University faculty and staff sometimes face student behavior that challenges their ability to maintain an effective and safe learning or work environment. The following information offers tips on responding to the disruptive or threatening student. Also, various campus offices can support faculty and staff in dealing with these situations. Feel free to consult with the campus resources listed at the end of this virtual brochure.

If a student behaves inappropriately with you or makes you feel uneasy, it may be helpful to discuss your concerns with someone else. Your department chair or office director may be a resource, and the Office of Student Life, the University Counseling and Testing Center, and the Department of Public Safety (DPS) are available to assist you. Frequently, just talking with another professional will clarify the issues and help you resolve the problem.

**What is disruptive behavior?**

Disruptive behavior is student behavior that interferes with or interrupts the educational process of other students or the normal business functions of the University. *Specific examples of disruptive behavior include:*

- Monopolizing discussion or taking over the lecture
- Side conversations
- Making hostile remarks to instructor or fellow student
- Arriving late/leaving early
- Distracting behavior such as sleeping, cell phone use, eating in class (What is inappropriate may depend upon the instructor’s rules and expectations.)
- Persistent and/or disturbing phone calls or emails that hamper your ability to continue your normal work
- Otherwise interrupting the educational process
Strategies to Discourage Disruptive Classroom Behavior

While there are some specific tactics for dealing with disruptive students, faculty may prevent some of this behavior from occurring by creating a positive classroom environment at the outset. You may already have put into practice some of these strategies:

- Be engaged with your students as individuals; learn names and refer directly to comments they have made (“As Mary pointed out earlier…”)
- Demonstrate through your actions that you are willing to listen to their views respectfully and that you are committed to their learning.
- Role model the behavior you require of your students (e.g., being on time, treating students of differing opinions with respect).
- Use structures that encourage students to get to know each other. It’s worth giving up some content time because this creates community and reins in outliers.
- Let them see who you are. Tell them about your background and let them see your passion for the subject. Consider sharing enough information so they realize you have a life outside the classroom. It’s harder to be uncivil to someone you see as a real person.
- Provide a syllabus that accurately and fully communicates class requirements and schedule. Clearly communicate deviations from the syllabus. Many student complaints arise from syllabi that create misunderstandings about course expectations.
- Consider what your limits of acceptable conduct are regarding lateness, sleeping in class, use of cell phones, alarm watches, eating in class, unrelated talking in class, etc. You have a right to set forth what is acceptable or unacceptable in your classroom. Enforce your guidelines in a consistent and equitable way.
- Communicate your expectations for appropriate behavior or “ground rules.” You can focus on factors that make a good learning environment and also more specifically on student behavior. This can be done on the syllabus, in a student driven conversation, or through a separate handout. Feel free to reference existing policies on student conduct.
- Set the tone and classroom expectations early in the class. It is hard to impose new rules after the class is underway, but you can always ease up on rules that have already been established.
- Use active learning techniques to fend off inattentiveness. Gerald Amada, author of Coping with Misconduct in the College Classroom says, “Perhaps the best antidote for all forms of disruptive behavior is for instructors to teach interestingly.”
- Seek feedback from students at mid-semester or earlier to see how things are going. This can be an informal mid-term evaluation or something more thorough. Make sure you respond — and do so in a non-defensive way. Be honest if something not working; change it or explain why it is persisting.
- Help students see the see the value of course. Be excited and help them see the value of the knowledge/skills they are developing even if outside their major. Take time to explain, perhaps repeatedly, why you have the requirements that you do. (For example, short papers in my classes)
- Avoid grade surprises. Make sure that students understand the grading system and that they have sufficient feedback so that the final grade is not a shock. If you count participation, make sure you let them know how they are doing in this area as the semester goes along.
- Be careful about creating too much informality within the classroom environment.
Responding to Disruptive Behavior

Suppose you have already worked hard to create a positive learning environment and disruptive behavior arises in class, what then? While every situation is unique and each instructor has a unique level of tolerance and preferred style for dealing with student behavior, here are some suggestions you may find helpful:

