Responding to Disruption in the Academic Setting

A Primer for Prevention and Response

The Ball State Policy

5.2.9 Obstruction or Disruption - Obstructing or disrupting the teaching and/or learning process in any campus classroom, building, or meeting area, or any University-sponsored activity, pedestrian or vehicular traffic, classes, lectures or meetings, obstructing or restricting another person’s freedom of movement, or inciting, aiding, or encouraging other persons to do so. See also Regulations for Use of Property for Expressive Activity, Appendix N and Classroom Disruption, Appendix P.

What is Classroom Disruption?

Disruption is defined as any “behavior a reasonable person would view as being likely to substantially or repeatedly interfere with the conduct of an academic setting.

These include coming late to class, tapping fingers, chewing gum, reading a newspaper. While annoying and distracting, these usually can be addressed effectively through conventional classroom management techniques which include addressing behavior expectations in the syllabus and during the first class period, in-class intervention, and speaking to a student after class.

However, students who exhibit behaviors listed above and who do not respond to reasonable intervention, who exhibit more severe behaviors, or who violate another University policy in an academic setting (e.g., intoxication, weapons policy violation) should be referred for adjudication through procedures outlined in the Code of Student Rights and Community Standards. Such behaviors include but are not limited to:

- repeated and unauthorized use of cell phones, laptops or other electronic devices
- persistent speaking without being called upon or disregarding instructor’s requests
- making loud or distracting noises
- making physical or verbal threats
- engaging in behaviors reasonable people consider intimidating

Preventing Disruption

- Assume that most students most want to help create positive learning environments
- State clear behavior expectations on the syllabus. For example, if you want students to turn off their cell phones during class, say so.

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1 This and other parts of this protocol are adapted from Pavela, G. (July 18, 2001). Questions and answers on classroom disruption. ASJA Law & Policy Report, No. 26). Association for Student Conduct Administrators (formerly Association for Student Judicial Affairs).

2 An excellent and accessible monograph from which this “primer” relies heavily as well is Amada, Gerald. (2015), Coping with misconduct in the college classroom: A practical model. Biographical Publishing Company, Prospect CT.
• Take the time during a first class meeting to discuss and clarify standards for conduct in your classroom including the behaviors that will help to create an effective learning environment versus those that will obstruct learning.

• Serve as a role model for the conduct you expect from your students.

**Intervening When Disruption Occurs**

• Intervene early when behavior first occurs.

• Utilize a graduated, progressive response.

• Be clear, courteous, and fair.

• Focus on the details of the disruptive behavior when speaking to the student instead of a student’s “attitude” or other attributes that are subject to interpretation.

• Document incidents when they occur. Document even small incidents and your response, as this may be important to establish a pattern of behavior; sometimes, small incidents assume greater importance at a later time. Document date, time, location, the names of persons involved, what you observed, and how you and others responded. Incidents that are adjudicated through procedures outlined in the *Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities* require a written complaint.

• Consult with your department chair and the Office of Student Rights and Community Standards (SRCS). SRCS can help by reviewing Ball State disciplinary procedures and meet with accused students informally or formally.

• Suspensions for more than one class period or restrictions from entering a service office require disciplinary procedures outlined in the *Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities* and the *Responding to Disruption in the Academic Setting* policy.

While each circumstance will require a different response, a general response sequence might look like the following:

• Use a general word of caution rather than warning a particular student and make students aware of what behavior is expected.

• Make eye contact with the student who is being disruptive, communicate non-verbally that behavior should stop.

• Request student who is being disruptive to speak to you after class in a firm, respectful and non-threatening manner.

• On rare occasions, speak to a student during class about his or her behavior. Correct the student with courtesy, indicating that further discussion can occur after class. Keep in mind that other students will expect the instructor or administrator to be reasonable and fair in your response.

• If disruption persists the student may be asked to leave the class for the remainder of the period. The student should be told the reason for this request and be given an opportunity to and meet with you at a scheduled time prior to the next class period. The instructor should consult promptly with the department chair and the Office of
Student Rights and Community Standards to meeting with the student. If the student refuses to leave, University Police should be called and requested to intervene.

- Few faculty members will ever encounter a situation that requires calling University Police. However, if a disruption is serious, other reasonable measures have failed, or if you believe there is a threat of violence or if the student refuses to leave the class after being told to do so, the class may be adjourned and the University Police may be called (285-1111 or 5-1111 from a campus phone).

Resources

While colleagues, department chairs, and supervisors can assist you with handling most situations effectively, there are a number of Ball State offices available to assist you with concerns about students, classroom disruption, and classroom management. These include but are not limited to:

- **Student Rights and Community Standards**, SC L-4, 765-285-5036
- **Counseling Center**, LU 320, 765-285-1736
- **Vice President of Student Affairs and Enrollment Services/Dean of Students**, AD 238, 765-285-5344
- **University Police**, 765-285-1111
- **Office of Educational Excellence**, TC 415, 765-285-1763