
Responding to Disruptive or Threatening Student Behavior:

A Guide for Staff

Quick Reference

In case of an immediate emergency, call VT Police: 231-6411

For consultations or to report a distressed student, follow your departmental protocol and/or call:

Your direct supervisor _____

Dean of Students Office (for consultations about all student concerns).....	231-3787
Cook Counseling Center (for psychological concerns).....	231-6557
Services for Students with Disabilities (for academic accommodations).....	231-3788
Campus Alcohol Abuse Prevention Center (for substance abuse issues).....	231-2233
Judicial Affairs (for violations of Student Code of Conduct).....	231-3790
Virginia Tech Women's Center (for cases of sexual assault or gender issues).....	231-7806
Residence Life (for concerns about the health/well-being of on-campus students)*	231-6205

*For concerns about the health and well-being of students living off-campus, the Dean of Students Office can arrange for the Blacksburg Police Department to check on off-campus students if deemed appropriate.

Please tell students about these offices or call the office while the student is with you to make sure he or she gets an appointment. Due to privacy laws, some of these offices will not be able to tell you if they have seen a student unless the student signs a release.

I.	Introduction	3
II.	University Standards.....	4
III.	Taking Action.....	4
	A. Identifying and Referring the Distressed Student.....	4
	B. Responding to Threatening or Potentially Violent Students.....	5
IV.	Student Discipline Procedures.....	6
	A. Filing a Student Misconduct Complaint.....	7
	B. Initiation of Student Discipline.....	7
	C. What to do While Disciplinary Proceedings are Under Way.....	8
V.	Special Issues.....	8
	A. Student Complaints about Students.....	8
	B. Disruptions Caused by Student with Disabilities.....	8
	C. Student Records Access.....	9
VI.	Appendix A	
	Virginia Tech Resources for Consultation and Referral of Students.....	10
VII.	Appendix B	
	Principles of Community.....	11
VIII.	Acknowledgements.....	12

Introduction

In an ideal world, we would not experience behavior that undermines instruction and, thereby, negatively impacts student learning. However, the unfortunate reality is that a small number of our students exhibit disruptive behavior in classrooms, lab areas, offices, field sites and other educational settings, or via electronic means such as email, discussion boards, online meeting spaces, and audio video conferencing. This manual is intended to offer guidance and support should you need to respond to disruptive or threatening student behavior.

- If you need immediate assistance in responding to a threat to your safety, or the safety of others, contact Virginia Tech Police Department at 231-6411 or 911. The department is staffed 24 hours per day and can dispatch law enforcement personnel to assist you at your campus location. Off campus and satellite locations should dial 911.
- If you need to consult with someone about a student who is disruptive in any educational setting or seems to be showing signs of emotional distress, mental illness, or difficulty in adjusting to college life, contact the Dean of Students Office at 231-3787. The Dean of Students Office can assess the situation and make the appropriate referrals.
- If you have questions about whether a student's disruptive behavior can be addressed through the university judicial system, contact the Office of Judicial Affairs at 231-3790.
- If you don't know whether to be concerned about a behavior contact the Dean of Students Office at 231-3787 for guidance and referrals. If after-hours contact is needed, the Virginia Tech Police can have the on-call administrator contact you.

Questions about this manual may be directed to the Dean of Students Office at 231-3787.

University Standards

The philosophy of *University Policies for Student Life* states, "To support the educational mission of the university, to create an environment where all students have the same opportunity to succeed academically and to promote health and safety, Virginia Tech has established policies that set minimum standards for student behavior." All students of Virginia Tech are required to adhere to the Student Conduct Code as stated in the *University Policies for Student Life* (www.judicial.vt.edu/upsl.php). All members of the university community are also expected to abide by "The Principles of Community" (see appendix B).

Taking Action

A number of factors, such as the severity and frequency of a student's misconduct, influence the action that might be appropriate to a specific instance of disruptive behavior. However, your position as a staff member of the university means you may only witness a single instance of distressed or disturbing behavior. The following measures do not constitute a fixed procedure that must be followed in each instance. If the incident of concern is manageable, then you may want to simply mention it to your supervisor or department head. The strategies offered here should be pursued based on your own assessment of their suitability to the situation with which you are dealing.

Identifying and Referring the Distressed Student

The college years can be very stressful for many. In the contemporary climate of competition and pressure, some students adequately cope with these stresses, but others find that stress becomes unmanageable and interferes with learning. In some cases, these students may even disrupt the learning of others. Many students initially seek assistance from faculty or staff members. The Thomas Cook Counseling Center has identified many behaviors that distressed students may exhibit in "Identifying and Referring the Distressed Student: A Faculty/Staff Guide," which is available at www.ucc.vt.edu/referringstudents.htm.

