

# Disruptive & Threatening Student Behavior

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*Guidelines for Faculty & Staff*



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*Adapted from the University of Southern California document "Disruptive & Threatening Student Behavior" revised Spring 2014 and Washington State University – Spokane Campus document "Classroom Management."*

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Occasionally, Washington State University experiences threatening and disruptive behavior on the part of some student, a trend paralleled nationally at other campuses. As a faculty or staff member, you may find yourself having to contend with a disruptive or emotionally disturbed student at some point during your career.



Student behaviors that you may encounter range from simple disruptions in class, to ongoing harassment, to verbal and physical threats.

The guidelines in this booklet are designed to: 1) assist your department in thinking through its response to situations in which students may behave in unusual or unpredictable ways; 2) help you handle an actual threat; and 3) assist you with referral and protocol procedures. When your department has prepared its faculty and staff adequately for such situations, the chances of serious disruption may be lessened.

The majority of students act in an appropriate and respectful manner; however, there are occasions when students will test the limits of acceptable classroom behavior. Student conduct that substantially or repeatedly interferes with the ability of an instructor to teach or the ability of other students to learn is a violation of Washington State University's Standards of Conduct for Students and can be addressed in accordance with Student Conduct procedures. However, it is rarely enough to simply hand a situation over to Student Conduct when a student has caused significant disruption within a department. The department or office involved may also need to address issues related to perceived safety of its faculty and staff, as well as the wellbeing of other students.

Please note that a separate policy and protocol exists for handling violence in the workplace. When an employee is threatening or intimidating assistance should be sought from Human Resource Services or from the WSU Police (509) 335-8548. The policy on workplace violence can be found here:

<http://www.wsu.edu/forms2/ALTPDF/BPPM/50-30.pdf>



## Definitions

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Classroom disruption is behavior a reasonable person would view as substantially or repeatedly interfering with faculty's ability to teach or student's right to learn. Disruptive behavior may sometimes threaten or endanger your physical or psychological wellbeing or safety, or that of others. Disruptive behavior can assume many forms, including but not limited to:

- Persistent late arrival or departure that disrupts the flow of class.
- Repeated cell phone use.
- Talking out of place during class.
- Loud and/or frequent interruption of class flow with inappropriate questions or remarks.
- Persistent contact outside of class that hampers your ability to do normal work or assist other students.
- Belligerent behavior once confronted.
- Verbal and/or physical threats.
- Threatening emails, letters, or voicemails.
- Inappropriate contact at your home.
- Any behavior indicating a romantic or obsessive interest.



## Three Levels of Threatening or Disruptive Behavior

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For the purposes of these guidelines, disruptive and threatening behavior has been categorized into three different levels.

- 1) The first level encompasses any situation that can be handled informally between you and the student, leading to a prompt resolution.
- 2) The second level involves an ongoing problem, or a more serious incident in the classroom. In these situations, you are encouraged to consult with the Dean of Students. If necessary, the Dean or a representative will assist you in evaluating and resolving the situation.
- 3) The third level, and most serious, is when there is immediate danger. If this occurs, you should call the WSU Police by dialing 911 immediately.

## Level One Informal Resolution

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### a) In the classroom

It is helpful if you clarify behavioral and other expectations at the beginning of the semester, and reach an agreement with students on standards for classroom conduct.

When establishing guidelines for behavior in your course, *it is important that you only articulate the standards you are willing to enforce*. You have broad authority to manage your classroom, exercise that authority with compassion and self-restraint. Apply standards fairly and consistently, as students will recognize and resent perceived unfairness.

Describing basic behavioral standards in the course syllabus will assist you in discussing them on the first day of class. Information should specify what behaviors are prohibited, how you will manage behavioral issues, and any consequences that may result. A statement in the course syllabus might read:

*“Behavior that persistently or flagrantly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students’ ability to learn and an instructor’s ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be asked to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Standards and Accountability.”*

### When a student is disruptive in class...

- Respond immediately. This may mean employing informal action (standing next to students who are talking), reminding the class of the agreed standards for behavior, or directing a word of warning to the disruptive student. When you respond to a student during class, do so in a professional manner.
- If the behavior continues, notify the student that he or she must leave the room if the behavior does not cease and that disciplinary action may result. If the student does not respond appropriately, ask him or her to leave and arrange to see you during office hours before the next class session. You may wish to consult with the Office of the Dean of Students prior to meeting. If the student refuses to leave, notify him or her that you will call WSU Police and that disciplinary action will result.
- It is appropriate to call WSU Police any time disruptive behavior escalates, or when it is reasonable to interpret behavior (including oral statements) as threatening or harassing to you or to other members of the class.

