek their voluntary course withdrawal should be thoughtfully considered.
- Withdrawals should not be pursued as a substitute for discipline when a student has committed a serious act of misconduct.
- Withdrawals are most appropriate when there is a genuine personal conflict that cannot be readily resolved, and when necessary administrative approvals have been secured in advance. Students will often respond negatively when they believe they have been given an ultimatum to withdraw from a class.
- Enlist the assistance of your department chair, Dean, or VP, to facilitate the student's withdrawal.

- **Removal of Student from a Single Class Event**

On a rare occasion, a student's conduct may be so seriously disruptive or threatening that immediate action is required.

- Begin by firmly warning the student that the behavior must stop or he/she will be asked to leave class.
- If the behavior persists, direct the student to leave for the remainder of the class session.
  - Although permanent removal from a class requires initiation of disciplinary proceedings, faculty can eject a student from a single class when necessary to end a seriously disruptive or threatening situation.
- If a student refuses to leave class when directed, get to a phone and call University Police at 673-3333 for assistance. If necessary, temporarily adjourn the class or send a student to call University Police for assistance. A police officer will be dispatched to your location and, at your request, will remove the student. Please cooperate with UP by making a report of the incident.
- Report any removal to your department chair. The Academic Affairs VP should also be notified of this action.

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- Your Chair, Dean and/or the Academic VP's can help you develop a plan of steps to be taken prior to the next class meeting.

**Identifying and Referring the Distressed Student**

The college years can be very stressful for many. In the contemporary climate of competition and pressure, some students adequately cope with these stresses, but others find that stress becomes unmanageable and interferes with learning. In some cases, these students may even disrupt the learning of others. Many students initially seek assistance from faculty or staff members. *See Appendix A for a chart illustrating resources for consultation and referral of students.*

Below are guidelines for identifying students in distress:

- Excessive procrastination and very poorly prepared work, especially if inconsistent with previous work
- Infrequent class attendance with little or not work completed
- Dependency (e.g. the student who hangs around or makes excessive appointments during office hours)
- Listlessness, lack of energy, or frequently falling asleep in class
- Marked changes in personal hygiene
- Impaired speech and disjointed thoughts
- Repeated requests for special consideration (e.g. deadline extensions)
- Threats to others
- Expressed suicidal thoughts (e.g. referring to suicide as a current option)
- Excessive weight gain or loss
- Behavior which regularly interferes with effective class management
- Frequent or high levels of irritable, unruly, abrasive, or aggressive behavior
- Unable to make decisions despite your repeated efforts to clarify or encourage
- Bizarre behavior that is obviously inappropriate for the situation (e.g. talking to something/someone that is not present)
- Students who appear overly nervous, tense or tearful

**Responding to Threatening or Potentially Violent Students**

Each of us responds differently to the behaviors of others. Encounters with students that leave you frightened or in fear for your personal safety should be taken very seriously. Direct or implied threats of violence, challenges to fight, shoving, physical attacks, stalking, threatening phone calls, emails or other correspondence, acts of harassment and similar behaviors should be immediately discussed with your department chair. Your department chair will provide advice and support and will ensure that the college dean and other appropriate officials are notified.

The University Police Department, 673-3333, will assist you in assessing the threat, determining the most appropriate steps to be taken and, if necessary, will dispatch law enforcement personnel. If the threat is immediate, call 673-3333 for immediate police response.

In instances where the reported conduct constitutes a violation of the *Student Conduct Code*, the Coordinator of Judicial Affairs, The VP or Assistant VP of Student Affairs or can assist you in filing an Incident Report.

**Faculty Guidelines for Responding to Disruptive or Threatening Student Behavior****Meeting with a Threatening or Potentially Violent Student**

Do NOT meet alone with an angry or hostile student. Arrange a specific appointment to meet with the student and have your Chair, Dean, and/or the Academic and Student Affairs VP's aware of/involved with the meeting.