1. Deal with disruptive behavior early, before you get angry or feel threatened.
2. Don’t take students’ behavior personally. Understand that they are coming into the classroom with their own personal history and issues. Don’t let them "hook" you. If they behave this way in your classroom, chances are they behave this way elsewhere as well.
3. Decide if you need to deal with the behavior immediately or if it can wait until after class. If it requires an immediate response, verbally request that the student stop the disruptive behavior. If the problem persists, ask the student to leave.
4. If you need to reprimand a student, speak with the student privately if possible. This will avoid defensiveness and/or "acting out" in response to being shamed in front of their peers.
5. Positive strategies might be best with a student who is monopolizing the discussion or going off on a tangent, might include saying:
   “We’ve heard John’s opinion. What do others think?“
   “It seems like we have two conversations going. Let’s come back to the topic at hand.”
6. Meet with the student to discuss the disruptive behavior.
7. When necessary, set specific behavioral expectations and then hold them to it. State your expectations clearly. Focus on behavior, not personality or labels.

Meeting with a Disruptive or Angry Student

How this meeting goes will depend upon your interpersonal skills as well as the student’s ability to develop rapport and participate in a calm discussion.

- Consider having someone else present, such as a supervisor, department or office head.
- If you feel threatened by the student, keep your office door open or meet in a conference room so that others can hear. Let others know when and where you will be having the meeting.
- Remain calm. This may be difficult if the student is agitated. However, your reasoned response will help establish a constructive tone and avoid aggravating the student further.
- Take a non-defensive stance, and convey your interest and concern to the student. Include a discussion of the student’s educational objectives and aspirations. Try to understand where the student is coming from and, if possible, to reach a mutual understanding.
- Ask questions and summarize what you hear the student saying. Respectful concern as an educator may enable you to help the student to be successful both in your class and in the University.
- Be specific about the inappropriate behavior that the student has exhibited. Focus on the behavior, not the person. Explain why the behavior is problematic.
• Highlight areas or agreement between you and the student. For example, you both want the student to do well in the class.
• Conclude by summarizing any resolution, and by clearly articulating your expectations and the consequences for the persistence of disruptive behavior. Consider putting these expectations in writing and providing copies to the student and the department head.
• If the student is irrational or threatening, then it’s critical to involve others. You may decide that, for your safety and well being, the situation has moved out of your hands. In this case, the Office of Student Life and Department of Public Safety may need to get involved.
• Document the meeting afterward and provide a copy to your department head.
• If it doesn’t go well because the student is entrenched in a mindset, perhaps irrationally angry, you should nonetheless feel good about the fact that you made an attempt to meet the student in an empathic and respectful way.
• Debrief difficult interactions with a colleague or supervisor afterward to get a “reality check” and emotional support.

Dealing with Disruptive or Rude Behavior in Other University Settings
• Remain calm and speak in a controlled manner.
• Try not to take it personally.
• Acknowledge that the student is angry.
• Tell the student that if they calm down it will be easier for you to help them.
• Empathize with the student’s frustration, while explaining the University policy, rule or requirement. Empathic statement examples include, “I can see that you’re upset by this” or “This feels like it’s really important to you.”
• Let them know what you CAN do, not what you CAN’T do.
• Recognize that, while for some students empathy will transform the situation, for others, nothing you say or do will get through to them.
• If you feel like you can’t respond to the student’s needs, offer to arrange for them to meet with a supervisor. This may encourage them to “cool down” before addressing the issue again.
• Afterward, be sure to debrief with a colleague or supervisor and attend to your stress and your needs.

Dealing with a Suspicious Student
Usually these students perceive that they are being mistreated and are apt to lodge complaints. They tend to be tense, cautious, and mistrustful and may have few friends. They often interpret a minor oversight as a personal slight or a sign of prejudice against them, and they overreact to insignificant occurrences. They see themselves as the focal point of everyone’s behavior, and everything that happens has a special meaning for them. Often they are preoccupied with fairness and being treated equally. Disavowing responsibility for their own behavior, they often blame others for their difficulties. Underneath, they may feel inadequate and even worthless.
It is helpful to:

- Give clear, consistent messages about what you are willing to do and what you expect.
- Express concern and compassion without being overly friendly or familiar.
- Be aware of your own anxiety about how the student is acting or communicating.
- Be aware of personal boundaries and space when interacting with them (i.e., keep a comfortable distance, both physically and emotionally.)