### Meeting with the disruptive student...

The Office of the Dean of Students recommends having another person present if possible when meeting with the disruptive student following a confrontation or removal from class (TA, colleague, etc.) or leaving the door open in case the situation becomes confrontational. You may wish to request a meeting with a student who has displayed

unacceptable behavior even when removal from class has not resulted. In either case, meeting with the student is an opportunity for him or her to understand the inappropriateness of their behavior, and for you to discuss strategies that will enable him or her to continue successfully in your class. Disruptive behavior generally results from other life problems, be ready to recommend additional resources on campus, such as Counseling Services, Health and Wellness Center, or other appropriate services.

### **In the meeting...**

- Remain calm. Your reasoned response will assist the student in addressing the behavior in question.
- Do not take the student's remarks personally. Again, disruptive behavior often results from other life problems.
- Be specific about the inappropriate behavior that the student exhibited. Describe the behavior; do not focus on the person. Explain why the behavior is problematic and the affect it has on others in the class.
- Ask questions and summarize what you hear the student saying. Respectful concern may enable you as the educator to help the student be successful both in your class, and in his or her university experience.
- Focus on areas of agreement between you and the student.
- Again, recommend additional resources on campus as needed.

- Conclude by summarizing any resolution and articulating expectations for the future. Be clear that continued inappropriate behavior will be referred to the Office of Student Standards and Accountability. We recommend that you send a summary by email to the student outlining your conversation and agreed upon conduct. This provides written expectations and may be useful for formal adjudicative procedures should the behavior continue.

### **b) Outside the classroom**

You may encounter threatening, intimidating or harassing behavior by students outside of the classroom. Should this occur, strategies for responding to the student generally are the same as those outlined previously.

### **In general...**

- Remain calm, and speak in a controlled manner. This will diffuse tension.
- Identify a more appropriate place and time to discuss the matter.
- Allow the student to regain composure if necessary and again, identify a more appropriate place to discuss the matter.
- Explain to the student that you will call the WSU Police if inappropriate behavior persists or if a threat is made.

Of course, it is important to differentiate between student behavior that is threatening or harassing, and that which is merely uncivil or rude.

## Level Two Disruptive Behavior Requiring a Student Affairs Response

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If the disruptive behavior feels intimidating, threatening, or appears to be escalating, you should consult with the Office of the Dean of Students and your department chair.

A member of the Office of the Dean of Students can assist you in handling the situation and consult on further disciplinary action. The Office of the Dean of Students will provide appropriate levels of support for you and others involved including other student affected by the student exhibiting the behavior in question. The student may be referred to the Student Care Team (SCT). The SCT is a cross-functional, multi-disciplinary behavioral threat assessment team that assesses and intervenes when a student may be at risk for self harm or for causing harm to others. The SCT gives guidance to the university community members who may need to refer students for assistance and review. The complete SCT policy is available upon request. On line reporting can be found at <http://aware.wsu.edu/>

The Office of the Dean of Students or the Office of Student Standards and Accountability will follow up with the disruptive student. Various disciplinary processes can be employed at this point, including, under certain circumstances, interim suspension of the student (WAC 504-26-406) prior to a formal review by the University Conduct Board.



## Level Three Immediate Threat

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Whenever there is an immediate threat to the safety of any person, contact the WSU Police immediately. **It is always safer to error on the side of caution.**

After a threatening incident has occurred and a report has been taken, the WSU Police customarily involves the Office of the Dean of Students, the Office of Student Standards and Accountability, Counseling Services, and other campus offices in responding to the incident. You can expect these and other offices to provide appropriate consultation and assistance on an ongoing basis where a serious problem has occurred.

When an incident is sufficiently serious and attracts media attention, senior Student Affairs officers and the WSU Police will take the lead in communicating with the press, in conjunction with Public Relations and other appropriate offices.

## **When a Complaint is forwarded to the Office of the Student Conduct**

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When you report behavior that violates the Standard of Conduct for Students, you will be advised of the outcome because you have a legitimate educational interest as defined by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA). Sanctions include a range of options from warnings to educational projects, community service, and suspension, or expulsion after formal review by the University Conduct Board.

Online reporting is available for faculty and staff members for your convenience. The online form can be found here:  
<http://conduct.wsu.edu/forms/misconduct/>

Following the receipt of your complaint and the determination that the student violated the Standards for Student Conduct, the student will be required to meet with a conduct officer to discuss the violation. This is a preliminary hearing to assess whether the situation can be resolved administratively through the student and the conduct officer or if the matter needs to be forwarded to the University Conduct Board for a formal hearing. Should this happen, you will generally be involved as the university witness.

The purpose of a hearing with the University Conduct Board is to discuss the facts of the case, to hear the accused student's perspective, and to determine an appropriate disciplinary sanction. Disciplinary sanctions take into consideration the needs of both the

accused student and the campus community as a whole.