Some behaviors that you, as a staff member, might see are:

- Dependency (e.g., the student who hangs around or makes excessive appointments).
- Marked changes in personal hygiene.
- Impaired speech and disjointed thoughts.
- Repeated requests for special consideration (e.g., deadline extensions).
- Threats to others.
- Expressed suicidal thoughts (e.g., referring to suicide as a current option).
- Excessive weight gain or loss.
- Frequent or high levels of irritable, unruly, abrasive, or aggressive behavior.
- Unable to make decisions despite your repeated efforts to clarify or encourage.
- Bizarre behavior that is obviously inappropriate for the situation (e.g., talking to something/someone that is not present).
- Students who appear overly nervous, tense or tearful.

Some guidelines for interacting with distressed students include:

- Talk to the student in private.
- Express concern. Be as specific as possible in stating your observations and reasons for concern.
- Listen carefully to everything the student says.
- Repeat the essence of what the student has told you so your attempts to understand are communicated.
- Avoid criticizing or sounding judgmental.
- Consider the Cook Counseling Center (CCC) as a resource and discuss referral with the student.
- If the student resists referral and you remain uncomfortable with the situation, contact the CCC to discuss your concern.

Responding to Threatening or Potentially Violent Students

Each of us responds differently to the behaviors of others. Encounters with students that leave you frightened and in fear for your personal safety should be taken very seriously. Direct or implied threats of violence, challenges to fight, shoving, physical attacks, stalking, threatening phone calls, emails or other correspondence, acts of harassment and similar behaviors should be immediately discussed with your department chair or supervisor, the Virginia Tech Police, and the Dean of Students Office. Your department chair or supervisor will provide advice and support and will ensure that the college dean and other appropriate campus officials are notified. The Virginia Tech Police, at 231-6411, will assist you in assessing the threat, determining the most appropriate steps to be taken and, if necessary, will dispatch law enforcement personnel. If the threat is immediate, dial 911 for immediate police response. It is strongly suggested that you notify the Dean of Students Office, at 231-3787, whenever the police have been requested to intervene. In instances where the reported conduct constitutes a violation of the Student Conduct Code, the Dean of Students Office can also assist you in filing a Judicial Referral.

Meeting With a Threatening or Potentially Violent Student

Faculty often encounter troubled students when they have arranged a meeting with that student, but staff are more often on the front lines and may not be expecting to encounter an angry or hostile student. Therefore, it is essential that staff develop a strategy for encountering a difficult student. Precautions to take include:

- Always know that the Virginia Tech police are only a phone call away. Call them immediately if you feel threatened by a student.
- Consider establishing a code word or phrase to be used within your department. That word would serve as a signal to others to call for help outside your office. For example,

you could establish the name "Mr. Pitt" as a code word. If you are in the front office of an academic department and you find yourself confronted by a threatening student, you can call into another room or on an intercom and say "my next appointment is with Mr. Pitt - can you call and let him know I'm running late?" This will act a sign to whoever is within hearing distance to call the police. It does not mean to come into the office or to double check the situation. It means **CALL THE POLICE IMMEDIATELY**. Create a code word or phrase, distribute it among the staff in your area, and be ready to respond.

- "Panic buttons" are available from CNS. You may contact them at 231-6460 to discuss.
- Terminate any conversation immediately if your "sixth sense" tells you something is wrong.
- Avoid body language that appears challenging such as placing your hands on your hips, moving into the student's territory, or using aggressive facial expressions.
- Slow your rate of speech down and use a low pitch and volume to reduce the momentum of the situation.
- Ask to consult your supervisor, a department head, or the Dean of Students Office to help satisfy the agitated person's need to feel heard.
- Listen carefully by really paying attention to what is said. Let the student know you will help within your ability to do so and within reason.
- Ask questions to help regain control of the conversation and to understand the situation.
- Neither agree with distorted statements nor attempt to argue. Avoid defensiveness.
- Terminate the meeting if the student remains belligerent and tell her/him that you will not continue until he/she calms down.
- Never physically touch an outraged student or try to force them to leave.
- If a weapon becomes evident, leave. If that is not possible, calmly ask the person to leave any weapon in a neutral position as you continue talking calmly. (Notify Virginia Tech Police as soon as you are able!) This is also an excellent example of when a code word or phrase (see p. 5-6) would be useful.
- Let the person know the consequences of any violent behavior.
- Never agree to go to an unmonitored location with a potentially violent person.

