

Dealing with Disruptive Behavior in Instructional Settings

Written by: Michael B. Brown, PhD
& Maggie Olszewska, EdD

Revisions by: Travis Lewis, EdD
Associate Dean of Students

Tamika Wordlow
Director for the Office of Students Rights & Responsibilities

Mandy Messerli
Associate Director for the Office of Student Rights & Responsibilities

Dealing with disruptive behavior is one part of the responsibility of teaching. Students probably exhibit more challenging behavior in the classroom than in the past for a number of reasons: Lack of academic socialization, greater sense of entitlement, poor coping skills and resiliency, and fewer demands for mature behavior in childhood and adolescence. Freshman are most at-risk as they may not yet have learned more mature behavior and may be overwhelmed by their new found independence.

I. Policy Guidance

There are a number of policies and procedures in place to assist faculty in managing disruptive behavior. Here are highlights of the three major policy documents:

UNC Policy on Student Conduct

Faculty and students share in the responsibility for maintaining an environment in which academic freedom flourishes and in which the rights of each member of the academic community are respected. Students, specifically, must conduct themselves in a manner that helps to enhance an environment of learning in which the rights, dignity, worth, and freedom of each member of the academic community are respected. *UNC Policy Manual 700.4.2.*

ECU Academic Disruptive Behavior Policy

East Carolina University is committed to providing each student with a rich, distinctive educational experience. Disruptive academic behavior impedes the learning environment and hinders other students' learning. The course instructor has original purview over his/her class and may deny a student who is unduly disruptive the right to attend the class. Students who repeatedly violate reasonable standards of behavior in the classroom or other academic setting may be removed from the course by the instructor following appropriate notice. Students removed from a course under this policy will receive a "course withdrawal" according to university policy and are eligible for tuition refund as specified in the current tuition refund policy.

This policy does not restrict the instructor's prerogative to ask a disruptive student to leave an individual class session where appropriate or to refer the student to the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities for violation of the Student Code of Conduct.

Disruptive Academic Behavior

Disruptive academic behavior is any behavior likely to substantially or repeatedly interfere with the normal conduct of instructional activities, including meetings with instructors outside of class. Examples of such behavior include, but are not limited to, making loud or distracting noises; using cell phones and other electronic devices without prior approval; repeatedly speaking without being recognized; frequently arriving late or leaving early from class; and making threats or personal insults. A verbal expression of a disagreement with the instructor or other students on an academic subject matter discussed within the course, during times when the instructor permits discussion, is not in itself disruptive academic behavior.

Procedure for Instructors

A student who does not follow reasonable standards of academic decorum should first receive a private verbal warning from the faculty member. The instructor should describe the behavior of concern to the student, explain that it is inappropriate, and ask the student to stop the behavior. If the behavior continues, the instructor should give the student a written warning indicating that the student will be removed from the course if the behavior does not cease. If the behavior persists, the instructor should discuss the situation with his/her department chair. If it is decided to remove the student from the course then the instructor should schedule a meeting with his/her department chair and the student to inform the student that s/he is being removed from the course. This decision must be communicated in writing to the student with a copy promptly forwarded to the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities. The department chair must promptly communicate the decision in writing to the Office of the Registrar so that the student's schedule will be adjusted accordingly. Instructors should keep written documentation of all actions taken during this process.

If the behavior is threatening in nature or is likely to result in immediate harm, the faculty member should contact the East Carolina University Police Department for immediate assistance.

Student Appeals

The student may appeal the decision of the instructor and the department chair to remove him/her from the course to the academic dean of the college in which the course is located. The appeal must be received by the dean, in writing, within three working days of the date of the receipt of the decision by the student. The dean or dean's designee will review the appeal and the documentation, will discuss the appeal with the faculty member and, after discussion with the student and instructor, can affirm, reverse or modify the decision made by the instructor and department chair. The student, instructor and department chair will be notified of the appeal decision no later than three working days after receiving the appeal. The dean will provide written notification of the appeal decision to the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities, and also, if the original decision is overturned, to the Registrar's Office. If the decision is made that the student is to return to the course then the student will be allowed to immediately return to the classroom without academic penalty and the chair will work with the student and instructor to facilitate the completion of any missed work. The dean's decision is final.

