

# Creating Harmony in the Classroom: Addressing Student Behavior

A Quick Reference Guide



FIT

Dean of Students Office  
Division of Enrollment Management & Student Success

## INTRODUCTION

Today's classroom environment has become increasingly challenging to manage. Our students are entering the classroom with greater responsibilities and life stressors that weigh heavily on their mental and emotional psyches. These life stressors often spill out into the classroom environment resulting in disruptive behavior that influences classroom dynamics, and has a negative impact on the overall student academic experience. As classroom instructors, faculty have the challenging role of setting a classroom tone that creates the necessary "space" for a safe and compassionate place of learning and development. To that end, this handout has been developed to provide some strategies on creating a harmonious classroom environment, and pointing out ways to recognize and address disruptive student behavior.

## UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DISRUPTIVE AND DANGEROUS BEHAVIOR

There is a distinct difference between students who are being disruptive to the classroom environment, and students that are exhibiting dangerous and troubling behavior. The below table provides some examples. The subsequent sections will walk you through how to address these when and if they do occur in the classroom.

<b>Disruptive Behaviors</b>	<b>vs.</b>	<b>Dangerous Behaviors</b>
Taking/making calls, texting, using smart phones for social media, etc.		Direct communicated threat to professor or another student such as: "I am going to kick your ass" or "If you say that again, I will end you."
Interruptions such as frequent use of the restroom.		Throwing objects or slamming doors.
Entitled or disrespectful talk to the professor or other students.		Conversations that are designed to upset other students such as descriptions of weapons, killing, or death.
Arguing grades or "grade grubbing" for extra points after the professor requests the student to stop.		Objectifying language that depersonalizes the professor or other students.
Excessive sighs or eye rolls or other gestures that disrupt the class environment.		Prolonged nonverbal, passive-aggressive behavior such as sitting with arms crossed, glaring or staring at staff, and refusing to speak or respond to questions or directives.
Poor personal hygiene, drowsiness, notable lack of participation that makes it difficult to continue a conversation or teach class.		Self-injurious behavior such as cutting or burning, including during a meeting or in class, or exposing previously unexposed self-injuries.

The examples listed above are just a few types of challenging behaviors that students may exhibit in the classroom. These types of behavior can be extremely disruptive to the classroom environment, but they can be handled in a relatively non-disruptive manner if some preliminary steps have been put into place.

## STRATEGIES ON HOW TO CREATE & MAINTAIN A HARMONIOUS CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

### Setting the Classroom Tone

Classroom environments tend to be dynamic and the manner in which individuals interact with each other depends on the tone and behavioral standards established by the person managing the class. Setting the right tone is an essential element when it comes to creating and maintaining a harmonious classroom environment. Here are some ideas to consider:

- Get to know your students
  - Ask them to introduce themselves, and share something that they love to do, like a hobby
  - Ask them for their preferred pronoun
- Provide clear behavioral expectations to students through established classroom policies and expectations that are written on an official course document such as a syllabus. Go over these with the students. You can go around the room and have students take turns reading these out loud so that everyone is a participant in understanding these standards
- Ask the students if they wish to add something to the classroom standards. You might be happily surprised by what they come up with

### Addressing Negative Behavior

Whether the behavior is disruptive or dangerous there are some immediate steps you can take to de-escalate a situation that has the potential to spiral out of control.

Outlined below are some examples that suggest ways to address potential situations that may arise.

**Example 1:** A student in your class has a noticeable hygiene problem. They are chronically late for class and often fall asleep during lectures. The behavior has also

been noticed by the other students who have come to you to complain. What should you do?

**Make contact:**

- Approach the student privately and quietly, preferably after the class is done for the day.
- Speak gently, openly and directly. Most of the time they know that something is wrong. You will not be surprising them. The less you are upset, the less they will worry about upsetting you with the truth. Express your concern, and explain what you have been noticing

**Try to focus on the behavior:** “I am concerned that you have been very late for class every day. Your appearance has also been concerning, and I notice that you have been falling asleep in class.”

**Try not to interpret or advise.** There may be big pieces of information you don’t have. If you are busy interpreting and advising, you are probably not listening

- Ask for clarification if necessary. You might say, “I’m not sure what you mean by nothing is working out. Would you tell me more?”
- Do not judge. As soon as you do, communication is finished. The student will feel alienated and will find no reason to talk with you
- Express understanding. Some examples are, “I can see that things are really difficult for you right now” or “I’m sorry that you are having a hard time.” These remarks should be based on what the student is telling you specifically. It is not necessarily helpful to talk about your own experiences.

**When you feel you have some idea of the problem...**

- Decide if you can realistically help the student by providing brief, direct support or
- Refer the student to an appropriate resource—The Counseling Center, FIT-ABLE, Health Services, or the Dean of Students Office
- Submit a CARE report (more on this later)

Remember a student need not be in crisis for you to refer him/her to counseling. A problem need not be overwhelming to impact the student’s life and academic performance. Any problem that is affecting the student’s classroom behavior is sufficient reason for you to inquire and, if you believe it will be helpful, make a referral.