Student Discipline Procedures

Serious consideration should be given to filing a misconduct complaint against any student who, following clear warning, persists in exhibiting disruptive behavior, or who threatens or commits an act of violence or abuse. While you may not know if a student has continued to behave in a disruptive manner, corrective measures are also appropriate when a student commits what you believe to be a single act of serious misconduct. You may initiate formal judicial action by filing a Judicial Referral with the Office of Judicial Affairs. The procedures for filing a complaint are discussed below. You are encouraged to contact the Dean of Students Office at 231-3787 for advice in filing a complaint.

Filing a Student Misconduct Complaint

Anyone can file a complaint alleging a violation of the Student Code of Conduct (available at <http://www.studentprograms.vt.edu/judicial/documents/SectionII.pdf>). A complaint exists once it is put into writing, signed and dated by the complainant, and received by the Office of Judicial Affairs in 108 Dietrick Hall (0227). A written complaint may be submitted in any form as long as it includes the following information:

- Full name and, if known, the identification number, phone number and email address of the student against whom the complaint is filed.
- A description of the misconduct, including the date, time and place of the occurrence.
- Names of witnesses, an explanation of what they observed, and how to reach them.
- Supporting documentation/evidence of the misconduct.
- Information concerning any similar previous incidents involving the student against whom the complaint is filed and/or any appropriate documentation of meetings with the student regarding the misconduct.
- Your name and how you may be reached by phone and email.

Please review the complaint with your supervisor, department chair, or the Dean of Students Office before submitting it to the Office of Judicial Affairs. While supervisory agreement or disagreement with the complaint is not required, experience indicates that such consultation assists in promoting institutional coordination and support.

Initiation of Student Discipline

The Director of Judicial Affairs is the person who initiates formal disciplinary action against a student. Upon review of a written complaint a determination is made as to whether there is sufficient information to suggest a Code violation. If so, the following steps are taken:

1. The student is notified in writing of the alleged violation. The student will receive a copy of your report with a letter outlining the Student Conduct Code violation in question.
2. A hearing is conducted by either a University Administrator or a student judicial committee (panel of 5 to 6 students advised by the Office of Judicial Affairs).
3. At the conclusion of the hearing, the student will be notified of his/her right to appeal any applied sanction as outlined in the *University Policies for Student Life*.

The individual bringing the complaint will normally be required to attend the hearing. Such hearings are closed and confidential except for the participants. Prior to scheduling the hearing, you will receive an email inquiring into your availability to attend a hearing. The results of complaints initiated against students charged with acts that are disruptive, abusive or threatening are normally communicated back to the complainant or any individual who may have been a victim of a violent act. Any questions about the University Judicial System should be directed to the Office of Judicial Affairs at 231-3790.

What to do While Disciplinary Proceedings are Under Way

A number of factors influence the length of time it takes to conclude the disciplinary process. The most significant factors include the student's timely response to official notices, the student's willingness to resolve the complaint, and any issues related to accommodating schedules of all parties needed at the hearing. The student discipline process moves relatively quickly (i.e., 1-3 weeks) when the student immediately responds to notices.

Students do not lose the right to continue attending class, lab, or accessing university departments upon being charged with a violation of the Student Conduct Code. When the alleged violation involves a verified threat of harm to you or anyone else, every effort will be made to prevent the student from returning to the site of the incident while the case is being adjudicated. Less severe cases will be considered on a case-by-case basis. While the University's goal in these circumstances is to protect your safety and the integrity of the educational process, there is also a need to mitigate the effects of missed class time or university services while the accused student receives due process.

Special Issues

Student Complaints about Students

When students report classroom or electronic misconduct that you did not witness, you should provide guidance and support in determining referral options. This may include your contacting the Dean of Students Office, the Office of Judicial Affairs or your department chair or supervisor and determine whether to file a complaint with the Virginia Tech Police Department or the Office of Judicial Affairs, as appropriate.

Students may independently initiate a complaint against another student for violation of the Student Conduct Code. Students do not have to discuss or review their complaint with anyone, although such discussions are advisable. The most effective way to assist students who want to initiate a complaint is to provide support and referral services.

Disruptions Caused by Students with Disabilities

All students, including those who have a disability, are expected to adhere to the Student Conduct Code. If you believe a student is genuinely experiencing difficulty in exhibiting appropriate behavior because of a disabling condition, you may wish to contact Services for Students with Disabilities, at 231-3788, for assistance. Contact the Virginia Tech Police at 231-6411 if your concern involves an immediate threat of health or safety. Normally, a disabling condition will not constitute an acceptable excuse for violating the Student Conduct Code. Your decision to initiate a complaint against a student should be based on the student's behavior and not his/her disability.

