Dealing with Difficult Students and Other Classroom Disruptions

By: Mary Bart

Problem students come in all forms, and may be “difficult” for a wide variety of behaviors. While it’s impossible to create neat little categories that adequately describe the full range of problems encountered by college faculty, a good starting point may be to classify the behaviors as annoying, disruptive, or dangerous. Each requires a different type of response based on the context of the behavior.

Consider the following scenarios one might experience in the classroom:

- A student behaves in an entitled manner. He texts in class, shows up late, gets up frequently to use the bathroom (or take a smoke break) and surfs the Internet during class. The student was asked to reduce these behaviors. He does not comply. The student smells of alcohol and talks about parties the night before.

- An older student emails her adjunct faculty member, challenging two exam questions and her grade. The faculty member responds via email. Then the student brings it up during class, becoming argumentative and enraged, resulting in her yelling and shoving a desk.

Either of these behaviors can quickly derail the learning experience and create an unpleasant, or even dangerous, environment. During the online seminar Handling Annoying, Disruptive, and Dangerous Students,
presenters Brian Van Brunt, director of Counseling and Testing at Western Kentucky University, and Laura Bennett, student conduct officer at Harper College, outlined strategies for dealing with difficult students.

One of the keys, they said, is to be proactive in setting expectations on the first day of class, and communicating those expectations, both verbally and in the syllabus. Explain what types of behavior you expect from your students and the type of learning environment you are looking to create. Taking the time to set the tone, learn students’ names and share a little bit about yourself is an investment that will pay dividends throughout the semester.

And yet, even if you do everything right, there still will be students who push your buttons and become (or have the potential to become) a destructive force in the classroom. Depending on the situation, you may want to refer that student to the student conduct office or campus behavioral intervention team. More often, however, you will first want to speak with the student about the behavior, and Bennett offered the following tips.

Eight-step outline for difficult conversations with students

1. Describe the behavior and its impacts
2. Listen to the student’s perspective and response
3. Discuss appropriate behavior
4. Discuss resources to promote success
5. Reiterate or set parameters for future behaviors
6. Share consequences for noncompliance
7. Summarize the conversation
8. Inform of any follow up:
   - Document the conversation and plan
   - Decide who you will inform
   - Check in with the student

“These are not easy conversations to have but you want to approach the conversation from the point of ‘I’m really concerned about this behavior because if it continues it’s going to get in the way of you being successful’ and not ‘How dare you,’” said Van Brunt. “Students, particularly this generation of students, want to know that you care about them and that you want to see them succeed.”

Editor’s Note: This article was updated at 12:25 p.m. Eastern based on reader feedback.