

Disruptive and Threatening Student Behavior

Guidelines for Faculty and Staff



University of Southern California

Occasionally, the University of Southern California experiences threatening and disruptive behavior on the part of some students, a trend paralleled nationally at other campuses. You as a faculty or staff member may find yourself having to contend with a disruptive or emotionally disturbed student at some point during your career.



Student behaviors that you may encounter range from simple disruptions in class, to ongoing harassment, to verbal and physical threats.

The guidelines in this booklet are designed to: 1) assist your department in thinking through its response to situations in which students may behave in unusual or unpredictable ways; 2) help you handle an actual threat; and 3) assist you with referral and protocol procedures. When your department has prepared its faculty and staff adequately for such situations, the chances of serious disruption may be lessened.

Students may exhibit disruptive behaviors in a classroom, department, or office. Faculty or staff members may find themselves on the receiving end of a student's anger or frustration. Often the behavior in question constitutes a violation of USC's Student Conduct Code, and can be addressed in accordance with Student Conduct procedures (as described in SCampus). However, it is rarely enough to simply hand a situation over to Student Judicial Affairs when a student has caused significant disruption within a department. The department or office involved may also need to address issues related to the perceived safety of its faculty and staff, as well as the well-being of other students.

Note: A separate policy and protocol exists for handling violence in the workplace. When an employee is threatening or intimidating another, assistance should be sought from the Department of Public Safety or from the threat management team at the Risk Management Office.





DEFINITIONS

A student is considered disruptive when he or she engages in behaviors which interfere in a significant way with your normal teaching or administrative duties as a faculty or staff member. Disruptive behavior may sometimes threaten or endanger your physical or psychological well-being or safety, or that of others. Disruptive behavior can assume many forms. It may be:

- a student in your class who persistently arrives late or leaves early in a manner which is disruptive to the regular flow of the class.
- a student who talks incessantly while you are delivering a lecture.
- a student who loudly and frequently interrupts the flow of class with inappropriate questions or interjections.
- a student who persistently calls your office and hampers your ability to continue your normal work, or to assist other students.
- a student who becomes belligerent when you confront his or her inappropriate behavior.

- a student who verbally or physically threatens you, another faculty or staff member, or another student.
- a student who writes you a threatening letter, email, or leaves a disturbing message on your voicemail.
- a student who attempts to contact you at your home in inappropriate ways.
- a student who displays behaviors indicating a romantic or other obsessive interest in you.

THREE LEVELS OF THREATENING OR DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR

For the purposes of these guidelines, disruptive and threatening behavior has been categorized into three different levels.

- The first level, which is the least serious, encompasses any situation that can be handled informally between you and the student, leading to a prompt resolution.
- The second level involves an ongoing problem, or a more serious incident in the classroom. In these situations, you may consult with Student Affairs. If necessary, a Student Affairs assessment team will assist you in evaluating and resolving the situation.
- The third, and most serious, level is reached when there is immediate danger of some kind. If this occurs, you should call the Department of Public Safety immediately.



LEVEL ONE INFORMAL RESOLUTION

a) In the classroom

It is helpful if you clarify behavioral and other expectations at the beginning of a course, and reach agreement with students on standards for classroom conduct.

When you are establishing guidelines for behavior in your course, it is important that you only articulate the standards that you are willing to enforce. Apply these standards fairly and consistently. Students will quickly recognize and resent perceived unfairness.

Describing basic behavioral standards in the course syllabus will assist you in discussing them the first day of class. Information should specify what behaviors are prohibited, how you will manage behavioral issues, and any consequences that may result. A statement in the course syllabus might read:

“Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students’ ability to learn and an instructor’s ability to

teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.”

When a student is disruptive in class...

- Respond immediately. This may mean employing informal action (such as standing next to students who are talking), reminding the class of the agreed standards for behavior, or directing specific comments to the disruptive student.

- If the behavior continues, notify the student that he or she must leave the room if the behavior does not cease immediately, and that disciplinary action may result. If the student does not respond appropriately, ask him or her to leave and arrange to see you during office hours before the next class session. You may wish to consult with the Office of Student Judicial Affairs prior to that meeting.

- If a student refuses to leave, notify him or her that you will call the Department of Public Safety, and that disciplinary action will result.

- It is appropriate to call DPS any time a disruptive behavior escalates, or when it is reasonable to interpret behavior (including oral statements) as threatening or harassing to you or to other members of the class.

Meeting with the disruptive student...

It is generally helpful for you to meet privately with a disruptive student following a confrontation or removal from class. You may wish to request

a meeting with a student who has displayed unacceptable behavior even when a confrontation has not resulted. In either case, the meeting is an opportunity for the student to understand the inappropriateness of his or her behavior, and for you to discuss strategies that will enable him or her to continue in the class. You may want to have a third person present, or to leave the door open so that someone in the office can assist you if the situation becomes confrontational.

In the meeting...

- Remain calm. This may be difficult if the student is agitated. However, your reasoned response will assist the student in addressing the behavior in question.

- Do not take the student's behavior or remarks personally, even though they may be directed at you. Disruptive behavior generally results from other life problems or general academic frustration.

- Be specific about the inappropriate behavior that the student has exhibited. Describe the behavior; don't focus on the person. Explain why the behavior is problematic. Offer a definition of what is considered appropriate behavior. Explain and discuss the differences.

- Ask questions and summarize what you hear the student saying. Respectful concern may enable you as the educator, to help the student to be successful both in your class, and in his or her general university experience.

- Focus on areas of agreement between you and the student.