Precautions to take include:

- Have University Police “standby” or with you as circumstances dictate
- Consider establishing a code word to be used within the department. That word would serve as a signal to others to call for help outside your office
  - Create a code word or phrase, distribute it among the staff in your area, and be ready to respond. That word would serve as a signal to others to call for help outside your office. *For example, you could establish the name “Mr. Pitt” as a code word. If you are in the office and you find yourself confronted by a threatening student, you can call into another room or on an intercom and say “my next appointment is with Mr. Pitt – can you call and let him know I’m running late?”* This will act as a sign to whoever is within hearing distance to call University Police. It does not mean to come into the office or to double check the situation. It means CALL UNIVERSITY POLICE IMMEDIATELY.
- Keep the door of your meeting place open
- Position yourself so that you can exit the room quickly, if necessary. For example, keep yourself between the student and the door.
- Terminate the session immediately if your “gut” tells you something is wrong
- Avoid body language that appears challenging such as placing your hands on your hips, moving into the student’s own territory, or using aggressive facial expressions.
- Slow your rate of speech down and use a low pitch and volume to reduce the momentum of the situation
- Include a department chair to help satisfy the agitated person’s need to feel heard
- As early in the meeting as possible, elicit the student’s goal for the meeting and state your goal. Negotiation of a common goals may be a useful approach to keeping the student focused
- Listen carefully by really paying attention to what is said. Let the student know that you will help within your ability to do so and within reason
- Ask questions to help regain control of the conversation and to understand the situation
- Neither agree with distorted statements nor attempt to argue
- Avoid defensiveness
- Terminate the meeting if the student remains belligerent and tell him/him that you will not continue until he/she calms down
- Never physically touch an outraged student or try to force them to leave
- If a weapon becomes evident, leave. If that is not possible, calmly ask the person to leave any weapon in a neutral position as you continue talking calmly (notify University Police as soon as you are able)
- Let the person know the consequences of any violent behavior
- Never agree to go to an unmonitored location with a potentially violent person.

**APPENDIX A:  
SUNY FREDONIA RESOURCES FOR CONSULTATION AND REFERRAL OF STUDENTS**

	Faculty Member Meeting with Student	Department Chair/Dean	Student Affairs Office (Judicial Affairs)	University Police	Counseling Center	Substance Abuse & Violence Prevention (CEASE)	Disability Student Services	Office of Affirmative Action
<b>CONTACT INFORMATION:</b>			673-3271	673-3333	673-3424	673-3424	673-3550	673-3358
<b>Working with a student exhibiting the following classroom behavior(s):</b>	<b>UNIVERSITY POLICE are available 24 hrs/day year-round. In case of emergency, call 673-3333.</b>							
<i>Possesses an immediate threat to self or others</i>				1				
<i>Writes or verbalizes a direct threat to another person</i>			3	1	2			
<i>Displays anger or hostility inappropriately</i>	1	2	4	5	3			
<i>Sleeping in class</i>	1	2			3			
<i>Exhibits behavior that seems bizarre or out of touch with reality</i>	1		2	3	2			
<i>Continuously uses cell phone causing disruptions</i>	1	2	3					
<i>Shows signs of alcohol or drug abuse</i>	1		2		2	3		
<i>Seems overly emotional, e.g., aggressive, depressed, demanding, or suspicious</i>	1		2		2			
<i>Continuously disrupts class and refuses to stop</i>	1	2	3	4	3			
<i>Is the subject of complaints by other students regarding behaviors</i>	1	2	4		3			
<i>Comes to class drunk or high</i>	1		2		3	2		
<b>Other Concerns:</b>								
<i>Is a victim of sexual assault</i>	1		3	2	3	2		
<i>Talks about homicide or suicide</i>	1		3	2	3			
<i>Is a victim of violence, stalking, intimidation or domestic abuse</i>	1		3	2	3	2		
<i>Is having difficulty due to illness or death of a friend or family member</i>	1		3		2			
<i>May have a disability</i>	1						2	
<i>Reports sexual harassment or civil rights discrimination</i>	1		2	3	3	3		2
<i>Violates principles of community or commits a biased based behavior</i>	1		2	3				4
<i>Is a victim of a biased based behavior</i>	1		2	3	3	3		2

\*CONTACT SHOULD BE BASED ON THE IMMEDIACY OF THE ISSUE