It is not helpful to:

- Be overly warm or sympathetically close to the student.
- Flatter the student or try to be humorous.
- Assure the student that you are their friend or advocate.

Threatening or Violent Behavior

Violence in the workplace can take many forms — from a colleague or student who exhibits dangerous or threatening behavior to abusive relationships between partners or family members to random acts of violence by members of the public with no connection to the campus.

When behaviors become intimidating or threatening, you may feel anxious, afraid and concerned for your personal safety. It is important not to manage such a situation alone. Various offices on campus can assist you, including those listed at the end of this resource.

What is threatening behavior?

- A student violates your personal space
- A student raises his/her voice and seems irrational
- A student implies or makes a direct threat to harm themselves or others.
- A student displays a firearm or weapon
- A student physically confronts/attacks another student
- A student stalks or harasses a faculty member
- A student sends threatening emails, letters, and other correspondence to a staff member
- An ex-boyfriend or girlfriend stalks a colleague

Predicting Violent Behavior

The best predictor of violent behavior is past violence. Since it’s unlikely you will be privy to such history, however, it’s important for you to pay attention to current behavior.
Warning Signs THAT MAY PRECEDE OR BE INDICATIVE OF Violent Behavior

- Threatening statements about killing/harming self or others, direct or veiled
- References to or preoccupation with other incidents of workplace violence
- Intimidating, belligerent, insubordinate, defiant or challenging behavior
- Confrontational, angry, easily provoked, unpredictable, restless or agitated behavior
- History of violent, reckless or antisocial behavior
- Alleged fondness or fascination with firearms
- Feelings of persecution.
- Blaming others for anything that goes wrong, while disavowing any responsibility
- Intolerance of differences
- Marked decline in school or job performance
- Changes in personality, mood or behavior
- Excessive crying
- Decline in personal grooming
- Crosses interpersonal boundaries (e.g., excessive phone calls, personal e-mails and/or visits)
- Substance abuse
- Cultural issues, e.g., disgrace for failing
- Significant personal stress (e.g., academic, financial, family or relationship problems)

Relationship violence is the most common form of violence to spill over into the workplace. In a study produced by the Justice Department and Centers for Disease Control in 2000, almost 25 percent of women and 7 percent of men reported that they had been assaulted by a current or former partner. While many victims often feel safer at work than home, they often endure threats and harassing phone calls and e-mails from partners who know exactly where to find them during work hours.

Signs of Relationship Violence

- Anxiousness, crying, depression
- Frequent or sudden unscheduled absences
- Frequent tardiness or leaving work early
- Fluctuations in the quality of work for no apparent reason
- Difficulty concentrating and decreased productivity
- Isolation from colleagues and social activities
- Excessive number of phone calls or e-mails from family members
- Disruptive personal visits to the workplace
- Visible injuries, often with an explanation of an “accident”; multiple injuries in different stages of healing; unexplained delay in seeking medical treatment for injuries
- Stress-related illnesses and/or anxiety-related conditions, such as heart palpitations, hyperventilation and panic attacks
How do deal with threatening or violent behavior

Always call for help if you or others are in imminent danger.

It is helpful to:
- Maintain a posture that is poised, ready to move quickly but not fearful
- Maintain a tone of voice that is matter of fact, a monotone
- Use clear, assertive statements of consequences and repeat as necessary
- Use eye contact sparingly or only to emphasize a point
- Avoid gestures, if possible, as they may be interpreted as signs of weakness
- Avoid physical contact or only have contact if you need to defend yourself
- Place yourself behind a table or near an exit
- Leave an unobstructed exit for the person who is threatening

It is not helpful to:
- Get into an argument or shouting match
- Become hostile or punitive yourself or make threats or dares
- Press for explanations of behavior
- Ignore warning signs such as clenched fists

Three Levels of Response

As you assess the situation, consider the following three levels of response. The level of response required may change as the situation unfolds. Be sure to trust your intuition, and when a situation feels potentially violent, consider a higher level of response.

