

Dealing with difficult and irate students

Strategies for de-escalating conflict and fostering a positive
classroom environment

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Teaching is a privileged position

- University environments are a wonderful place to work
- You have the opportunity to influence and shape students' lives
- At a basic level, teaching is about possessing knowledge and expertise and having a passion to share that knowledge with others

Challenges do emerge

- As a general rule expect the unexpected...

Classroom management

- Guiding principle: manage the classroom to create the best learning experience for the majority of students. Your obligation is to the entire class, not necessarily any one student.
- Examples of challenges: 5 broad areas to consider

Scenario #1: Problematic verbal behaviors

Students who...

- talk too much
- constantly want you to call on them
- interrupt
- make tangential comments
- shift into lectures
- are oppositional and challenging

Recommendations: _____

Student says...

“You seem to have only textbook knowledge. My brother died of a heroine overdose. Let me educate you on the reality of what it’s like.”

The next thing you would say...

Scenario #2: Serious Disengagement

- Not contributing to class discussions
- Sleeping in class
- Cell phone or iPad or laptop use

Recommendations: _____

Student falls asleep in class...

He comes in and seems to be engaged for the first 15 minutes and then puts head down on desk and sleeps. To make matters worse, he snores and the rest of the students are giggling.

The next thing you would do...

Scenario #3: Chronic Absences & lateness

- Missing a significant portion of the classes for the semester
- Chronic lateness

Recommendations: _____

A student only showed up for 3 classes and sends the following email the last week of the course...

“I have had a really tough semester. A lot of things have been going on with my health. I have a doctors note for the classes I’ve missed. Please tell me what I need to do to complete the course.”

Your response...

Scenario #4: Personal distress & turmoil

- Mental health issues (e.g., depression, anxiety, trauma, serious mental illness)
- Learning disabilities
- Financial and transportation struggles
- Family and relationship problems
- Parenting and child care

Recommendations: _____

Student brings her 4-year old daughter to class...

She puts the child in a chair next to her and gives her a coloring book. The child is engaged with the coloring for about 10-minutes and then starts to complain to her mother that she is bored. The student verbally scolds the child and tries to get her to be quiet. After class she tells you that she doesn't have child care and that she has no choice but to bring her daughter to every class.

The next thing you would say...

Scenario #5: Conflict & disruption

- Threatening
- Acute agitation (e.g., emotional dysregulation and outbursts, schizophrenic spectrum behavior, manic episodes)
- Aggression

Recommendations: _____

Student altercation; one student says to another...

Student 1: *“You’re a disrespectful jackass! If we weren’t in class I would kick your ass.”*

Student 2: *“I’ll be waiting for you after class.”*

Your response...

Final thoughts

- In terms of the classroom, almost nothing (or very little) is a crisis -- “*No problem.*”
- Listen before reacting
- Avoid public confrontation as much as possible
- Keep open dialogue with your chairperson (e.g., ask for feedback about challenging student scenarios as they emerge)
- Utilize university resources
- Universities are about learning – provide students with a safe place to make mistakes (but give them gentle feedback)
- Enjoy the students!

List of resources

- Your chairperson... Office: _____ Cell: _____
- CCSU Public Safety (Campus police) 832-2375 (live 24/7)
- 911 emergencies (routes all emergency calls to the appropriate first responders including the CCSU Police via the CCSU dispatch center, including calls made from cell phones)
- Counseling and Wellness Center, Marcus White Hall room 205; Phone 832-1945
- The Learning Center, Carroll Hall room 016; Phone 832-1900
- Writing Center, Willard Hall room 115; Phone 832-2765
- Student Technology Center/ Computer lab, Marcus White Hall room 100; Phone 832-1722
- Student Behavioral Review Team 832-1601 (student is exhibiting symptoms of distress)
- Threat Assessment Team 832-1776 (greater level of concern; more immediate)