ECU provides reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities. When communicating a warning to a student, faculty should ensure the discussion is private and refer any student who discloses a disability to Disability Support Services. (FS Resolution #11-52, April 2011)

ECU Student Code of Conduct

All students are responsible for conducting themselves in a manner that helps enhance an environment of learning in which the rights, dignity, worth, and freedom of each member of the academic community are respected. Upon acceptance of admission to ECU, each student agrees to abide by the policies of the University and to conduct her/himself on- and off-campus in a manner consistent with its educational mission. Students have a responsibility to review the Student Code of Conduct and other policies and to seek clarification if necessary from the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities. The relevant policies and procedures may be found in the Undergraduate Catalog, the Graduate Catalog, the Student Handbook, the University Policy Manual, and other manuals. East Carolina University students are expected to refrain from the following behaviors:

Disruptive Conduct: Being disruptive or disorderly in a manner that interferes with the function of the University or interferes with conduct of others, including law enforcement officers, who are on- or off-campus. Refusing or failing to submit appropriate identification or refusing to comply with a request from an identifiable University official acting on behalf of the University.

Harassment and Threats: Directing action toward a particular individual or group in a manner which is unwelcome and, under the totality of the circumstances, so severe, pervasive, or objectively offensive that it undermines and/or detracts from the target's academic pursuits, participation in University-sponsored activities, or employment effectively denying equal access to University resources and opportunities.

Endangerment: Acting in a manner that could or did endanger or injure a person or the ECU community. Examples of endangerment include, but are not limited to, fighting, operating a vehicle while under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and engaging in non-consensual sexual contact. (*ECU Student Code of Conduct* <http://www.ecu.edu/PRR/11/30/01>)

Addressing Disruptive Behavior

There are three general categories of disruptive behavior. The first is where a student exhibits threatening or dangerous behavior such as making threats, assaulting or following someone in anger, etc. The second type is "run of the mill" disruptive behavior—talking in class, texting, and sleeping are examples of this type of behavior. Finally, there is behavior that is intermediate between these two extremes. This may include cursing at the instructor, not cooperating in learning activities or talking on a cell phone.

II. Dealing With Disruptive Behavior in the Face-to-Face Setting

Most disruptive behavior is annoying rather than challenging or dangerous. The vast majority of students respond well to a reminder to behave differently and/or a private conversation about their behavior. Instructors must think about student misbehavior as a developmental issue, and our job is to help (teach) students to behave appropriately in the classroom. We must also help students understand that orderly behavior is a key to academic inquiry and learning.

Remember, most disruptive behavior is not directed personally at you but likely represents the student's general orientation toward life or is "random" misbehavior. Usually just giving a reminder of how to behave is all that is frequently necessary.

If you need to have a discussion with students, it is best to do so in private by asking the student to stay for a minute after class and then make an appointment to meet with you. It is better if you have some time right then that you could meet if the student has time. During your meeting:

1. Acknowledge the emotions if the student seems upset, angry, frustrated, or otherwise emotional. "Sarah, I notice you seem frustrated."
2. Briefly state your concerns. Be direct. "Sarah, I am concerned that you have been late for class every day since the beginning of the semester."
3. Frame it as a learning issue—you want them to get the most out of class and college.
4. Remind them of how their behavior affects the atmosphere for others.
5. Let the student talk. If he or she is reluctant or refuses, indicate that your door is open and that the student may return at another time. You may also suggest that the student seek assistance through the Dean of Students Office or the Center for Counseling and Student Development on campus.
6. Ask for clarification, if necessary. "I am not sure what you mean by 'not getting through.' Could you tell me more?"
7. Paraphrase what has been said. "I understand that you have been late for class because you work until noon and have a hard time finding a parking space."
8. If the student has problems or issues that you cannot deal with, make a referral to another campus resource (see Additional Campus Resource List).
9. Ask that the behavior should cease. Focus on behavior and clearly state the expectations and the consequences of continued disruption. For example, "if you continue to disrupt the class by coming in late and greeting your friends, I will have to report this to the department chair and you may be removed from the class."
10. Ask the student for comments. If the student doesn't agree with you, don't keep pressing for them to "admit" their error.
11. Leave the meeting on a positive note if at all possible. Tell them that you enjoy the subject and want them to, and that you look forward to working with the student. Thank them for his or her time.

