



Responding to Students in Distress

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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. *Responding to Students in Distress* will offer guidance and support should you need to respond to disruptive or threatening student behavior.

- If you need immediate assistance in response 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 Office of the Dean of Students at 231-3787. The Office of the Dean of Students 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 conduct system, contact the Office of Student Conduct at 231-3790.
- If you don't know whether to be concerned about a behavior contact the Office of the Dean of Students at 231-3787 for guidance and referrals. If after hours contact if needed, the Virginia Tech Police can have the on-call staff person contact you.

As the course instructor, you are the authority both in your classroom and in any class related interaction occurring outside of the class. You are obligated to establish appropriate academic and behavioral standards. There are a number of ways you can influence how individual student behavior impacts the learning environment. Some strategies that might prove helpful include:

- set and communicate classroom behavior expectations on your syllabus,
- personally model the behaviors students are expected to exhibit,
- firmly and fairly address disruptive behavior, and
- hold students accountable for their actions.

A learning environment that incorporates the above elements will better support students in their intellectual and personal growth while contributing to your own sense of safety and well-being.

Questions about this Guide may be directed to the Office of the Dean of Students, dean.students@vt.edu, 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.” Virginia Tech students are required to adhere to the Student Conduct Code as stated in the *University Policies for Student Life* (www.hokiehandbook.vt.edu/studentlife/). All members of the university community are also encouraged to abide by “The Principles of Community”.

Establishing Expectations for Classroom Conduct

As stated in the Faculty Handbook, “Maintaining a good learning environment in the classroom is an important part of a faculty member’s responsibility as a teacher. The teacher should endeavor to create a classroom atmosphere that is comfortable and welcoming of all students, including women and members of minority groups. Disruptive classroom conduct on the part of students may be distracting, annoying, or intimidating to other students and should not be tolerated by the teacher.”

“Faculty have the prerogative of deciding the classroom conduct and the appropriate dress of their students as long as these actions do not infringe upon the students’ rights as guaranteed in principles underlying the section in *University Policies for Student Life*.”

In addition to the various University standards and policies referred to above, students are subject to the academic and behavioral standards set by the course instructor. Behavioral standards that are thoughtfully developed and effectively communicated at the start of the semester, and reinforced when needed, may exert a positive influence on classroom conduct.

Behavioral concerns that, in your judgment, require special emphasis can be addressed in your course syllabus. It is quite common to include a statement of warning about cheating and plagiarism and the consequences of these forms of misconduct.

Examples of other behaviors that may be addressed in your syllabus include:

- intimidation or harassing behavior
- inappropriate, disrespectful, or uncivil responses to the comments or opinions of others in the classroom or transmitted electronically
- biased based behaviors (comments or harassment)
- threats/challenges to do physical harm (even when stated in a joking manner)
- use of obscene or profane language in the classroom or transmitted electronically
- excessive talking
- late arrival to, or early departure from, class without permission
- use of personal electronic devices such as cell phones/smart phones, iPods, iPads, PDAs, etc.

- refusal to comply with faculty direction

When discussing standards and expectations at the beginning of the semester, you might want to consider an approach that does not discourage your students from forming and expressing ideas and opinions that are relevant to course objectives. Appropriate behavioral standards tend to ensure and protect everyone's free speech; however, everyone must be cognizant of and reinforce the Virginia Tech "Principles of Community."

Establishing Expectations for On-line Class Conduct and Electronic Communication

The number of students taking online classes has increased, as has the use of electronic communication tools, such as Canvas. With the increase in use comes an avenue for disruptive and unacceptable behavior. Students may make comments electronically that they would not make in person-to-person contact. Just as faculty members establish classroom conduct they must also establish expectations for students during on-line classes and through electronic communications. It is recommended that specific language regarding expectations for electronic communication be included on the syllabus for the course.

A Sample Excerpt from Syllabus:

ONLINE COMMUNICATION

Keep in mind that all electronic interactions (e-mail, chats, discussion forums, etc.) are an extension of our classroom and should be treated as such.

DO NOT enter a chat room, send e-mail, or participate in an online discussion under an alias, a false name, or as "anonymous." This is an important rule that everyone must follow so that we may maintain a safe academic environment. Entering an academic space, whether it be online or in a traditional classroom, and misrepresenting yourself is a violation of the Virginia Tech Honor Code. All Honor Code violations will be prosecuted.

