Guide for Responding to Distressed and/or Disruptive Students

A Resource for Faculty and Staff
Introduction

Some students struggle with adapting to college life, and may also be dealing with considerable personal issues. As a result, students may experience a heightened emotional response that impacts their academic performance and their ability to function optimally. Identifying the early warning signs of students who may be struggling, and responding in a timely manner includes linking the student with the appropriate campus resource(s) which can improve their chances of being successful.

Faculty and staff are often in a position to recognize students who are struggling and are often the first to recognize changes in a student’s behavior. We appreciate the central role faculty and staff members have in the everyday lives of our students and provide this manual to offer guidance and support should the need arise. It is our intention that this guide will assist you in handling disruptive situations more confidently since you will be more aware of policies and procedures, campus resources and how to identify students who are struggling, in addition to knowing how to respond in an emergency.

The climate of higher education has changed, not only for those who work at colleges and universities, but also for our students. Today’s students have been exposed to school violence in varying degrees and some have a genuine concern for their personal safety. The increased prevalence of bullying behaviors is alarming with approximately 28% of students reporting being bullied with some level of frequency in their K-12 education.

The prevalence and severity of mental health issues among our students has drastically increased over the past 20 years, and college campuses are faced with the challenge of meeting these increased needs with limited resources. A national survey from the Association of Counseling Centers found a 30% increase in students seeking counseling with 61% of those students reporting anxiety. Other prominent reasons for seeking counseling are depression, stress, family issues, relationship problems, substance abuse and concerns regarding their academics.

Thus, today’s faculty and staff are often faced with the challenge of addressing students’ emotional dysregulation as well as behavior that is potentially disruptive in the classroom and student service areas. Understandably, faculty and staff may feel underprepared to deal with these issues, and there are good reasons for reluctance to deal with the disruptive student including:

A) Being unsure of how to handle the situation,
B) Fear of retaliation from the student,
C) Concern over legal ramifications such as violation of FERPA, and
D) Belief that reporting the student could do more harm than good, since the student may appear to be fragile/unstable to begin with.

However, failure to address and/or report disruptive behavior sends the wrong message to the student and to those around them. The message heard loud and clear by surrounding parties is that such behavior is not problematic and that it is even acceptable in our community. As such, the following information is designed to give faculty and staff guidance when faced with a disruptive or emotionally upset student.
Creating Community in the Classroom:

Have you noticed that students will choose where they sit for the entire semester on that first day of class? And they return to that same seat, class after class. Likewise on the first day, students decide how and to what extent they will participate in class; instructors use this time to establish an interactive, productive environment; and expectations are reviewed including everything you will expect of your students over the course of the term (i.e. writing, analyzing textbooks, speaking, group work, etc.). This is a good time to also set boundaries and limits as to what is and what is not acceptable behavior in your classroom.

Other tips for creating community in the classroom:

- Spend some time talking about your interest in the class and theirs as well.
- Make students feel comfortable and welcome by arriving early and greeting students as they enter. Have your name and the name of the class on the board. Learn their names as early as possible.
- Patterning begins on the first day, so make expectations and roles clear: If you expect them to speak in class, to write in class, and/or to engage in small group discussion, ask them to do these things, in some part, on the first day of class. This will give you an initial sense of how your students are functioning at “baseline” which may be helpful in identifying any changes throughout the semester.
- Explain why you chose this content and structure for the course: Why are the readings important? How do they connect? Why did you choose this format for testing?

It is beneficial to clarify expectations about classroom behavior openly and at the beginning of a course/semester. It is fundamental that the course syllabi reflect the guidelines for behavior in your class, and equally essential that the instructor enforce these standards in a fair and consistent manner.

**POLICY ALERT:**

**College Policy on Expectations for Classroom Student Behavior:** Students are expected to treat each other and the instructor or person in charge with common courtesy, decency and respect. They will refrain from behaviors that interfere with the teaching/learning process. All behaviors that, in the judgment of the instructor, interfere with the teaching/learning process will be considered disruptive. Students will recognize that the instructor of the course is the leader of the class and is in charge of instruction. Students must respect the instructor’s authority to lead and to direct the classroom activities. Attempts to dispute the instructor’s authority to lead will be considered disruptive.

