



OFFICE OF THE DEAN OF STUDENTS

Dealing with

DISRUPTIVE

Students



University of North Carolina Wilmington
Division of Student Affairs • *“Creating Experiences for Life”*

University Statement of Academic Expectations for Students

In choosing UNCW, you have become part of our community of scholars. We recognize that the UNCW learning experience is challenging and requires hard work. It also requires a commitment to make time available to do that hard work. The university expects you to make academics your highest priority by dedicating your time and energy to training your mind and acquiring knowledge. Academic success in critical thinking and problem solving prepares you for the changes and challenges you will encounter in the future. Our faculty and academic support resources are readily available as partners in this effort, but the primary responsibility for learning is yours.

In an effort to uphold the academic expectations of the university, this brochure was developed. This brochure is designed to provide UNCW's faculty with appropriate, effective, and legally sound principals for dealing with disruptive student behavior, especially that which occurs in the classroom.



Dealing with Disruptive Students

On college campuses, the term “disruptive behavior” is most commonly associated with large-scale demonstrations and protests. There is another form of misconduct on campus which is seldom reported by the media, but causes individual faculty members considerable personal turmoil: disruptive behavior in the classroom.

The climate of higher education has changed over the past few decades, and faculty are now faced with serious issues of classroom behavior that were previously of little concern. Unfortunately, instructors frequently fail to address the disruptive behavior of students because they may: (1) be unsure how to handle the situation, (2) fear legal or physical retaliation from the student, (3) conclude that reporting the disruptive behavior will cause emotional pain to an already fragile or unstable person and/or (4) fear that confronting student misconduct may result in negative student evaluation of the course. However, failure to address disruptive behavior is likely to encourage further disruption, and it sends the message that such behavior is not problematic and that university personnel are indifferent to it.

The information and recommendations that follow are consistent with, and supported by, *The UNCW Code of Student Life*. The goal is to help you to confidently, fairly, and safely address incidents of disruption in a manner that discourages such behavior in the future while retaining the dignity of the classroom environment.

Examples of Disruptive Behavior

Disruptive behavior is defined as behaviors that hamper the ability of instructors to teach and students to learn. Common examples of disruptive behaviors include, but are not limited to:

- Eating in class
- Ringing cell phone
- Monopolizing classroom discussions
- Failing to respect the rights of other students to express their viewpoints
- Talking when the instructor or others are speaking
- Constant questions or interruptions which interfere with the instructor's presentation
- Overt inattentiveness (e.g., sleeping or reading the paper in class)
- Creating excessive noise with papers, book bags, etc.
- Entering class late or leaving early
- Use of pagers or cell phones in the classroom
- Inordinate or inappropriate demands for time and attention

More extreme examples of disruptive behavior include, but are not limited to:

- Use of profanity or pejorative language
- Intoxication
- Verbal abuse (e.g., taunting, badgering, intimidation)
- Harassment (e.g., use of “fighting words,” stalking)
- Threats to harm oneself or others
- Physical violence (e.g., shoving, grabbing, assault, use of weapons)

It is important to remember that conditions attributed to physical or psychological disabilities are not considered a legitimate excuse for disruptive behavior.

Guidelines

For Dealing with Disruptive Students

An Ounce of Prevention...

The best thing faculty can do to address disruptive student behavior is to create an environment in which it is unlikely to occur. For example, an instructor should:

- Serve as a model by demonstrating appropriate, respectful, and responsible behavior in all interactions with students.
- Use the class syllabus to inform students in writing of standards and expectations for classroom conduct and of possible consequences for disruptive behavior.
- Devote time during the first class to review this information in the syllabus.
- Invite the Office of the Dean of Students and/or Counseling Center to departmental meetings to talk about dealing with difficult students in the classroom.
- Consult with the Office of the Dean of Students as situations occur to discuss potential options and referrals.

Responding to Disruptive Behavior

Some general suggestions for dealing with disruptive student behavior are:

- A general word of caution directed to the class rather than at an identified student may effectively deter the disruptive behavior.
- Deal with the disruptive behavior immediately. Ignoring behavior will likely cause it to increase.
- Work against the human tendency to take the disruptive behavior personally. The behavior usually has little to do with you, and you are simply the unfortunate target.

“What do you mean I can’t order pizza with my cell phone during a physics lecture?”

- If the student’s behavior is irritating, but not particularly disruptive, consider talking with the student privately after class.
- If you feel unsafe being alone with the student for some reason, request that a colleague or your department chair attend the meeting.
- If it is necessary to deal with a student’s behavior during class, you should calmly but firmly inform the student that the behavior is disruptive and ask that it be stopped. Example: “Your use of your cell phone is bothering me and disrupting the class. Please end your conversation now and refrain from in-class phone calls in the future.”
- If the disruptive behavior continues during either the present or some future class, meet with the student in private to discuss that the continued behavior may result in student disciplinary action. Example: “I’ve already warned you about talking when I am speaking to the class. If you disrupt the class again in this manner, you will be referred to the Office of the Dean of Students.” Always document the incident and any conversations with the student in writing and forward the documentation to the Office of the Dean of Students.