Class members will no doubt disagree with one another on various issues and articles discussed in class and online. That's fine—disagreement and critique promote a deeper understanding. Take care to distinguish academic criticism and political debate from personal attacks and "power plays." In other words, if you are offering criticism, do not frame your remarks in ways that are demeaning to others. By the same token, try not to be defensive if your idea receives criticism in a way that really is not a personal attack. With this in mind, we can have lively discussions, which prompt us all to think more critically about the assumptions, feelings, and values we hold.

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. Thus, the following measures do not constitute a fixed procedure that must be followed in each instance.

Rather, these strategies should be pursued based on your own assessment of their suitability to the situation with which you are dealing.

Give a warning

A rare instance of rude, annoying, or irritating behavior could simply be a sign of a student's immaturity or lack of familiarity with campus and classroom culture. When this first occurs, you might choose to ignore such behaviors, or address them by modeling the proper conduct, or use informal means to get a message to the student. However, recurring acts of disruptive behavior should be addressed in a direct manner. When disruptive behavior first becomes evident, consider reminding the entire class of the need to follow the applicable standard outlined in the syllabus. If the disruption involves a behavior that has not been previously addressed, take the time to communicate your expectations.

Speak individually with any student who exhibits a pattern of disruptive behavior or who commits a single incident of serious misconduct. Ask the student to remain after class for a conversation or to schedule a meeting. A confidential meeting will provide the best opportunity to discuss your concerns while avoiding the embarrassment or defensiveness the student might display when publicly addressed. However, do not meet alone with any student you believe to be a threat to your personal safety. Refer to the section, Responding to Threatening or Potentially Violent Students. During the meeting, discuss the disruptive behavior, clarify your expectations, gain cooperation in adhering to class standards, and state the consequences of failing to make necessary adjustments (e.g., the filing of a misconduct complaint as discussed on page 6 of this publication). If a meeting cannot be arranged, don't hesitate to communicate by phone, email, letter, fax, or any method that allows you to reach the student *before the next class session*. Make a written record of any meeting to discuss disruptive behavior. If the meeting concerned a serious incident, send a letter to the student summarizing the conversation.

Involve Others as Appropriate

Even when there is no threat of harm, you may find it helpful to involve a colleague when meeting with a student to discuss seriously disruptive behavior. The Dean of Students Office staff is also available for consultation. The added perspective of a campus official will serve to reinforce the importance of your standards and help keep the conversation focused on behaviors rather than personalities.

Seek a Voluntary Course Withdrawal

Students cannot be involuntarily withdrawn from a course except as provided by an existing University policy or through use of the student discipline procedures. In some cases, a student's withdrawal from a course provides the most expeditious way to end disruptive behavior and its corresponding conflict. Conversations with students to seek their voluntary course withdrawal should be thoughtfully considered. Withdrawals *should not* be pursued as a substitute for discipline when a student has committed a serious act of misconduct.

Withdrawals are most appropriate when there is a genuine personal conflict that cannot be readily resolved, and when any necessary administrative approvals have been secured in advance. Students will often respond negatively when they believe they have been given an ultimatum to withdraw from a class. If necessary, enlist the assistance of your department chair, academic dean or the Office of the Dean of Students staff to facilitate the student's withdrawal.

If Necessary, Remove the Student from a Single Class Event (face to face or at a distance)

On rare occasion a student's conduct may be so seriously disruptive or threatening that immediate action is required. Begin by firmly warning the student that the behavior must stop or he/she will be asked to leave class. If the behavior persists, direct the student to leave the event for the remainder of the class session. Although permanent removal from a class requires initiation of formal disciplinary proceedings, faculty can eject a student from a single class when necessary to end a seriously disruptive or threatening situation.

If a student refuses to leave class when directed, call the Virginia Tech Police at 231-6411 for assistance. If necessary, temporarily adjourn the class or send a student to call the Virginia Tech Police for assistance. A VT Police Officer will be dispatched to your location and, at your request, will remove the student. Please cooperate with the Officer in making a report of the incident.

It is very important that you immediately report any removal to your department chair. The Office of the Dean of Students should also be notified of this action as quickly as possible by calling 231-3787. The Dean of Students representative will help you develop an action plan to be taken prior to the next class meeting and can assist with completing a Student Conduct referral, if applicable. The plan can include a conversation between the student and the staff members in the Office of Student Conduct or the Office of the Dean of Students which will focus on the conditions for the student's return to class, strategies the student can pursue to participate appropriately in class, and the consequences of further disruptive behavior.

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 the following behaviors in “Identifying and Referring the Distressed Student: A Faculty/Staff Guide,” which is available at www.ucc.vt.edu/referringstudents.htm.