- Recommend additional resources on campus, such as Student Counseling Services, the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs, the Center for

Women and Men, or other appropriate services. If you and the student are comfortable, offer to escort the student to the office or to have the student call the office in your presence.

- Conclude by summarizing any resolution, and by articulating expectations for the future. Be clear that continued inappropriate behavior will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs.

b) Outside the classroom, or in a department or office

You may encounter threatening, intimidating or harassing behavior by students during office meetings, before or after scheduled classes, or in spontaneous encounters on campus. Should this occur, strategies for responding to the student generally are the same as those outlined previously.

In general ...

- Remain calm, and speak in a controlled manner. This will prevent the situation from escalating and may diffuse the tension.

- Identify a more appropriate place and time to discuss the matter if the problem is occurring outside the normal parameters of professional interaction.

- Use a "time out" to allow the student to regain composure, or explain that if the student cannot maintain composure, you cannot discuss the issue at this time.

- Explain to the student that you will call the Department of Public Safety if inappropriate behavior persists or if a threat is made.

Of course, it is important to differentiate between student behavior that is threatening or harassing, and that which is merely uncivil or rude.

The latter does not generally warrant the intervention of DPS officers, or other disciplinary action.

LEVEL TWO

DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR REQUIRING A STUDENT AFFAIRS RESPONSE

If the disruptive behavior feels intimidating, threatening, or appears to be escalating, you should consult with one of the following: Student Support and Advocacy in the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs, the Office for Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards, the Center for Women and Men, Student Counseling Services, or your department chair. Typically, a team approach will be employed to assist you in evaluating and handling the situation.

A Student Affairs assessment team can meet with you and other faculty and staff involved. The team will assess imminent danger to individuals or to the academic community. The objectives of such an assessment include providing appropriate levels of support for you and others involved; demonstrating concern for other students who may be affected by the student exhibiting the behavior in question; and deciding how to handle the student's behavioral problems.

Student Affairs will also follow up with the disruptive student. Various disciplinary processes can be employed at this point, including, under certain circumstances, interim suspension of the student or the negotiation of a behavioral contract, pending a formal review.

LEVEL THREE

LIFE THREATENING INCIDENT OR IMMEDIATE THREAT

Whenever there is an incident that is life threatening or risks the safety of any person, you should always contact the Department of Public Safety immediately. This includes behavior that could be classified as unlawful harassment, stalking, or a death threat.

After a disruptive incident has occurred and a report has been taken, the Department of Public Safety customarily involves Student Affairs, Student Judicial Affairs, the Center for Women and Men, Student Counseling Services, and other campus offices in responding to the incident. You can expect these and other offices to provide appropriate consultation and assistance on an ongoing basis where a serious problem has occurred.

When an incident is sufficiently serious and attracts media attention, senior officers of Student Affairs and of the Department of Public Safety will take the lead in communicating with the press, in conjunction with Media Relations and other appropriate offices. If you are contacted by the media, please refer to Media Relations, Department of Public Safety or Student Affairs.



WHEN A COMPLAINT IS FORWARDED TO THE OFFICE FOR STUDENT JUDICIAL AFFAIRS

When you report disruptive behavior to the Office for Student Judicial Affairs, you will be asked to recommend a desired outcome. Remedies may include disciplinary probation, a behavioral contract, anger management counseling, other educational interventions, or more serious sanctions such as suspension or expulsion.

Following receipt of your complaint, the student will be required to meet with someone at the Office for Student Judicial Affairs to discuss his or her behavior. In some cases, the complaint can be resolved administratively without further involvement on your part. In other cases, it may be necessary to convene a panel and conduct a formal review of the matter. Should this happen, you will generally be involved as the complainant at the review.

The purpose of a disciplinary review is to discuss the facts in the case, to hear the accused student's perspective, and to determine an appropriate disciplinary response. Disciplinary decisions take into consideration the needs both of the campus community and of the accused student.

Note: While you, or the Department of Public Safety, may order a student to leave a class session in which he or she is displaying disruptive behavior, permanent removal cannot occur without a Student Judicial review. The Vice President for Student Affairs may temporarily remove a student from further class sessions, pending a review, where circumstances warrant such action.



THE ACCUSED STUDENT'S RIGHTS AND SUPPORT

As always in situations involving students, you should observe appropriate confidentiality. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 protects the privacy of student education records (including disciplinary records), and allows only the individual student the right to inspect his or her records. USC expects students to be treated as independent, responsible, and adult members of the university community. They also have due process rights which must be respected.

Student Counseling Services provides additional support and assistance to students accused of any kind of misconduct.

A student who believes that he or she has been treated improperly in the aftermath of an incident may seek assistance through established departmental, school, and university grievance procedures (as outlined in SCampus).

DOCUMENTATION

Resolving disruption cases can be helped if you document specific problem behavior, including dates, times, brief descriptions of what happened, and the names of witnesses who may have observed the behavior. Such documentation should always be factual, and not include personal interjections.



IMPORTANT TELEPHONE NUMBERS

Department of Public Safety (emergency)	(213) 740-4321
Department of Public Safety (non-emergency/business)	(213) 740-6000
Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs Student Support and Advocacy	(213) 740-2421
Office for Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards	(213) 821-7373
Student Counseling Services (UPC)	(213) 740-7711
Student Counseling Services (HSC)	(323) 442-5631
Center for Women and Men	(213) 740-4900

This booklet is published by the Division of Student Affairs.
If you have any questions or need assistance, please contact
Student Affairs at (213) 740-2421.

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