



## **CLASSROOM DISRUPTION PROTOCOLS: GUIDELINES FOR FACULTY AND ACADEMIC UNITS**

The Office of the Vice Provost for Educational Equity appreciates the range of pedagogical cultures guided by our many academic disciplines, colleges, campuses, and departments, particularly the standards that support faculty success in the classroom.

The purpose of this document is to offer a set of recommended protocols for the management of classroom challenges as they increasingly present at Penn State and other colleges across the nation. These recommended “Classroom Disruption Protocols” are suggestions and nothing more. Individual faculty, academic unit deans, directors, and department heads will and must make their own decisions regarding problems in the classroom. Nothing in these guidelines should be interpreted as converse to Penn State University’s robust support of the faculty’s intellectual and pedagogical freedoms, nor student success. Instead, the focus is on general academic structures and expectations that affirm faculty and prioritize student learning and classroom safety. We encourage readers to review [Classroom and Syllabus Guidelines for Instructors Related to COVID-19](#) for health and safety information directly related to teaching during 2020–21 COVID-19 pandemic.

Research tells us that race, ethnicity, gender expression, disabilities, and other visible social identities play a role in how faculty members experience the classroom environment, particularly how they may be received and related to by students on predominantly white campuses. Faculty of all ranks and across social differences often find themselves challenged by levels of disruptive student classroom misbehaviors that push the boundaries of the classroom courtesy and respect required of an inclusive learning environment. Minoritized and marginalized faculty members, and those who teach “hot button” issues (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, etc.) are often targets of misbehaviors. Swift supportive guidance from colleagues and leadership can relieve concerns, better enable instructors and students to move forward, and maintain more welcoming and equitable work and learning environments. Minoritized and marginalized faculty members are encouraged to contact the Senior Faculty Mentors in the Office of Educational Equity should they seek support to best navigate issues of concern, their resolution, follow-up, and situation closure whenever possible.

To assist you in addressing these types of incidents, the Faculty Senate recommended the following guidelines:

### **MANAGEMENT OF DISRUPTIVE AND THREATENING BEHAVIOR**

A large majority of Penn State students act in a respectful and polite manner toward each other and toward our faculty. Students typically understand that disagreement and debate are part of robust classroom discourse and are necessary dimensions of intellectual development. However, we cannot take for granted that all college students will participate in discussions with courteousness and respect for faculty, nor their peers. Yet, every member of the Penn State community has the right to expect respect in the exchange of ideas and perspectives.

The Office of Educational Equity has some experience with concerns that seem to be increasing across the nation’s university and college campuses: students who act in an intimidating or threatening way toward their peers and/or toward the faculty and staff, or whose behavior seriously disrupts the academic processes of the classroom. Scholars are beginning to explore this phenomenon, but in the meantime, it is important that we prepare our faculty to respond as fairly and effectively as possible. The information and guidelines provided below are intended to support faculty success in the classroom regardless of course delivery format, e.g., in-person and/or remote virtual learning environments.

**Minor Disruptions:** Minor troubling student classroom behaviors often stem from issues of classroom etiquette and/learning gaps or unwillingness to make logical, evidence-based arguments. With regard to etiquette issues, examples are sleeping in class, late arrival, and early departures. Gaps in logic require greater description here. Some students may equate the expression of opinion with reasonable argument. For faculty, these occurrences in the classroom may provide learning opportunities that can be managed with a set of clear “classroom discussion” criteria. We recommend that these boundaries be listed in the course syllabi and reiterated at the start of each class session, or as often as necessary. These boundaries are the “expectations for classroom participation” so that discussions are guided primarily by assigned course readings, visuals and lecture materials, particularly those that represent peer-reviewed scholarship. In this way, faculty foster the ability of students to critically engage with course content and develop and practice the skills of argumentation, rather than assuming that points of view and personal experience alone are valid contributions.

Minor behaviors can also often be sufficiently addressed through private conversation between the faculty member and student. This low-level response can reassure the student of their value in the classroom, the faculty member’s interest in the student’s success, and build trust in the relationship. Whereas elevating the issue may have a contrary affect.

We encourage faculty not to ignore or be intimidated by a student who does not observe an appropriate degree of respect -- allowing, of course, for the disagreements and frustrations that all individuals experience and have the right to express.

Optimally, classroom issues should be managed at the lowest level possible. For example, faculty should confront inappropriate behavior as quickly as possible by speaking directly to the student. When possible, address the concern outside of the classroom and in a secure setting (for example, in one’s office with the door open, and with the knowledge of the department head, director, or nearby colleagues). If faculty need advice or help with a problematic student relationship, they should first consult with the department head/director and/or senior-level colleague and then move through other administrative resources for consultation as appropriate and/or as guided.

**Student Classroom Conduct**

(examples and not an exhaustive list)

**Minor Disruptions**

- Sleeping in class
- Reading material unrelated to class (e.g., laptop or hard bound)
- Chronic lateness
- Chronic leaving class early
- Use of cell phone
- Inappropriate interruption of instructor and/or peers

**Appropriate Faculty Responses**

**Minor Disruptions**

- Speak with student privately
- Clarify for the student, what behavior is
- Remind student of classroom behavior
- Document private interaction via hardcopy or electronic note
- Send a follow-up email to the student, thank them for conversation, and remind them to review syllabus for class expectations
- Via email, remind entire class to review syllabus for classroom conduct expectations
- Zoom lock class 5 to 15 minutes after start time (virtual class only)
- Restrict internal Zoom chats (virtual class only)

**Major Disruptions:** We begin this section by acknowledging and accepting that faculty, regardless of rank, do not all share the same level of comfort or skill in regards to the management of classroom disruptive behavior. Faculty members have varying experiences and backgrounds and, as an office that focuses on inclusiveness, we support and encourage the ability of faculty members to privately assess their individual level of comfort, willingness to address the inappropriate behavior with a student, and/or preference to seek assistance from

University resources. In keeping with this, we recommend that academic units develop their own protocols to support faculty response to major disruptive student behaviors. When they present, major disruptions can be unsettling and create fear and anxiety for faculty members, especially if there is little to no clarity on unit processes. Those developed will complement and not override University policies and practices.