**What is disruptive behavior?**

Students can display disruptive behavior in many different ways. In some incidents it can be a onetime disruption from a student, while some students display repeated and continuous disruptive behavior and/or multiple behaviors.
As individuals we can have vastly different tolerance levels that define what is or is not disruptive. Disruptive students generally exhibit behavior that interferes with the ability of instructors to teach and students to learn.

A student who repeatedly engages in disruptive behaviors by derailing classroom discussions, lectures or activities is likely a student to be concerned about.

**Responding to Disruptive Behavior**

Here are a few examples of disruptive behavior in the classroom and how to effectively respond:

- For students who interrupt or dominate discussion, but mean no real harm, acknowledge any productive contribution they are making, and let them know that the class needs to move on. If behavior is repeated and/or the student continues to monopolize the class, it is recommended you discuss this with the student privately after class.

- If a student is angry or expressing negative emotions, remain calm and non-judgmental. When you remain calm in the presence of the group, the student generally may settle down. You may want to reflect empathy towards the student by reflecting how they seem to be feeling. If the student does not respond, and the behavior continues, you may consider asking them to leave the class.

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### Examples of disruptive behavior:

- Eating in class
- Entering class late
- Leaving early
- Use of cell phones in class
- Carrying on conversations with others in class
- Creating excessive noise with papers, book bags, etc.
- Monopolizing classroom discussions

### More extreme examples are:

- Use of profanity or derogatory language
- Intoxication or impairment
- Verbal abuse (e.g., taunting and intimidating)
- Threat to harm oneself or others
- Physical violence (e.g., pushing, grabbing, assault)
• If students are expressing themselves in a strong emotional way on a particular topic, validate the strength of their feelings, and gently suggest that you need to move on, hear from other students, etc.

• If the student is agitated to the point of being unreasonable, ask them to leave. If the student refuses to leave class, give the class a 10 minute break, or dismiss them altogether. If comfortable, attempt to address the student one on one (in private if possible). Notifying University Police at their emergency number of 395-2222 is always an option particularly if you or your students are feeling unsafe.

• Escalating situations: If the student’s behavior is moving from disruptive to volatile either in the classroom or other areas of campus and you are concerned for the welfare and safety of yourself and others call University Police at 395-2222 for an emergency response.

• If you are concerned that someone may be in danger of harming themselves or others, immediately contact University Police at: 395-2222.

Refer to the College’s Webpage on Emergency Preparedness in the Classroom, a guide that will assist in your preparation of your classroom in case of an emergency at: https://www.brockport.edu/support/emergency/classroom_preparedness.html

The Distressed Student

Some students come to college encumbered with psychosocial baggage. In varying degrees, they come with repressed emotions, unhealed wounds, ambiguous understanding of intimate relationships and sex, self-doubt and even formidable anxieties. The many physical and psychological demands of college students can burden coping capabilities, creating an imbalance between needs and resources, and therefore heighten vulnerabilities. Distressed students are experiencing emotional and/or psychological problems that are interfering with their ability to learn.

Faculty and staff are likely to encounter distressed students in the course of their work and some signs may not directly indicate unmanageable stress. Some of the symptoms described below may fall within the range of typical experiences for some young adults, but multiple symptoms or patterns of behavior consistently present over time more likely indicate that a student’s distress may require professional intervention.

• Marked changes in academic performance or behavior - Be alert to a student’s poor performance and preparation when it is markedly inconsistent with previous work. Notice repeated requests for special consideration (e.g., incompletes, late papers) or infrequent class attendance with little or no work completed. Report these academic concerns in EagleSUCCESS to alert the ASC team.