**Example 2:** A student in your class is constantly makes comments out of turn. Additionally, while you are teaching and/or assigning students work, the student will sigh loudly and roll their eyes in an exaggerated manner. The behavior is disruptive and is resulting in a negative impact on the classroom flow and your ability to teach effectively.

A student’s disruptive behavior may be due to a number of different causes: overwhelming anxiety, poor social skills, substance use, medical conditions or disability, an attention-related cognitive disorder, or a symptom of an underlying mental or emotional disorder, to list a few.

Assess whether you feel comfortable addressing the student yourself. If you do not, contact the Chair of your Department for advice and work with them on next steps. If, however, you do feel comfortable addressing the student, these guidelines will be helpful:

- Avoid calling the student out in front of the classroom. Instead, ask the student to step outside the classroom with you, where you may speak in private.
- Speak in a calm and reassuring manner. Emphasize the student's wellbeing/benefit rather than punishment or discipline as your concern
- Explain your concerns about the student's behavior and its disruption to the class. These may be different from the student's perceptions and concerns
- Express interest in the student's point of view but do not ask too many questions. It is important for the student to feel listened to
- Focus on the behavior and clearly state your expectations and the consequences of continuing disruption to the class. "I'm sorry that you are having a hard time, but if you continue to disrupt the class and behave in this disrespectful manner, I will have to report this to the Department Chair and notify the Dean of Students Office."
- If appropriate, refer the student to the Counseling Center.
- If, in your opinion, it is advisable for you to escort the student to the Counseling Center, tell them you will go with them

**Example 3:** A student in your class is upset at the midterm grade that they received. You have spoken with them about it and have explained the reason for the grading and have offered them options on ways they can improve their performance in the class. However, the student has been extremely upset and agitated. After your conversation with them, they walk away muttering curses under their breath. The following class, they show up very agitated. They exhibit passive-aggressive behavior and are sitting with arms crossed, glaring and staring at you, refusing to respond to any questions or queries.

Extreme behavior by students can be very trying for even the most experienced faculty. Be aware of your own limits, discomfort, and safety. Always feel free to ask for assistance:

- Notify Public Safety and file a report with them. This will prompt an immediate response from the Dean of Students Office to conduct an investigation
- Notify your Department Chair

Disruptive, disrespectful, or annoying behavior is not necessarily dangerous behavior. If, however, you sense danger in the classroom, clear the room and call Public Safety immediately at 212-217-7777. If you are in your office, leave and call for help.

## Things to think about when addressing Challenging Behaviors

1. Be consistent and stick with your established behavioral standards
  - Handle the behavior when it occurs, do not dismiss the behavior hoping it will stop
  - If appropriate, try speaking with the student privately. For example, suggest that you step outside the classroom, or make an appointment with the student to meet with you in your office.
  - Document each and every incident with language that is objective. For instance, following your conversation, send a follow up email to the student outlining the key points of the discussion. If you have been interacting with a disruptive student in your classroom, send the Chair of your department a detailed email outlining the incident. The email should be objective in nature and free of assumptions and/or emotion laden language that could be construed as biased.
  - Keep your department chair apprised of the situation from the very beginning
  - Avoid confronting an angry, or disgruntled student in a manner which may escalate the potential for violent behavior
2. Take a middle of the road approach
  - If the student makes unreasonable demands, let them know the limits of what is reasonable.
    - For instance, set clear limits up front and hold the student to the allotted time for the discussion. Say something like “I have 10 minutes today and so we can work together within that time to try and help you with this concern.”
    - When students are trying to use manipulative requests and behaviors you could respond with something like “you came asking for my help and I have offered you several ideas, but they do not seem okay with you. What ideas do you have?”
  - If you are uncomfortable meeting with the student 1 on 1, contact your department chair to meet as a group
3. Work on adopting a calm, cool, and collected stance in the face of upsetting or frustrating behavior
  - Do not meet the student at their emotional level. If the student is raising their voice and getting loud, respond in a calm manner and take the lead.
    - Suggest stepping outside the room to have the conversation.
    - Ask questions like “tell me what is bothering you and then let’s decide what solutions there might be.”
    - Emphasize behaviors that are and aren’t acceptable. For instance say something like “if you want me to continue with this, I will need you to be as respectful of me when you are talking as you would want me to be respectful of you.”
4. Try to view the situation from the other person’s perspective
  - We encourage you to make every attempt to look through the eyes and experiences of the student you are trying to help
5. Know the signs of danger
  - People don’t simply explode in violence—they escalate over time

## UNDERSTANDING AND EFFECTIVELY USING CAMPUS RESOURCES

In the case of an emergency which requires an immediate response, always contact the Department of Public Safety.