The Student Code of Conduct, in describing the Disruption of Operations, includes the following: *Obstruction or disruption of classes, research projects, or other activities or programs of the University; or obstructing access to University facilities, property, or programs. Disruption is defined as an action or combination of actions by one or more individuals that unreasonably interferes with, hinders, obstructs, or prevents the operation of the University or infringes on the rights of others to freely participate in its programs and services* (<https://studentaffairs.psu.edu/support-safety-conduct/student-conduct/conduct-information-faculty-staff>).

In some extreme cases of disruptive and/or disrespectful student behavior, it may be necessary for a faculty member to take steps to remove the student from class enrollment. The recommendations below are provided by Penn State Faculty Senate:

#### *Set Clear Standards for Behavior*

Setting clear standards of behavior at the beginning of a course is a powerful deterrent to inappropriate behavior. Faculty members might consider stating their expectations for classroom behavior in their syllabus and define inappropriate behaviors. However, if such a statement is included, the syllabus should also contain a means by which students can address any questions or concerns they have with the standards of behavior policy and provide contact information for a course administrator or department head for any follow-up concerns that may arise. Any changes to such behavior policy should be presented to students in writing per [Faculty Senate Policy 43-00](#).

#### *Confront the Behavior*

When students behave inappropriately in class, it is important to confront the behavior as soon as possible. If it becomes necessary to reprimand a student in public, try to do so in a firm and friendly manner. Identify the inappropriate behavior. Explain how it is disruptive to the rest of the class, and request that it not be repeated. Rather than address one individual, it usually causes less embarrassment to use a general statement such as, "There are too many people talking at one time, let's all get focused on the same topic." The student must always be treated with respect and courtesy, not only to role-model civil behavior but also to keep the situation from escalating.

#### *If the Behavior Continues, Request the Student Leave Class*

Faculty have the authority to request that a disruptive student leave a class for the remainder of the period. However, faculty do not have the authority to expel students from class, either on an interim or permanent basis, or require them to drop the course. University processes and procedures must be followed to determine if a student will be expelled from a class or be required to drop the course.

Meet with the student privately as soon as possible to explain the inappropriateness of his or her behavior. Point out that if the behavior continues, you will have to file a complaint with the Office of Student Conduct. Follow up the discussion in writing, repeating the nature of the problem and what you and the student have agreed is necessary to resolve it. If you are concerned about your personal safety in a private meeting, consider asking your department chair (or equivalent at campus locations) or another faculty member to be present.

If a disruptive student appears to be highly agitated and on the verge of violent behavior, avoid confrontation. Consider dismissing the class. Immediately communicate a class dismissal to your department/program head or director and, as soon as possible, produce a written record of the facts.

Should an emergency situation develop that you feel cannot be resolved by classroom dismissal, please consider calling 911 for assistance.

Under no circumstances do we recommend that an instructor attempt to use force or threats of force toward a student, except for immediate self-defense.

*If Continuing Disruption Occurs, File a Report with the Office of Student Conduct*

The department head (or equivalent at campus locations) as well as the Office of Student Conduct Senior Director or designee should be notified when continuing disruptions occur. These should be handled through the conduct process coordinated by the Office of Student Conduct or the designee at your campus location. Students involved in a serious disruption of the learning environment may not be permitted to return to class until University procedures have been completed (<https://studentaffairs.psu.edu/support-safety-conduct/student-conduct/conduct-information-faculty-staff>).

**Student Classroom Conduct**

(examples and not an exhaustive list)

**Major Disruptions**

- Progressive or chronic minor disruptions
- Erratic or irrational behavior
- Physical threat, verbal assault, harassment (in person, electronic, or hard copy)

**Appropriate Faculty Responses**

**Major Disruptions**

- Speak directly to student
- Ask student to leave class
- Dismiss class
- Should an emergency situation develop that you feel cannot be resolved by classroom dismissal, please consider calling 911 for assistance.
- Notify academic department head/director for guidance
- Zoom lock classroom (virtual class only)
- Restrict chat forum (virtual class only)
- Remove student session (virtual class only)
- Block student video (virtual class only)
- Restrict entry to Penn State only (virtual class only)

**Your College/Campus Contacts:**

**We encourage you to use the space below to record appropriate contacts:**

Department Head/Director

Emergency Contact (911)

Office of Student Conduct, Student Affairs

Office of the Dean/Associate Dean

Senior Faculty Mentor, Office of Educational Equity

This document has been adapted from Ronald P Seyb's *Classroom Protocols: Notes for Skidmore Faculty, 2018–2019 Edition* (<https://www.skidmore.edu/advising/documents/ClassroomProtocolsWeb.pdf>) and the Stockton University of New Jersey's "Classroom Disruption Protocol," (<https://stockton.edu/dean-of-students/documents/Classroom-Disruption-faculty-brief.pdf>) to best reflect Penn State's learning and work environment. We thank Skidmore and Stockton for offering their permissions to adapt.