

Some Solutions for Dealing with Misbehavior in the Large Class

Ideally, creating an atmosphere that is conducive to positive, respectful behavior should allow instructors to work smoothly with all students. However, instructors may still run into some students or classes that present problems. Beyond notes in syllabi, instructors need to take a sensible stance on student misbehavior in terms of identifying it, responding to it, and doing so reasonably and consistently. The suggestions offered below address the behaviors that faculty report as most irritating and troublesome. There are several excellent resources to consult when confronted with more serious breaches of classroom conduct; for example, cheating, physical intimidation, harassment, drug or alcohol abuse (Amada, 1999; Dannells, 1997; McKeachie, 1999; Richardson, 1999).

Talking and Inattention

- If students are chatting, make direct eye contact with them so that they know you see them. Sometimes stopping the lecture, looking directly at the students, and resuming the lecture when you have full attention is enough to resolve the problem.
- Physically move to that part of the room, again making eye contact with the students. Often stepping into student space gets the message across.
- Direct a question to the area in which the chatting students are sitting. This focuses attention to that area of the class but avoids confrontations or putting anybody on the spot.
- Call the offending student or students up after class. Students usually appreciate a private reminder rather than public embarrassment. Tell students who talk in class (or read the newspaper, etc.) that their behavior distracts you and the other students, and ask them please to refrain.
- There is peer pressure among students not to confront each other about rude behavior; it is difficult to directly enlist students to reinforce your expectations. An accounting professor uses a subtler tactic. On the first day, she reads excerpts from past student evaluations that make it clear that rude behavior, especially noise

during the lecture, irritates students as much as it does the instructor and that students appreciate it when she discourages such behavior.

Arriving Late and Leaving Early

- Establish an understanding with students: You expect them to come to class on time; in return, you will start and finish as scheduled.
- Institute a starting ritual: moving to the podium, dimming the lights, playing music, raising your hand, reading a notable quotation or passage—whatever suits your teaching style.
- Require students to inform you if they need to arrive late or leave early, either verbally or in writing. Some instructors reserve a section in the front or back, near an exit, where such students can sit so that their arrival or departure causes as little disruption as possible.
- Station your TAs along the back of the classroom, and if students arrive or leave early, have them ask students if they are okay, why they are leaving, etc.
- Use the last five minutes of class in ways that circumvent the temptation for students to pack up early. A biology teacher put a multiple choice or short answer question on the overhead projector during the last few minutes of each class. The question gets at the heart of the concluding lecture or previews the next lecture and the students know that they will see some variation of this question on the exam.
- Let students know that there are costs for arriving late or missing class. Don't teach a class twice—make students responsible for getting missed assignments and material.

Inattendance

- Many instructors of large classes leave the question of attendance up to individual students. If you require attendance, be sure to have a system for reliably recording it, such as collecting homework, an in-class assignment, or a quiz at the end of class.

- A psychology professor divides the lecture hall and assigns TAs and their student discussion sections to specific areas. He asks TAs to note empty seats and to follow up on those who are excessively absent.
- A professor in accounting builds into class ten unannounced, short, extra credit writing assignments that essentially reward students for attending class. Roughly once a week, he shows a segment of video, poses an open-ended question on the overhead, etc., and asks students to respond from what they've learned in lecture and through personal experience. To ease the burden of grading, he scans the assignments, evaluates them with a check (or a zero for an absent student), and figures them toward the total grade.
- If a large percentage of students don't come to class, consider the possibility that they do not find sessions useful or that notes on the Internet or sold by companies inadvertently signal that attending class is not important. Make sure not only that the material covered in class is vital to students' mastery of the subject and their performance on tests and papers, but also that students understand the connection.
- On the day you give a test (attendance should be high), ask students to write on a piece of paper the reasons why they are not attending classes regularly.

Deadlines

- Clearly state your policy on missed exams, make-up exams, late homework, writing assignments, written university-sanctioned excuses, etc., in writing and orally at the beginning of the semester. Periodically remind students of such policies in advance of deadlines.
- Make it clear to students that there are logical consequences if they turn in assignments late. If the policy is not to accept late papers, then don't accept them except under the most extraordinary circumstances—and then in private. Always document the rationale for a change in policy should your decision be challenged by a third party.

- Regularly meet deadlines. If you say tests will be graded and returned Friday, then get them back on Friday.

Challenges to Authority

At some point in the large class, most teachers will have to face a student who is resentful, hostile, or challenging. The following are a few suggestions for gaining the cooperation of an oppositional student.

- As a rule of thumb, avoid arguments with students during class. If a student continues to press, table the discussion until later and then continue it with the student privately, in a more neutral setting. Listen carefully, openly, and calmly to the grievance. Sometimes the opportunity to ventilate and express a felt grievance may be more important to a student than is a resolution.
- When talking to a disruptive student, tell the student that you value his or her good contributions, but point out how the behavior that he or she is engaging in negatively affects you when you are teaching. Try to enlist the student's cooperation in setting ground rules for acceptable behavior.
- Don't become defensive and take a confrontation personally. Respond honestly to challenges, explaining—not defending—your instructional objectives and how assignments and exercises contribute to them. Although the purpose of class activities and lectures may be obvious to you, students often need to have these objectives made explicit.
- If the behavior is reoccurring, you may want to write a letter to the student. Describe the behavior, indicate how it disrupts you and other students, restate your expectations for behavior, and outline specific changes you would like to see. Copy the letter to the student's academic advisor or to the dean of students.
- On the rare occasion that a student is alarmingly hostile or threatening, contact the ombudsman's or the dean of student's office. Most campuses have disciplinary procedures that protect faculty as well as students.

Conclusion

For most instructors, teaching the large lecture is one of the most challenging of classroom assignments. Although we have expertise in our content areas, we often have little training for developing positive interpersonal relationships with and managing such large numbers of students. Yet we all want to create a classroom environment of mutual respect, not one rife with adversarial relationships. Paramount to establishing a positive environment in the large class and deterring disruptive behavior is to let students know from the outset what you expect of them and then to hold them to those expectations—intervening directly (e.g., talking privately, setting limits) to deal with inappropriate conduct. Perhaps most importantly, as instructors we need to consider our own behavior as well as that of our students. An honest attempt to understand how our classroom deportment might contribute to a difficult situation may help to reduce incivilities in our classrooms.

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