Below are potential actions and behaviors of distressed students:

- Excessive procrastination and very poorly prepared work, especially if inconsistent with previous work.
- Infrequent class attendance with little or no work completed.
- Dependency (e.g., the student who hangs around or makes excessive appointments during office hours).
- Listlessness, lack of energy, or frequently falling asleep in class.
- 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.
- Behavior which regularly interferes with effective class management.
- 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.

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, the Virginia Tech Police, and the Office of the Dean of Students staff. Your department chair 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 Office of the Dean of Students whenever the police have been requested to intervene. In instances where the reported conduct constitutes a violation of the Student Conduct Code, the Office of the Dean of Students can assist you in filing a Conduct Referral.

Meeting With a Threatening or Potentially Violent Student

Do not meet alone with an angry or hostile student. Arrange a specific appointment to meet with the student; thereby giving you time to develop an action plan. Precautions to take include:

- Alert a colleague that you will be meeting with the potentially violent person and have that colleague ready to assist. Have a Virginia Tech police officer on "standby" or with you as circumstances dictate.
- Consider establishing a code word to be used within the department. That word would serve as a signal to others to call for help outside your office.
- Keep the door of your meeting place open.
- Position yourself so that you can exit the room quickly, if necessary. For example, keep yourself between the student and the door.
- Terminate the session 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 include a department head or Dean of Students staff member to help satisfy the agitated person's need to be heard.
- As early in the meeting as possible, elicit the student's goal for the meeting and state your goal. Negotiation of a common goal may be a useful approach to keeping the student focused.
- 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 - dial 911 directly.
- Let the person know the consequences of any violent behavior.
- Never agree to go to an unmonitored location with a potentially violent person and do not meet after hours.

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. Students warned of the need to correct disruptive behavior should be held accountable if the behavior continues. Corrective measures are also appropriate when a student commits what you believe to be a single act of serious misconduct. You may initiate formal student conduct action by filing a Conduct Referral with the Office of Student Conduct. The procedures for filing a complaint are discussed below.

Filing a Student Misconduct Complaint

Anyone can file a complaint alleging a violation of the Student Code of Conduct. A complaint exists once it is put into writing, signed and dated by the complainant, and received by the Office of Student Conduct. For your convenience, conduct referrals may be submitted electronically. Conduct referrals should include 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 alleged misconduct, including the date, time and place of the occurrence.
- Any names of witnesses, an explanation of what they observed, and how they might be contacted.
- 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 department chair or staff in the Office of the Dean of Students before submitting it to the Office of Student Conduct. While the department chair's 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 Student Conduct (or designee) initiates formal disciplinary action against a student. Upon review of a written referral 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 via Hokie SPA of the alleged violation. The student may view the referral on Hokie SPA.
2. Students may participate in an agreed resolution meeting where they meet with an assigned hearing officer to discuss the incident. In this meeting, potential sanctions are determined, or a hearing is conducted by either a University Administrator or a student conduct committee (panel of 5 to 6 students advised by the Office of Student Conduct).
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 strongly encouraged 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 conduct referrals 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 Student Conduct System should be directed to the Office of Student Conduct at 231-3790.

What to do While Student Conduct 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 upon being charged with a violation of the Student Conduct Code. When the alleged violation involves a verified threat of harm to you or another member of the class, every effort will be made to prevent the student from returning to class 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 while the accused student receives due process. As such, you may be asked to propose alternate ways that the student's educational interests can be preserved between the time that he/she has been asked not to return to class and the conclusion of conduct proceedings.

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 Office of the Dean of Students, the Office of Student Conduct or your department chair and determine whether to file a complaint with the Virginia Tech Police Department or the Office of Student Conduct, 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 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 231-0858, for assistance. Contact the Virginia Tech Police at 231-6411 if your concern involves an immediate threat of health or safety. Normally, a disability will not constitute an acceptable excuse for violating the Student Code of Conduct. 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 Student Conduct. Additionally, the content of a student record can not 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, editorial comments, 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 Student Conduct at 231-3790.

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In August, 2012, permission was granted from Human Resources to the Dean of Students to provide needed updates to this Guide. Future oversight for this Guide will be provided by the Dean of Students and his/her designee.

NOTE: The Dean of Students Office also provides a Faculty and Staff Resource Guide in the form of a folder for quick reference. This Guide provides a quick reference for faculty and staff members to access when working with a distressed students. The following topics are covered in the quick reference format:

Care Team

Threat Assessment Team

Bias-related Incidents

Signs of a student in distress and Working with a student in distress

Absence Verification Guidelines

Important Contact Information

Dean of Students online Reporting System

Request your copy by sending a note to dean.students@vt.edu

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