

# **CAMPUS CIVILITY AND THE DISRUPTION OF LEARNING: A GUIDE FOR FACULTY AND STAFF**

## **INTRODUCTION**

California State University, Long Beach takes seriously its tradition of maintaining civility and mutual respect among all members of the University community. These qualities are intrinsic to excellence in teaching and learning. They also contribute to the maintenance of a productive workplace and an overall positive campus climate. (from Policy Statement 03-09.)

Nevertheless it is possible that faculty or staff may experience behavior that is disruptive to the learning/workplace environment or even personally threatening. These disruptions may happen in a classroom, department, faculty or staff offices, or others areas on the campus. Disruptions might be caused by members of the campus community, but may also be caused by people who visit the campus or by children of students or personnel. **Civility is the responsibility of everyone who participates on the CSULB campus.** Student behavior is governed by University policies, including the CSULB Student Code of Conduct. However, in cases in which a student has caused a disruption to educational or administrative activities, faculty or staff members may need to address issues related to the perceived safety to themselves and other members of the community. These guidelines were developed to provide faculty and staff with a range of responses to disruptive behavior.

## **DEFINITION OF DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR**

Behavior is considered disruptive when it interferes in a significant way with the opportunity of other students to learn, or with the administrative functions of the University. Disruptive behavior may sometimes be so severe as to threaten or endanger the physical safety or psychological well-being of personnel or students.

### **Examples of Disruptive Behavior**

Disruptive behavior may assume many forms, such as:

- ◆ persistently arriving late to class or leaving early in a manner that interferes with the learning activities of other students;
- ◆ talking incessantly while the instructor is delivering a lecture or when others students are presenting, thus preventing others from benefiting educationally from the class;
- ◆ using obscene or profane language;
- ◆ using inappropriate body language/signals that are offensive and create an atmosphere of hostility;
- ◆ using personal electronic devices such as pagers and cell phones;
- ◆ interrupting the educational process with inappropriate questions or interjections in such a way that interferes with other students' learning;
- ◆ being disrespectful, offensive, and/or threatening;
- ◆ persistently calling or interrupting faculty or staff, thus hampering normal work activities;
- ◆ becoming belligerent when asked about his or her behavior;
- ◆ verbally or physically threatening faculty, staff or other students by writing threatening letters, emails or leaving disturbing voicemail messages;
- ◆ attempting to contact faculty or staff at home in inappropriate ways;
- ◆ displaying behavior indicating a romantic or obsessive interest in a faculty or staff member.

## **UNIVERSITY STANDARDS FOR STUDENT BEHAVIOR**

All students of the California State University system must adhere to the Student Conduct Code as stated in Section 41301 of the Title 5 of the California Code of Regulations as well as all campus rules, regulations, codes and policies. The Student Conduct Code, as well as CSULB policies covering areas of discrimination, harassment, and the use of computing resources, are published in the Schedule of Classes and the University Catalog.

## **SUGGESTED PRACTICES FOR INSTRUCTORS**

The instructor of a course has the authority to establish appropriate academic and behavioral standards. There are many ways that an instructor may influence student behavior that will impact the teaching/learning environment. The following measures do not constitute a fixed procedure that must be followed in each instance, but these strategies may be pursued, based on an assessment of their suitability to the situation. Some suggestions that might be helpful are:

1. Set and communicate acceptable standards.
2. Articulate in the syllabus the standards for behavior that are expected in the classroom; provide guidelines for behavior that will be enforced;
3. Explain what is considered disruptive behavior, e.g.:” Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive. Such behavior inhibits other students’ opportunity to learn and the instructor’s ability to teach.”
4. Explain the range of possible interventions and consequences, including that a student may be required to leave the class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be referred to the Department Chair, the Associate Dean and/or Dean of the College, the University Ombuds, Counseling and Psychological Services, the Dean of Students or the Office of Judicial Affairs.
5. Apply the standards with consistency.
6. Personally model behavior that students are expected to exhibit.
7. Address disruptive behavior firmly and fairly.
8. Hold students accountable for their actions.

## **THE RANGE OF RESPONSES**

**Mild interventions: Working with the student informally to resolve the problem.** These kinds of intervention are appropriate for an isolated occurrence of disruptive behavior that may, or may not, be intentional. Faculty or staff may consider consulting with the Department Chair, the Associate Dean and/or Dean of the College, the Director of the Faculty Center for Professional Development, or the University Ombuds for advice in effectively dealing with the situation.