• Physical signs - Students in crisis may experience a marked decline in personal hygiene. Notice if they consistently look unkempt, fatigued, or have swollen or red eyes. Students in crisis may also experience dramatic fluctuations in their weight, either a noticeable loss or gain.
• **Exaggerated emotional responses** - Intense anxiety, extreme irritability and anger, prolonged depressed mood and/or frequent tearfulness and crying spells are all clear signs of emotional distress.

*Whether the student is distressed or disruptive, perhaps it may be time to refer the student to the Student Behavioral Consultant Team and/or Counseling Center.*

**What is the Student Behavioral Consultant Team?**

The Student Behavioral Consultant Team (SBCT) was formed to facilitate communication of information regarding students of concern. The committee consists of professional and administrative staff from Academic Affairs, Hazen Center for Integrated Care, Health & Counseling Centers, Residential Life/Learning Communities, the Student Conduct Office, University Police, Student Accessibility Services, Athletics, and the Office of the Vice President of Enrollment Management and Student Affairs, and meets at least once a week during the academic year.

The purpose of this team is to provide a confidential means to facilitate early intervention through collaboration with campus departments, faculty and staff. Students exhibiting behaviors that are of concern in relation to their personal, physical and emotional well-being should be referred to this team of professionals.

Information from faculty, staff and students is confidentially shared among the team members. The team broadens the scope of involvement and includes other faculty and staff members when appropriate. The SBCT will review all information on the student’s behavior and background. At this point, the team will then determine an action plan and monitor the student on a case-by-case basis. Communication with involved parties is led by a member of the SBCT to ensure consistency and ongoing monitoring of these students when necessary.

[Please note: The core team is not meant to be the sole mechanism of communication and will not take the place of services provided by Hazen Center for Integrated Care, Health and Counseling Centers, Student Conduct Office, University Police or other established student services. For more information on SBCT refer to the following Webpage at: https://www.brockport.edu/support/student_behavioral_consultant_team/].

**Some reasons for referring a student:**

• If your efforts to manage a significant classroom behavioral issue following the policy on Disruptive Students in the Classroom has not resolved the problem.
• If you are concerned about the welfare of the student, yourself and other students.
• A student asks for help in dealing with personal issues that is out of your role as a faculty or staff member.
What Does the SBCT do?

The SBCT will make recommendations based on the information gathered (including the SBCT faculty & staff report) and take action that may involve:

• Referral to the Counseling Center for mental health assessment, alcohol and substance abuse assessment, anger management, depression or other mental health issues.

• Referral to the Student Conduct system to evaluate if a violation of the Code of Student Conduct has occurred.

• Campus referrals to Academic Success Center, Student Accessibility Services, FYE, TYE, Financial Aid, Career Services, Student Clubs/Organizations, and Community Development Office, etc.

• Referral to community health and mental health agencies/hospitals.

• SBCT member meetings with student of concern. Ongoing communication with the student to assess compliance with recommendations and requirements.

• Notification of parent/guardian only if student is deemed a threat to self and/or others, or if the student provides consent to communicate with parent/guardian.

• Requesting permission to obtain outside medical and educational records.

Behavioral warning signs:

Some behavioral warning signs carry more weight than others and multiple indicators increase the risk of potential harm to self and/or others. Emergencies and imminent threats of violence must be reported immediately to University Police at 395-2222. Please note: Some of the following behaviors may be a violation of the Code of Student Conduct and/or Title IX violation and should be reported respectively to the appropriate offices.

Warning Signs - Students with more serious personal problems and/or mental health issues may exhibit the following warning signs:

Anger management problems - Difficulty controlling anger, aggressive behavior, impulsivity and making threats — particularly, anger that is expressed intensely and frequently for seemingly minor reasons.

Suicidal ideation - Expresses hopelessness and despair, depression, may verbally make references to suicide and exhibit suicidal preparatory behavior such as giving belongings away.

Aggressive behavior - Expresses contempt for other(s), makes threatening comments or gestures. Indicates a desire to become physically aggressive, makes references to homicide, death, or threats to harm others.