*Please note: While you or the WSU Police may order a student to leave a class session in which he or she is displaying disruptive behavior, permanent removal cannot occur without a hearing from the University Conduct Board. The Vice President of Student Affairs, Equity and Diversity or a designee may invoke an interim suspension (WAC 504-26-406), prior to a hearing by the University Conduct Board, when circumstances warrant such action.*

## **The Accused Student's Rights and Responsibilities**

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As always, in situations involving students, you should observe appropriate confidentiality. FERPA protects the privacy of student education records (including disciplinary records). Disciplinary records are kept separate from academic records. If a student is suspended or expelled a letter may be sent with their transcript if a conduct board rules the offending behavior is egregious. It is prudent to communicate only with those directly involved with the situation.

Often students will have a misunderstanding of the jurisdiction of their First Amendment Rights. The Standards of Conduct for Students (WAC 504-26-203) states: "Students have the right to freedom of speech, including the right to dissent or protest, but this expression cannot interfere with the rights of others or disrupt the university's activities. Prohibited behavior includes: disruption or obstruction of

teaching...” As long as you do not discriminate or seek to punish students for expressing their pertinent viewpoints you can and should feel free to set limits for discussion and make the determination of behavior that extends beyond expressing a viewpoint and becomes disruptive or threatening.

WSU expects our students to act as independent, responsible, and adult members of the university community. Students are afforded due process rights during the conduct process. A student who believes that he or she has been treated improperly in the aftermath of an incident may seek assistance through established university grievance procedures (University Ombudsman).

### **The Faculty and Staff Members Rights and Responsibilities**

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As a faculty or staff member you have the right to conduct your business in a reasonable and respectful environment. Disruptive and threatening behavior tests the boundaries of what can be deemed reasonable. As such, you have certain assurances when reporting violations. The risk of liability for making such a report is minimal. There are strong public policy reasons to support and protect individuals who make good faith reports of wrongdoing to appropriate officials, even if those reports later prove to be mistaken. Common law (or statutes in some states) gives people who report misconduct to proper authorities a “qualified privilege.” Simply stated, that means they cannot be held liable for

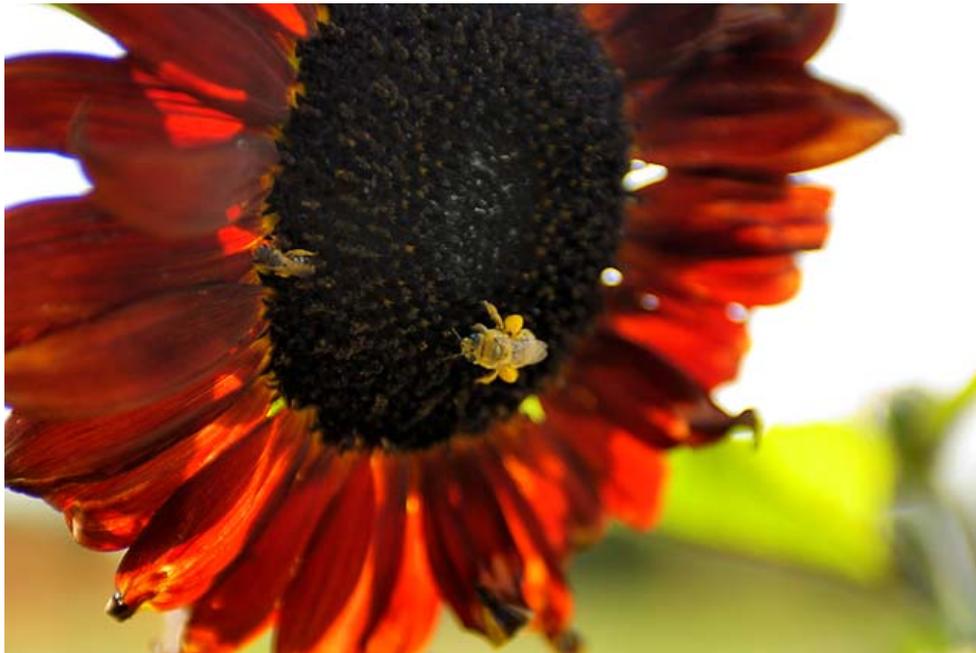
defamation unless the report was made in bad faith, with knowledge the information they provided was false, or in reckless disregard of its truth or falsity.

### **Documentation**

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Resolving disruption cases can be helped if you document problem behavior, including dates, times, brief descriptions of what happened, and the names of witnesses who may have observed the behavior. Such documentation should always be factual, and not include personal interjections.





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## Important Contact Information

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Office of the Dean of Students  
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(509) 335-5757  
<http://deanofstudents.wsu.edu/>

Office of Student Standards and  
Accountability  
260 Lighty  
(509) 335-4532  
<http://conduct.wsu.edu/>

University Ombudsman  
2 Wilson Hall  
(509) 335-1195  
<http://www.wsu.edu/~ombuds/>

WSU Police  
(509) 335-8548  
911 for emergencies  
<http://police.wsu.edu/>

Counseling and Testing Services  
280 Lighty  
(509) 335-4511  
<http://counsel.wsu.edu/>

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