**Moderate interventions: Taking official or formal action.** These kinds of interventions are appropriate for ongoing problems, an escalation of a problem, or a more serious incident in the classroom. It is advised that in these situations the faculty or staff consult with the Department Chair, the Associate Dean, and/or Dean of the College, the Dean of Students, or Judicial Affairs for guidance and support in developing a plan to deal with the situation

**Emergency intervention: Calling University Police (562-985-4101).** This intervention is appropriate when disruptive behavior threatens or endangers the physical safety or the psychological well-being of individuals. Program the phone number of the University Police into your cell phone because if you dial 911 on a cell phone it may not connect to the University Police depending on the cell site to which you connect.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FACULTY AND STAFF

### Helpful Hints

#### DO

- ◆ Keep your voice calm and low.
- ◆ Acknowledge the student's anger and frustration, e.g., "I hear how angry you are."
- ◆ Rephrase what the student is saying, and identify her/his emotion, e.g., "It appears you are upset because you feel your rights are being violated and nobody will listen."
- ◆ Reduce stimulation; invite the student to a quiet place if this is feasible and safe.
- ◆ Allow the student to tell you what is upsetting her/him.
- ◆ Be directive and firm about the behavior you will accept, e.g., "Please stand back; you're too close," and/or "I cannot listen to you when you yell and scream at me that way."
- ◆ Help the student problem-solve and deal with the area issues when she/he becomes calm, e.g., "I'm sorry you are so upset; I'd like to help if I can."
- ◆ Be honest and genuine; do not placate aggression.

#### DON'T

- ◆ Get into an argument or shouting match.
- ◆ Become hostile or punitive yourself, e.g., "You can't talk to me that way!"
- ◆ Press for explanations for their behavior.
- ◆ Ignore the situation.
- ◆ Touch the student, as this may be perceived as aggression or otherwise unwanted attention.

### **MILD INTERVENTIONS – appropriate for an isolated occurrence of disruptive behavior that may, or may not, be intentional**

#### **In the classroom:**

1. Respond immediately.
2. Remind the class of the agreed standards for behavior.
3. If the student does not respond appropriately, ask the student to see you after class or during office hours.
4. If the behavior continues, notify the student that he or she must leave the room if the behavior does not cease, and that disciplinary action may result.

#### **Stepping outside:**

1. Remain calm and speak in a controlled manner. This may prevent the situation from escalating and may diffuse the tension.
2. Identify a more appropriate place and time to discuss the matter if the problem is occurring outside normal parameters of professional interaction.
3. Use a "time out" to allow the student to regain her or his composure, or explain that if the student cannot maintain control, you cannot discuss the issue at this time.
4. Explain that if the behavior is not controlled you may need to contact the University Police.

#### **Meeting with the student later**

1. It is generally helpful to meet with a disruptive student privately. This will provide an opportunity for the student to understand the inappropriateness of his or her behavior and for the faculty or staff to discuss strategies that will enable the student to continue in the class.

2. Remain calm – this may be difficult if the student is agitated, but reasoned responses will assist the student in addressing the behavior in question.
3. Do not take the student’s behavior or remarks personally. Disruptive behavior generally results from other life problems or general academic frustrations.
4. Be specific about the inappropriate behavior that the student exhibited. Describe the behavior, and do not focus on the person. Explain why the behavior is problematic for student learning.
5. Ask questions, and summarize what the student is saying. Respectful concern may enable the student to acknowledge the need for dealing with his or her behavior.
6. State what you want to see happen.
7. Focus on areas of agreement.
8. Conclude by summarizing any resolutions and articulate expectations for the future. Be clear that continued inappropriate behavior will require further action.

**MODERATE INTERVENTIONS -- appropriate for behavior that is an ongoing problem, is escalating, or seriously interferes with the learning process.**

Students may become verbally abusive when they encounter frustrating situations which they believe are beyond their control. They can displace anger and frustration from those situations onto the nearest target. Explosive outbursts or ongoing belligerent, hostile behavior become this student's way of gaining power and control in an otherwise out-of-control experience. It is important to remember that the student is generally not angry at you personally, but is angry at her/his world and you are the object of pent-up frustrations. This behavior may often be associated with the use of alcohol and other drugs. It is important at this level to differentiate between behavior that is just uncivil or rude and behavior that is threatening or harassing.

1. **Involve others as appropriate:** It may be helpful to involve your Department Chair, supervisor, the Associate Dean and/or Dean when meeting with a student to discuss his or her behavior. This may help to reinforce the importance of your standards and help keep the conversation focused on behavior. In meeting with the student you may learn that the disruptive behavior is the result of some a perceived conflict between the student and you or other individuals in the class. Depending on the nature of the problem, it may be appropriate to involve the Office of the Dean of Students, the Office of Judicial Affairs, or Counseling and Psychological Services.
2. **Seek voluntary Course Withdrawal:** Students cannot be involuntarily withdrawn from a course except as provided by an existing University policy or through the use of the student disciplinary process. Withdrawal should not be used 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 resolved and administrative approval has been secured. If this recourse is necessary you may find it necessary to enlist the assistance of your Department Chair, the Associate Dean or Dean of the College or the Dean of Students.
3. **Suspension from class.** A faculty member has the right to suspend a student from a single class session. Notify the student that if the student refuses to leave when asked, the faculty member will contact the University Police and that will result in a formal disciplinary action.