Student Records Access

Federal law and campus policy protect students against third party access to information contained in their records. Except as permitted by law, students must provide written authorization for release of information in their student record to a third party, including matters of student discipline. Inquiries into student discipline records should be directed to the Office of Judicial Affairs. Additionally, the content of a student record cannot be released to any member of our faculty or staff who does not have a legitimate need to know the information as a result of his/her official duties.

With few exceptions, students have a right to access most records (including email correspondence) in which they are identified by name or other distinguishing characteristic such as student identification or social security number. (Note that such access does not extend to your personal notes that are only available for your personal use.) Therefore, you should draft all written correspondence as though the student will eventually gain access to it. With this in mind, refrain from unnecessary opinions, personal insults or derogatory characterizations in any written correspondence.

General questions concerning student record release practices should be directed to the University Registrar's Office. Questions concerning student discipline record release practices should be directed to the Office of Judicial Affairs at 231-3790.

Appendix A

Virginia Tech Resources for Consultation and Referral of Students

	Dean of Students Office	VT Police	Office of Judicial Affairs	Depart. Chair/Dean	Cook Counseling Center	Office for Equal Opportunity	VT Women's Center
	231-3787	231-6411	231-3790		231-6557	231-7500	231-7806
Working with a student who exhibits the following behaviors:	VT Police is available 24 hrs/everyday. In case of emergency call 911. For after hours referrals call 231-6411.						
Possesses an immediate threat to self or others		*					
Writes or verbalizes a direct threat to another person	*	*			*		
Displays anger or hostility inappropriately	*			*	*		
Exhibits behavior that seems bizarre or out of touch with reality		*			*		
Shows signs of alcohol or drug abuse	*			*	*		
Seems overly emotional, e.g., aggressive, depressed, demanding, or suspicious	*			*	*		
Is the subject of complaints by other students regarding behaviors	*			*	*		
Comes to class, lab, or an office drunk or high	*		*	*	*		
Other Concerns:							
Is a victim of sexual assault	*	*	*		*		*
Talks about homicide or suicide	*				*		
Is a victim of violence, stalking, intimidation or domestic abuse	*	*	*		*		*
Is having difficulty due to illness or death of a friend or family member	*				*		
May have a disability	*				*		
Reports sexual harassment or civil rights discrimination			*			*	
Violates principles of community or commits a biased based behavior	*		*				
Is a victim of a biased based behavior					*	*	*

*Contact should be based on the immediacy of the issue.

Appendix B: Principles of Community

The "Virginia Tech Principles of Community" were affirmed by the board of visitors March 14, 2005, and signed by eight university organizations.

“Virginia Tech is a public land-grant university, committed to teaching and learning, research, and outreach to the Commonwealth of Virginia, the nation, and the world community. Learning from the experiences that shape Virginia Tech as an institution, we acknowledge those aspects of our legacy that reflected bias and exclusion. Therefore, we adopt and practice the following principles as fundamental to our on-going efforts to increase access and inclusion and to create a community that nurtures learning and growth for all of its members:

- We affirm the inherent dignity and value of every person and strive to maintain a climate for work and learning based on mutual respect and understanding.
- We affirm the right of each person to express thoughts and opinions freely. We encourage open expression within a climate of civility, sensitivity, and mutual respect.
- We affirm the value of human diversity because it enriches our lives and the University. We acknowledge and respect our differences while affirming our common humanity.
- We reject all forms of prejudice and discrimination, including those based on age, color, disability, gender, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, and veteran status. We take individual and collective responsibility for helping to eliminate bias and discrimination and for increasing our own understanding of these issues through education, training, and interaction with others.
- We pledge our collective commitment to these principles in the spirit of the Virginia Tech motto of *Ut Prosim* (That I May Serve).”

Ben J. Davenport Jr., Rector, Board of Visitors

Charles W. Steger, President

W. Samuel Easterling, President, Faculty Senate

Sue Ellen Crocker, President, Staff Senate

Sumeet Bagai, President, Student Government Association

Myrna Callison and Yvette Quintela, Co-Vice Presidents, Graduate Student Assembly

Kimball "Jay" Reynolds, President, Virginia Tech Alumni Association

Ray Plaza, Chair, Commission on Equal Opportunity and Diversity

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