- **Level One: Attempt to defuse situation**
  - Be aware of your feelings.
  - Take a breath and try to stay as calm as you are able.
  - Show empathy and concern. (e.g., try saying something like: “I can see your frustration and I’m frustrated too. Unfortunately, the rules are…”)
  - Don’t insist you are right or contradict the student. Instead, let the person know you see the situation differently.
  - If someone is threatening or verbally abusive, tell them you would be able to help them better if they calmed down, lowered their voice and stopped attacking you.
  - Be direct, set limits and don’t tolerate abuse. (e.g., “Please stand back, you’re too close” or “I can’t listen to you when you are yelling.”)

- **Level Two: Get assistance from others nearby**
- **Level Three: Get yourself to a safe location**
**Level Two: Get assistance from others nearby**

- Tell the student: “Let me see if I can find someone who can help.”
- Talk about your concerns with your supervisor or with peers.
- Have a plan in place for dealing with aggressive student behavior, e.g., identify who the back-up person(s) will be if a staff person needs help in dealing with a student.

**Level Three: Call Public Safety and Get to a safe location**

- Call Campus Public Safety at 346-6666 — or ask someone else to do so.
- Retreat to a locked office or other safe place while waiting
- Have a safety plan in case of violent or dangerous behavior. The plan may include dismissing class, contacting campus police, having a code word that signals another to call for help (if you are calling from your office), have an escape route planned, etc.

**Dealing with an Ongoing or Evolving Threat**

Make sure that you document threatening behavior for possible future reference. Include name of student, date, time and place of incident, describing incidents in behavioral terms. Use quotes for verbal threats.

Contact your department chair or office director for advice and support.

Consult with the Dean of Students Office and consider filing a student conduct complaint. UO Students are responsible for conforming with community standards as set forth by the Student Conduct Code. Violations affecting the health, safety and well being of the community may result in a negative notation being placed on a transcript, suspension, or expulsion.

Consult with the Department of Public Safety if the person is not a student.

Consult with the Counseling & Testing Center to assist you and/or debrief after an event.

The Employee Assistance Program offers brief counseling at no cost.
Campus Resources

Several offices on campus can assist you in dealing with disruptive, threatening or violent students.

Office of Student Life 346-3216

The Office of Student Life can consult with you, meet with a student, and enforce violations of the Student Conduct Code. If a student is disruptive with you, the student is very likely causing problems elsewhere. The Student Life Office is able to gather information from a variety of sources and can convene the Dean's Consultation Committee to decide on a course of action. Student Conduct Code: http://studentlife.uoregon.edu/programs/student_judi_affairs/index.htm

University Counseling & Testing Center 346-3227

The Counseling & Testing Center is available, from Monday to Friday 8:00 a.m. to 5 p.m., to consult with you about students who are of concern to you, perhaps because they appear to be at risk to others or themselves.

Department of Public Safety 346-5444

Emergency Only: 346-6666

The Department of Public Safety can dispatch officers to respond to immediate threats. They can work with you to help create a safe office, department or classroom. They also can consult with you regarding persons who are not UO students.

Employee Assistance Program: Cascade Centers 1-800-433-2320

The Employee Assistance Program offers no cost, brief, confidential counseling to UO employees.

1 Adapted from: “Dealing with Rude and Disruptive Students: Being Proactive,” by Ken Jones of St. John’s University
2 Source: Safe Campus, University of Washington
3 Adapted from: “Depression Awareness and Suicide Prevention Training” – an online training offered by the University Health Services at the University of California, Berkeley.

We consulted the following additional resource materials in developing this virtual brochure:
Assisting the Emotionally Distressed Student: A Guide for Staff and Faculty, University Health Services Counseling and Psychological Services, University of California, Berkeley
Dealing with Disruptive Students in the Classroom, The Office of Student Life, Northern Arizona University
Disruptive and Threatening Student Behavior: Guidelines for Faculty and Staff, Division of Student Affairs, University of Southern California
Managing Difficult Student Behavior: Guidelines for Faculty and Staff, The Office of the Dean of Students & The University Counseling Center, University of Utah
Tips For Dealing With Disruptive Students, Counseling Services, University of Missouri – St. Louis