4. **File a Student Misconduct Complaint with Judicial Affairs.** (Student Conduct Procedures - Executive Order No. 970)

**EMERGENCY INTERVENTION - appropriate when there is an immediate threat of public safety.**

**Call University Police – Program the University Police number (562-985-4101) into your cell phone because if you dial 911 on a cell phone it may not connect directly to the University Police, depending on the cell site to which you have connected.**

- ◆ When you believe that you or another person is in immediate danger.
- ◆ When you believe that the student is about to harm her/himself.
- ◆ When you believe that the student is out of control and is disrupting the classroom.

### **DOCUMENTATION**

In resolving disruption cases it is critical that there be appropriate documentation of the problem behavior, including time, date, brief description of the incident, and what actions were taken. This documentation should always be factual and avoid personal interjections or conjecture. Initially, the faculty or staff member may wish to maintain the documentation in their own files, however, if the disruptive behavior escalates, the faculty or staff may provide the Chair or Dean with the information they have compiled. If the situation continues and requires a hearing by Judicial Affairs, a factual record of the encounters will be beneficial in effectively resolving the situation.

All of these recommendations are intended to be consistent with policies of the University. In a situation in which the recommendations and the established policies are in conflict with existing legal statutes or administrative regulations, those statutes and regulations shall govern.

### **DISRUPTION CAUSED BY STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

Disabled students are expected to adhere to the same Student Conduct Code that governs the behavior of all students. Normally a disabling condition will not constitute an acceptable excuse for violating the Student Conduct code. Your decision to initiate action against a disabled student should be based on the student's behavior and not his/her disability. If you believe a student cannot exhibit appropriate behavior because of a disabling condition, you may wish to contact the Student Services Office for assistance.

### **RESOURCES TO ASSIST IN DEALING WITH DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS**

**Faculty Center for Professional Development (5-5287)** – offers services and programs that support **all faculty members** in their multiple roles and responsibilities in the University's academic community.

**Faculty & Staff Assistance Program (5-4001)** – is a confidential resource to help resolve personal, family, or work-related problems. Services directly provided by FSAP are available only by appointment at no cost.

**The Office of University Ombudsman (5-5983)** – provides at no cost an confidential and neutral setting for students, faculty, staff and community members to informally solve campus-related problems and concerns. The Ombuds serves the campus community and its citizens as an independent and neutral party.

**Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) (5-4001)** – offers **students** short-term counseling for individuals and couples, group counseling, referral services, psycho-educational workshops and crisis intervention to help them meet the personal challenges associated with identifying and accomplishing academic, career and life goals.

CAPS can provide **faculty or staff** with consultation on how to respond to specific situations.

**The Office of the Dean of Students (5-8670)** – works cooperatively within the Division of Student Services and throughout the university to assist **students** in achieving their academic goals and enhancing their personal, intellectual and social development.

**Office of Judicial Affairs (5-5270)** – assists **students, faculty, staff, administration and community members** in locating, interpreting and applying campus policies and regulations and laws applicable to students. Investigates and adjudicates campus-related complaints and charges against students involving alleged violations of campus regulations and explores alternatives to resolve actual or perceived problems.

**The Office of Disabled Student Services ( 5-5401)** – Offers a **student** support program within the Division of Student Services. Its mission is to assist students with disabilities as they secure their university degrees at California State University, Long Beach. A Disabled Student Services **Faculty Handbook** is available at: [http://www.csulb.edu/depts/dss/web\\_fhandbook/fhb-toc.html](http://www.csulb.edu/depts/dss/web_fhandbook/fhb-toc.html)

**University Police (5-4101)** – Will respond to severe and immediate threats and can enforce the administrative instructions of faculty and staff.

### **This document was adapted from the following sources**

Information about Disruptive and Distressed Students  
Faculty Center for Professional Development, California State University, Long Beach  
<http://www.csulb.edu/divisions/aa/personnel/fcpd/>

Disruptive & Threatening Student Behavior: Guidelines for Faculty and Staff. Division of Student Affairs, University of Southern California, Fall 2004. (Brochure)

Dealing with Incidents of Disruptive Student Behavior in the Classroom, California State University, Sacramento, Reference: PM 89-09  
<http://www.csus.edu/admbus/umannual/UMD03250.htm>