Here are some suggestions for how to deal with each of the categories of disruptive behavior:

Student exhibits threatening or dangerous behavior.

What to do:

1. Withdraw from the conflict or argument if possible.
2. Move yourself and other students to a safe place if possible.
3. Call ECU Police (911 or 328-6787) for immediate assistance.
4. Notify ECU Cares at (252) 737-5555 and press 3, or online at www.ecu.edu/ecucares and make a report of concerning behavior.

Student engages in serious disruptive behavior

What to do:

1. Ask student to stop the behavior.
2. Tell the student that you will discuss his or her concern or the behavior after class.
3. If this is unsuccessful in remedying the situation, should contact the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities to file a student code of conduct violation report. Go to www.ecu.edu/osrr and click on “file a complaint” to complete the reporting form. call the office at 252-328-6824 should you have any questions. Document in writing what happened and what actions that you took.

Student is moderately disruptive in a single class session

What to do:

1. Ask student to cease disruption.
2. If continues, ask student to leave class for the single class session.
3. Talk privately with student outside of class about the disruptive behavior.

Student is continuously disruptive in more than one class session.

What to do:

1. Provide a private verbal warning. Describe the behavior of concern to the student, explain that it is inappropriate, and ask the student to stop the behavior.
2. If the behavior continues, give the student a written warning indicating that the student will be removed from the course if the behavior does not cease.
3. If the behavior persists, discuss the situation with your department chair or school director. Under the Academic Disruptive Behavior Policy a student can be removed from a course when the process has reached this point. If it is decided to remove the student from the course then you should schedule a meeting with his/her department chair and the student to inform the student that s/he is being removed from the course. This decision must be communicated in writing to the student with a copy promptly forwarded to the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities. The department chair

must promptly communicate the decision in writing to the Office of the Registrar so that the student's schedule will be adjusted accordingly.

Additional Considerations in the Online Environment

Online instruction presents similar yet different issues with disruptive students. The lack of face-to-face presence and the difficulty in interpreting emotions within electronic communications may add to the difficulties with online student interaction. In the online class, disruption can be direct, such as students responding in an aggressive fashion on a discussion board. It can also be less direct, such as a student posting a picture that she might not think is sexually explicit, but you or other students might find it inappropriate. Rarely will considerations about threats be a concern, but if so then you should follow the guidance for threats in the face-to-face setting.

Addressing Disruptive Behavior

Here are some strategies for dealing with disruptive students in the online environment:

- Prevention is the best strategy. Many students don't understand the context of online instruction. Provide information about your expectations for interaction (the "etiquette of learning") on your syllabus and in your announcements to students.
- Carefully consider the student's behavior to make sure it is really disruptive and not just an expression of disagreement.
- Email a student who is disruptive as soon as you are aware of the issues. Describe the problem, let the student know how he or she was disruptive and how his/her behavior had a negative impact on the learning process, what the possible consequences will be if he continues to be disruptive.
- You may decide to call the student or have the student call you to discuss the problem. If the student is local, you can also ask the student come to campus to talk with you.
- If necessary, you can delete any inappropriate postings in the discussion board and if needed you can also block a student from posting.
- While you are addressing the disruptive behavior be sure to save any pertinent emails or postings for documentation in case you need to take further action.