### 1. Department of Public Safety

P: 212.217.7777 / Rm: Pomerantz, D-442 / Email: [public\\_safety@fitnyc.edu](mailto:public_safety@fitnyc.edu)

- All reports submitted to the Department of Public Safety which involves students are shared with the Dean of Students Office.
- If you feel threatened and fear for your safety you should immediately contact Public Safety. They are on site 24/7.

There are also other campus resources available to you to assist in handling disruptive and/or dangerous behaviors, but are not crisis responders like Public Safety.

### 2. The Care Team

P: 212.217.3800 / Rm: Business & Liberal Arts, B221 / Email:

[care\\_team@fitnyc.edu](mailto:care_team@fitnyc.edu)

- The Care Team or Behavioral Intervention Team, as they can sometimes be referred to, exist on college campuses to provide a 360-degree view of situations in order to better respond to concerning behaviors
- The Team is made up of professional staff from the areas of Residential Life, Dean of Students Office, Counseling, Health Services, and FIT-ABLE
- The Care Team is not an emergency response team. All immediate emergencies should be reported to Public Safety first. A follow-up report can always be submitted to Care after an incident is reported to Public Safety, if necessary
- You should refer a student to the Care team if you are concerned by a student's behavior or have noticed a general change in the student's behavior over time in your course. Examples of such behavior, included but are not limited to:
  - Unusual or erratic behavior in or outside the classroom environment.
  - Extended absences from class by an otherwise engaged and involved student.
  - Submission of class work that consists of troubling themes or references
  - Behavior that could be construed as threat to self or others.
- All reports can be submitted online at [fitnyc.edu/careteam/](http://fitnyc.edu/careteam/)

### 3. The Dean of Students Office

P: 212.217.3800 / Rm: Business & Liberal Arts, B221 / Email:

[dean\\_of\\_students@fitnyc.edu](mailto:dean_of_students@fitnyc.edu)

- The Dean of Students Office serves as a critical support structure dedicated to the intellectual, creative, personal and social development of FIT students

- All reports submitted to Public Safety involving students are provided to the Dean of Students Office. The Dean of Students Office can also receive reports via the Care Team or individual departments on campus. Once a report is received the following steps occur:
  - The Dean of Students and/or designee investigates the incident and meets with the student(s). If upon investigation, it is determined that the Code of Student Conduct has been violated, the students can face disciplinary charges and the matter will be adjudicated as per the Code of Student Conduct

This Handout has been designed to serve as a helpful tool. We hope that the examples provided are useful to you. If you have any questions and or need any help or support, there are resources available to help guide you. Feel free to reach out at any point with questions or concerns.



## RESOURCE LIST

### **Dean of Students Office**

Location: Business & Liberal Arts Center, Room B-221

Phone: 212.217.3800 / Email: [dean\\_of\\_students@fitnyc.edu](mailto:dean_of_students@fitnyc.edu)

Web: [fitnyc.edu/deanofstudents](http://fitnyc.edu/deanofstudents)

### **Care Team**

Location: Business & Liberal Arts Center, Room B-221

Phone: 212.217.3800 / Email: [care\\_team@fitnyc.edu](mailto:care_team@fitnyc.edu)

Web: [fitnyc.edu/careteam](http://fitnyc.edu/careteam)

### **Public Safety**

Location: Pomerantz Center, Room D-442

Phone: 212.217.7777 / Email: [public\\_safety@fitnyc.edu](mailto:public_safety@fitnyc.edu)

Web: [fitnyc.edu/safety](http://fitnyc.edu/safety)

### **Title IX Coordinator**

Location: 333 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue, 16<sup>th</sup> floor

Phone: 212.217.3360 / Email: [titleix@fitnyc.edu](mailto:titleix@fitnyc.edu)

Web: [fitnyc.edu/empower](http://fitnyc.edu/empower)

### **FIT-ABLE**

Location: Dubinsky Center, Room A-570

Phone: 212.217.4090 / Email: [fitable@fitnyc.edu](mailto:fitable@fitnyc.edu)

Web: [fitnyc.edu/fitable](http://fitnyc.edu/fitable)

### **Counseling Center**

Location: Dubinsky Center, Room A-212B

Phone: 212.217.4260

Web: [fitnyc.edu/counseling](http://fitnyc.edu/counseling)

### **Health Services**

Location: Dubinsky Center, Room A-402

Phone: 212.217.4190

Web: [fitnyc.edu/healthservices](http://fitnyc.edu/healthservices)

### **Center for Excellence in Teaching**

Location: Business & Liberal Arts Center, Room B-502

Phone: 212.217.4064

Web: [fitnyc.edu/cet](http://fitnyc.edu/cet)

Information for this handout has been obtained from *Addressing Disruptive and Dangerous Behavior*, The NABITA 2017 Whitepaper and *Helping Students in Distress: A Faculty and Staff Guide for Assisting Students in Distress*, Southern Connecticut State University, 2015