Establishing Classroom Civility and Dealing with Disruption

Set the stage for a positive classroom experience by:

- Stating reasonable and clear expectations in advance
- Defining conduct standards and discussing rules of etiquette in your syllabus and during class
- Giving examples of desired conduct as well as unacceptable behavior
- Explaining the reasons for your classroom expectations and inviting student comments and suggestions
- Being a role model for expected behavior and keeping your relationship with students friendly and professional

What is disruptive behavior?

Depending on the size and nature of your class, what is considered “disruptive” may vary. In general, disruption and obstruction include behavior that interferes with, disrupts, or prevents normal classroom functions or activities. Disruptive behaviors can range from mildly distracting to clearly disorderly, violent, or dangerous.

Depending on the course rules set by the instructor, disruption in the classroom may include:

- side conversations, ringing cell phones or using a cell phone to talk or send text messages
- interrupting the instructor or other students
- monopolizing class discussion and refusing to defer to instructor, or listen to others; persisting when the instructor has indicated that the student’s remarks are off topic and it is time to move on
- entering late/leaving early, moving about the classroom
- filming, photographing, or taping the class
- yelling, arguing, swearing, bullying, or other intimidating behavior
- reading, sleeping, eating, drinking, or not paying attention
- shuffling through papers, cleaning out a backpack or purse during lecture
- showing up to class under the influence of alcohol/drugs

Who decides what is disruptive?

Faculty have the authority and discretion to set rules that foster student learning. As a matter of academic freedom, these rules can be tailored to the subject matter and the instructor’s teaching methods and learning objectives. For these reasons, the course instructor is the one who makes a determination about what constitutes disruptive behavior.
Responding when disruption occurs:

- If you believe inappropriate behavior is occurring, **start by cautioning** the whole class rather than warning a particular student. A technique is to stop class, calmly indicate the problem (e.g. side conversations, cell phones) and state that class cannot continue until the behavior stops. Before resuming, enlist the support of others by reminding the class that the disruptive behavior is taking away from class time and may result in some exam material not being covered in class.

- Students also have academic freedom, so it is important to exercise authority with compassion and self-restraint. It is best to **correct innocent mistakes and minor first offenses gently, without ridiculing students’ remarks**. It is also important to respect the privacy of students and not to discuss incidents widely, beyond the chair and the dean.

- If it becomes necessary to **speak to an individual student about disruptive behavior, do so after class** in a discreet manner. If the situation requires an immediate response in class, calmly and courteously ask the student to stop the conduct and to talk to you after class or during office hours.

- You may want to inform the class that students may be disciplined for disrupting class, and to reiterate that message if you talk with an individual student outside class because of his or her behavior. **Remind the student that continued disruption** may result in permanent removal from the class.

- **A student should be asked to leave class if he or she engages in disruptive behavior that impedes your ability to teach the class productively.** If a student refuses to leave upon request, the instructor may contact University Police at ext. 2222 to intercede. Additionally, if the behavior of a student creates a safety risk or makes it impossible to continue class, the instructor may also dismiss class for the day. If the instructor intends to refer the student to the Dean of Students for disciplinary action, the referral should be accompanied by a detailed description of the behaviors and any relevant documentation that led to the referral and/or removal from class.

- If a student is persistently disruptive refer him/her to the Dean of Students for disciplinary action, with an accompanying detailed description of the behaviors and any relevant documentation that led to the referral and/or removal from class. **A disruptive student cannot be permanently removed from a class without a formal review, either through the student disciplinary process or through academic channels, including the department or dean’s office.**