Extreme anxiety - Agitation, noticeable restlessness, hyperactivity or unusually rapid speech are distinct signs of uncontrollable anxiety.
Social Withdrawal - A student’s withdrawal from peers, friends and family is often a red flag signaling a decline in overall functioning. A student’s avoidance of social interaction in general or a sudden marked reduction in class participation could be a sign of distress as well. More extreme signs include isolation, inability to establish friendships, does not seem to fit in, less engaged and prefers to be alone.

Non-compliance and disciplinary problems - Refuses to abide by written and/or verbal rules. Rejects the authority of faculty and staff.

Stalking - Follows, harasses, repeatedly attempts to contact a person regardless of the person’s expressed annoyance and demands to stop behavior. Stalking behaviors and threatening or accusatory statements within text messages, emails, letters or phone calls generally indicate a crisis and require an immediate response.

Aberrant behavior - Exhibits actions and/or words that cause people around them to become fearful and suspicious.

Inappropriate affect - Mismatch between emotional expression and what the person is thinking or speaking about. Exhibiting affect unsuitable to the situation.

Acting out – Impulsivity, expresses disproportionate anger or humor in situations not warranting it.

Paranoia - Expresses a true belief that he/she is being singled out for unfair treatment and/or abuse, feeling persecuted.

Fascination with weapons - Exhibits an inappropriate interest in guns, knives and explosives.

Alcohol and other drug use - Shows a pattern of inebriation and/or substance abuse. May smell of alcohol, sleep in class and/or have excessive class absences.

What can you report?

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) does not prohibit faculty and staff from sharing personal observations and knowledge about a student among campus officials when there is a legitimate concern related to campus safety. Refer to the College’s FERPA Policy at: https://www.brockport.edu/support/policies/adopted/aa_vprovost_academicaffairs_disruptive_students_inclass.html

If you are concerned about a student whom you have observed exhibiting one or more of the warning signs, do not hesitate to notify SBCT, Counseling Center and/or University Police.

How to make a referral to the SBCT:

To report a student of concern, submit an online SBCT Faculty/Staff Report Form at: https://www.brockport.edu/support/student_behavioral_consultant_team/form.html
You may also contact the SBCT Chair directly at Office of the Assistant to the Vice President for Enrollment Management and Student Affairs, Allen Administration Building, 6th floor. Phone no.: 395-5042 or email at klogsdon@brockport.edu

If you are uncertain if your situation is significant enough to contact the SBCT, please consult with a colleague, supervisor, department chair or dean, or SBCT Chair.

It is easy to minimize or talk yourself out of your concerns for a variety of reasons (e.g. "I don't want to make a big deal out of this," "what if I am overreacting," or "what if the student gets mad," but it is better to consult and have someone else help you to make that decision.

Remember, the goal is to express support and set limits for students, which is something we can do successfully most of the time. Our goal is to do everything as a College to identify and respond to students who are in distress or who are exhibiting behavior that has caught our attention.

Thank-you for taking the time to support a shared and strategic effort in managing disruptive and distressed student behavior(s) on our campus.

References


2018 NaBITA Standards for Behavioral Intervention Teams retrieved from: https://www.nabita.org/resources/publications/

Campus Resources Webpages:

Academic Success Center at: https://www.brockport.edu/academics/success_center/
College Policy Webpage at: https://www.brockport.edu/support/policies/
EagleSUCCESS at: https://www.brockport.edu/academics/eagle_success/
Emergency Management Office at: https://www.brockport.edu/support/emergency/
Hazen Center for Integrated Care at: https://www.brockport.edu/life/hazen_care_center.html
Student Accessibility Services at: https://www.brockport.edu/life/accessibility_services/
Student Behavioral Consultant Team at: https://www.brockport.edu/support/student_behavioral_consultant_team/
Student Conduct Office at: https://www.brockport.edu/life/student_conduct/
University Police at: https://www.brockport.edu/support/university_police/

Informational Publications or Guides:


NaBITA national organization for behavioral intervention teams publications at: https://www.nabita.org/resources/publications/