

Dealing with Disruptive Students

If you feel threatened or endangered, call the police!

What is disruptive behavior?

Behavior that a reasonable person would view as likely to substantially interfere with other students, faculty or staff and their access to an appropriate educational or work environment is considered disruptive behavior.

What are some examples of disruptive behavior?

- ✓ Yelling or screaming
- ✓ Repeated, unauthorized use of cell phones in the classroom
- ✓ Repeatedly interrupting others or speaking without being recognized
- ✓ Persistent and unreasonable demands for time and attention
- ✓ Words or actions that have the effect of intimidating or harassing another
- ✓ Words or actions that cause another to fear for his or her personal safety
- ✓ Threats of physical assault

How should I deal with a disruptive person?

First, remember that only 7% of what we communicate is words we actually say. The remaining 93% is communicated through tone of voice, body language and facial expression. In other words, **how** you communicate will likely be more effective than the words you actually say. Therefore, it is important to keep calm, speak in a lower voice, and communicate in a respectful manner. Model the way in which you would like the disruptive person to respond to you.

Second, many disruptive situations involve anger or frustration in some form. Recognize that the period of peak anger usually lasts 20-30 seconds. Although this may feel like an eternity in the throes of the situation, it is often best to “wait it out” before progressing.

Finally, recognize that students are often the strongest supporters of classroom decorum. Other students in the classroom will likely be uncomfortable with the behaviors of a disruptive person and will expect you to address the problem behavior.

To guide you in this process, here are some basic principles to follow when addressing disruptive behavior:

1. *Assume good intentions.* If you can start with this premise, what you say and how you say it will likely help to deescalate the situation, and will serve as a teachable moment for all of your students.
2. *Remain calm.* As noted earlier, your non-verbals will greatly influence how things go. If you remain calm, the student will eventually mirror your approach. It may help to remind yourself that the situation is likely not about you, but about the situation.
3. *Be specific* when addressing the problematic behavior and make it clear that such behavior is inappropriate. If needed, inform the individual(s) that there are consequences for failing to improve the disruptive behavior.

4. *Invite the student* to speak with you after class or during office hours to discuss the matter in greater detail if needed.

Documentation

Disruptive behavior should always be documented. Write a factual, detailed account of what occurred. Use concrete, behavioral terms and not your personal reflections on the assumed intent of the student. Share the documentation appropriately.

The Do's

- + DO listen through the anger. Use active listening.
- + DO acknowledge the feelings of the individual (e.g., "I understand that you are upset ...").
- + DO allow the person to vent and tell you what is upsetting him or her. Use silence to allow the person to talk it out.
- + DO set limits. Explain clearly and directly what behaviors are acceptable and which ones are not.
- + DO be firm, steady, consistent and honest.
- + DO focus on what you can do to help resolve the situation (e.g., "Here is what I can do ...").
- + DO make personal referrals. Give a name of an individual, when possible, and call ahead to brief the person.
- + DO report the behavior to the department chair, the MSU Police, and/or Student Life, if necessary.

The Don'ts

- DON'T interrupt, particularly during the first 20-30 seconds of peak anger.
- DON'T minimize the situation.
- DON'T get into an argument or shouting match.
- DON'T blame, ridicule or use sarcasm.
- DON'T touch.
- DON'T ignore warning signs that the person is about to explode.
- DON'T ignore your own limitations.

Resources

- 📞 Emergency 911
- 📞 MSU Police (Non-Emergency) 355-2221
- 📞 Student Life-Judicial Affairs 432-2471

Can faculty disenroll disruptive students from their classes?

From 3335-8-33 Conditions and Procedures for Disenrollment From a Course.

(A) The instructor (or in the case of a graduate teaching associate, the supervising faculty member), the chair of the instructor's department (with the agreement of the instructor), or other appropriate administrative official may disenroll a student from a course if:

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(E) After investigation, including consultation with the instructor and the student in question, and utilizing other university resources, as desirable, the chair (or other appropriate administrative official) may disenroll a student from a course if the student presents a clear and present threat of bodily harm or injury to the instructor or fellow students, or, after warning, continues to engage in disruptive conduct, either of which results in impairment of teaching or learning processes:

(1) If, after attempting to resolve the difficulty by informal means, the department chair (or other appropriate administrative official) deems disenrollment necessary, the affected student shall be notified in writing. The notice shall be delivered by hand or sent through ordinary mail to the student at the last address supplied pursuant to rule 3335-9-09 of the Administrative Code. Copies of the disenrollment action shall be sent to the dean of the instructional college, the dean of the student's college, the office of the university registrar, and the office of student affairs.

(2) The student may appeal to the executive vice president and provost or designee for waiver of disenrollment under paragraph (E) of this rule, provided the appeal is filed within ten days of the disenrollment action. The executive vice president and provost shall make final determination on the appeal within seven days.

(3) Disenrollment is effective upon the action of the department chair (or other appropriate administrative official), unless reversed by the executive vice president and provost or designee.