

Classroom Disruption Protocols: Guidelines for Instructors and Academic Units

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

This document's purpose is to offer a set of recommended protocols to support faculty and instructors in managing classroom challenges at Penn State. These recommended protocols are suggestions and nothing more. Individual faculty and academic administrators should make their own decisions regarding problems in the classroom. Nothing in these guidelines should be interpreted as converse to student success or Penn State's support of the faculty intellectual and pedagogical freedoms. Here, the focus is on general academic structures and expectations that affirm faculty and prioritize student learning and course safety.

Research tells us that race, ethnicity, gender expression, disabilities, and other visible social identities play a role in how faculty members experience a course environment, particularly how they may be received and related to by students on most campuses. Faculty of all ranks and across social differences often find themselves challenged by levels of disruptive student classroom behaviors 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 more likely than others to be targets of misbehaviors. Swift supportive guidance from colleagues and leadership whenever disruption occurs can relieve concerns, better enable instructors and students to move forward, and maintain more welcoming and equitable work and learning environments.

Faculty Pathway and its Senior Faculty Mentors, hosted by the Office of Educational Equity are a resource especially developed as a point of contact and support for minoritized and marginalized faculty, though all are welcome to utilize this office to help navigate issues of concern, their resolution, follow-up, and situation closure whenever possible.

Management of Disruptive and Threatening Behavior

A large majority of Penn State students act in a respectful and polite manner toward each other and their instructors. Most students understand that disagreement and debate are part of robust course discourse and a necessary part of intellectual development. However, not all students will participate with courtesy and respect for their instructors or peers. Every member of the Penn State community has the right to expect respect in the exchange of ideas and perspectives.

Minor Disruptions

Minor disruptions may stem from issues of classroom etiquette, learning gaps, or unwillingness to make logical, evidence-based arguments. Some students may equate opinion with reasonable argument. For faculty, these disruptions may provide learning opportunities or be prevented with clear course discussion (or participation) guidelines, which may include a focus on course content and materials. These guidelines should be listed in the course syllabus and reiterated prior to course discussion. This fosters students' ability to engage with course content and develop and practice argumentation skills rather than relying solely on opinions and personal experiences.

Minor behaviors might be addressed through private conversation between faculty and student. This low-level response can reassure the student of their value in the classroom, faculty interest in the student's success, and build trust, while elevating the issue may have a contrary effect.

We encourage faculty not to ignore or be intimidated by a student who does not follow course discussion guidelines, with consideration for disagreements and frustrations that all individuals experience and have the right to express.

Optimally, course issues should be managed as quickly and at the lowest level possible. When possible, address the concern outside of the classroom and in a secure setting (e.g., in your office with the door open, and after alerting your administrator or nearby colleague). If you need advice or help with a problematic student, you should first consult with your unit head and/or a senior colleague before moving to other administrative levels.

Table 1. Minor Disruption Examples and Faculty Responses

Examples of Minor Disruptions	Appropriate Faculty Responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleeping in class • Reading material unrelated to class • Chronic lateness • Chronic leaving early • Use of cell phone • Interruption of instructor and/or peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak with the student privately • Clarify for the student what behavior is acceptable • Remind student of their classroom behavior • Document private interaction • Send a follow-up email to the student, thank them for the conversation, and remind them to review the syllabus for course expectations • Via email, remind all students to review syllabus for course conduct expectations For online or remote courses • Lock the course 5–15 minutes after the course starts • Restrict chat features

Major Disruptions

Faculty, regardless of rank, do not all share the same level of comfort or skill in managing disruptive behavior. Faculty members have varying experiences and backgrounds, and faculty members are encouraged to privately assess their comfort and willingness to address inappropriate behavior with a student. If not comfortable, seek assistance from respective department heads, associate deans, deans, and others outlined in academic unit protocols.

Academic units should 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 or no clarity on unit processes. Those developed will complement and not override University policies and practices.

The [Student Code of Conduct](#), prohibits engaging in behavior that could reasonably be foreseen to cause, or that causes, the disruption of or interference with the process of instruction, research, service, administration, or any other university operation. In some extreme cases of disruptive student behavior, it may be necessary for a faculty member to tell the student to leave the classroom or remove them from the virtual classroom and refer the matter to the Office of Student Accountability & Conflict Response for next steps.

Table 2. Major Disruptions Examples and Faculty Responses

Examples of Major Disruptions	Appropriate Faculty Responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progressive or chronic minor disruptions Refusing to leave the classroom upon the reasonable request of the faculty member • Erratic or irrational behavior • Physical threat, verbal assault, harassment (in person, remote, electronic, or written) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak directly to the student • Ask the student to leave class • Dismiss class • Call 911 or local University Police unit. • Notify academic administrator for guidance • Zoom lock classroom (virtual class only) • Restrict chat forum (virtual class only) • Remove student from the session (virtual class only) • Block student video (virtual class only)

Penn State Faculty Senate Recommendations

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 disruptive it is 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, Ask the Student to Leave Class

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

Meet with the student privately as soon as possible to explain the inappropriateness of their behavior. Point out that if the behavior continues, you will refer the issue to the [Office of Student Accountability & Conflict Response](#). 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 administrator 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 or if you or others feel unsafe, please calling 911 or your local University Police unit .

Instructors should not attempt to use force or threats of force toward a student, except for immediate self-defense.

When appropriate, [Report a Potential Code of Conduct Violation](#). Students involved in a serious disruption of the learning environment may not be permitted to return to class until they have connected with the Office of Student Accountability & Conflict Response.

completed (<https://studentaffairs.psu.edu/support-safety-conduct/student-conduct/conduct-information-faculty-staff>).