- If the student continues the disruptive behavior despite this warning, the student should be informed that she/he will be referred for disciplinary action and should then be instructed to leave the classroom. Following the class, the instructor should contact the Office of the Dean of Students (ext. 3119) and provide pertinent information about the student's behavior.
- If the student refuses to leave the classroom after being instructed to do so, she/he should be informed that this refusal is a separate instance of disruptive behavior subject to additional judicial actions.
- If the student continues to refuse to leave the classroom, the instructor may choose to adjourn class for the day.
- Keep a log of the date, time and nature of all incidents of disruptive behavior and any meetings you have with the student. Document incidents and meetings immediately while specifics and details are still fresh in your memory.
- Keep your department chair informed as situations develop. Ask for guidance and support from her/him and from colleagues.

If the Student Seems Dangerous.....

If you sense that a disruptive situation is escalating and that a student may pose a physical threat to you or other students:

- Maintain a safe distance, and do not turn your back to the student.
- Unless you are under physical attack, do not touch the student or the student's belongings. Initiating physical touch may be interpreted by an agitated student as an assault.
- Use a calm, non-confrontational approach to defuse the situation.
Example: "Please lower your voice. We can't continue to talk if you threaten me."
- If a threat of harm is present, do not mention disciplinary action or police intervention. If you have already mentioned these, work to refocus the student's attention away from the future consequences of her/his behavior. Example: "You've raised some important issues. I need to consult with my department chair to see what we can do."

If the disruptive student threatens to harm you, other students, or her/himself:

- Immediately dismiss the class and contact University Police (ext. 911). The Police will investigate the threats, warn intended victims if necessary, and determine whether the student may have committed a crime.
- After the danger has passed, consult with the Office of the Dean of Students regarding the judicial process, and determine the appropriate process to be initiated.
- If a student's behavior is disruptive to the point there is a faculty request to administratively withdraw him/her from the class, the case will be reviewed by the Office of the Dean of Students, the Dean of the appropriate College or School, or Student Academic Support Programs to determine the outcome. An outcome of the judicial process could provide a recommendation of withdrawal from a class and other sanctions.

Possible Sanctions

For Disruptive Student Behavior

The *Code of Student Life* specifies the minimum level of conduct expected of every UNCW student. These standards are higher than those imposed on all citizens by civil and criminal law and serve to foster an environment in which learning and scholarship can flourish. Students who violate this *Code* through their disruptive behavior will face disciplinary sanctions including, but not limited to:

- **Written Reprimand** – A written reprimand involves a status of warning through the end of the next full semester, which terminates automatically when the imposed period expires.
- **Disciplinary Probation** – Disciplinary probation involves a status of probation for up to one calendar year, which terminates automatically when the imposed period expires. A student who is placed on disciplinary probation is considered not to be in good standing with the university. As part of the disciplinary probation, the student may have restrictions placed on specific student privileges, as determined by the hearing body or administrative hearing officer, not to exceed the duration of the probationary period. In the event of a further violation of this *Code* or other applicable rules while on disciplinary probation, the university will seek the penalty of suspension or expulsion.
- **Suspension** – Suspension involves withdrawal of enrollment privileges and cancellation of registration, at a minimum, through the end of the next full semester, and carries with it conditions which must be met for re-enrollment. Re-enrollment after a suspension period requires that the student apply to the Dean of Students office at the close of the imposed period, and the dean will determine whether the student has met the conditions imposed and is otherwise eligible for re-enrollment. A denial may be appealed to the Committee on Problem Admissions & Extraordinary Disciplinary Emergencies.

During the term of suspension, the student may not come onto campus. Failure to abide by this condition may result in arrest for criminal trespassing.

A student who is suspended after the deadline for withdrawal with a “W” shall be assigned a grade of “WF” or “W” by each instructor based upon the academic performance prior to the suspension.

- **Expulsion** – Expulsion is the permanent dismissal of a student from the university, and it precludes matriculation at any UNC constituent institution, unless and until the chancellor who imposed or approved the sanction or his/her successor concludes on the basis of the former student’s petition and any supportive documentation that the individual should be given a new opportunity to pursue higher education within the UNC system. The student will be trespassed from university property for as long as the individual is considered a risk to others or to university property. Expulsion will result in a permanent transcript notation.

Campus Resources

To Help You Deal with Disruptive Students

Office of the Dean of Students (ext. 3119)

The Office of the Dean of Students provides guidance to faculty, and is available to consult regarding handling challenging or threatening students in the classroom. Remedies range from consultation with students to administering sanctions to students whose disruptive behavior violates the *Code of Student Life*. The procedure and sanctions are designed to guide and correct behavior while protecting the rights of all faculty, staff and students in the university community.

Counseling Center (ext. 3746)

Counseling Center staff provide consultation and support for faculty/staff who are dealing with a disruptive and/or emotionally disturbed student. Psychologists and counselors can aid in the development of a more comprehensive understanding of the student's problem behavior and in the design of effective intervention strategies.

University Police Department (ext. 911)

While not typically involved in most situations of disruptive student behavior, the University Police Department is often the primary source of immediate support when the disruptive student engages in threats or actions to harm her/himself or someone else.

Recommended Reading

Coping with Misconduct in the College Classroom: A Practical Model by Gerald Armada (1999). Asheville, N.C.: College Administration Publications, Inc.

Acknowledgments

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UNCW Cornerstone

I am an **engaged learner** in constant search of knowledge.

I foster **human dignity** through acts of **civility** and **respect**.

I maintain a distinguished character based on **truth, honesty** and **integrity**.

I pursue **inner-peace** by recognizing the significance of **spirituality**.

I demonstrate honorable **citizenship** through acts of **civic engagement**.

I embrace community by active **involvement** and **service**.

I lead a lifestyle that advances physical **health** and **emotional** well-being.

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Consultation & Personal Advising
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