Addressing Threats

Threats in the online environment are relatively rare. If you are concerned that a student in an online course is engaging in threatening behavior then you should take immediate action as stated above:

1. Withdraw from the conversation with a student who has made a threat.
2. Immediately notify the ECU Police Department at 252-328-6787 if you perceive there to be imminent danger to anyone.
3. Notify ECU Cares at (252) 737-5555 and press 3, or online at www.ecu.edu/ecucares and make a report of concerning behavior.
4. Notify your department chair or school director about your concerns.

III. Preventing Classroom Disruption

Include Critical Information in Your Course Syllabus

- A statement that indicates your expectations about following the University's principles of academic integrity along with a reference to the online Student Handbook.
- Your attendance policy, including any penalties or bonuses for attendance and tardiness.
- A statement about your expectations for civil and respectful behavior in the classroom.
- A statement that electronic devices must be turned off during class.

Develop Positive Relationships with Your Students

Positive faculty-student relationships encourage greater student learning, reduce the likelihood of conflict, and can enhance student learning without lowering your standards. Here are some ways to encourage a positive relationship with your students:

- Come a little early for a face-to-face class and talk with students as they arrive for class.
- Explain your expectations and provide examples of what high quality work looks like.
- Talk with students about the importance and impact of what you are teaching on their lives, on scholarship, and on the rest of the world.
- Show enthusiasm for your subject area; students respect instructors who are enthusiastic about their material.
- Provide encouragement for students who are doing poorly.
- Talk with students about effective study techniques, time management, etc.
- Give students feedback in a constructive fashion and talk positively about scholarship.
- Keep your online or faculty office hours as posted and encourage students to utilize them.

Promote Civility in the Classroom

Civility is a core value of higher education, and faculty members may have to teach our students what it means to have a civil and productive learning environment. Here are some strategies to use that may promote civility in the classroom:

- Reduce anonymity. Get to know students' names, have some small group discussions in class, have a Blackboard discussion page, and occasionally visit laboratory sections of your course.
- Discuss with students the rationale for scholarly discussion and what appropriate participation is.
- Be approachable, and encourage students to talk with you about their concerns about learning, the course material, and the classroom.
- Help students to connect what they are learning to their lives on- and off-campus. Use examples, small group learning, discussion questions and other pedagogical techniques that promote discussion and greater personalization of the material in your course.
- Model civil behavior yourself. Come to class on time and end class on time. Treat students respectfully, even if you disagree with them. Respond to problems firmly but not in a hostile or demeaning manner.

IV. Additional Campus Resources for Assistance

There is a number of offices on-campus that can provide assistance to you in resolving student-faculty disagreements. The first person to talk with is your department chairperson or school director. Many colleges have an associate dean who deals with student issues who may be a useful resource to you. Other helpful resources include:

ECU Cares:

An online and telephone mechanism to report behavior of concern. Call 252-737-5555 and press option #3 or go online at www.ecu.edu/ecucares.

For general university problems and concerns about students:

Dr. Travis Lewis Associate Dean of Students 368 Wright Building
252-737-5555 lewistr@ecu.edu www.ecu.edu/ecucares

For student conduct or academic integrity issues:

Ms. Tamika Wordlow Director 372 Wright Building
Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities
252-328-6824 www.ecu.edu/osrr

For academic integrity issues:

Mrs. Mandy Messerli Associate Director 371 Wright Building
Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities
252-328-6824 www.ecu.edu/osrr

For counseling and psychological issues:

Dr. Valerie Kisler-Van Reede Director
Center for Counseling and Student Development 137 Umstead Building
328-6661 <http://www.ecu.edu/counselingcenter/>

For disability-related issues:

Mrs. Liz Johnston Director 138 Slay
Department for Disability Support Services
737-1016 <http://www.ecu.edu/dss>

For appeal of suspension, probation, or readmission issues:

Office of the Registrar 207 East 5th Street 328-6770

For Student Records and Confidentiality Questions (FERPA):

Mrs. Amanda Fleming Associate Registrar
207 East 5th Street
328-6747 <http://www.ecu.edu/registrar>

Student Code of Conduct:
<http://www.ecu.edu/PRR/11/30/01>