

Addressing
**DISRUPTIVE
AND
DANGEROUS**
Behavior

in the Classroom and Around Campus

The NaBITA 2017 Whitepaper



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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Disruptive or Dangerous?	4
Your Most Important Tools in a Crisis	6
Seven Steps	7
Final Thoughts	10

In a similar manner, providing clear behavioral expectations to students through policies and expectations and upholding those standards on the college campus remains important. We would not suggest a disregard for inappropriate behaviors, but there is often an opportunity for grace and understanding that can be lost in the escalation of a situation. Students come to us with a broad array of previous life experiences, including past experiences of trauma and abuse. Sometimes flexibility, empathy, and listening are the best courses of action and still allow for accountability, student learning, and development to occur as the situation is resolved.

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Disruptive or Dangerous?

One of the critical distinctions in selecting the best response to a crisis situation is understanding the difference between disruptive and dangerous behaviors. In the book, *A Faculty Guide to Addressing Disruptive and Dangerous Behavior in the Classroom* (Van Brunt and Lewis, 2014), the authors provide a list of behaviors that help the reader sort out what we would consider disruptive or dangerous in the classroom. In 2017, Van Brunt and Murphy wrote a follow-up text, *A Staff Guide to Addressing Disruptive and Dangerous Behavior on Campus*. This update includes behaviors occurring outside the classroom—in front offices, advisor settings, residence halls, and student activity environments. It also includes behaviors that are more likely to occur in online learning environments or on social media and websites. Examples of these behaviors are provided in the insert boxes.

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So, where does this leave us on the central questions concerning what is “disruptive” and what is “dangerous” behavior in the classroom? Threat and risk are best understood in the context of the individual and the environment. This means considering the context of past behaviors and experiences and the nature of the current situation. A core concept to responding to any of these behaviors is understanding the importance of sharing information with those on campus most appropriate for

assisting with the response. Faculty, staff, and students are not alone in determining how to respond and manage these difficult situations. The campus Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT), which may be known as Care Team, Student of Concern Team, or another name, is a collaborative group designed to assist the campus community with intervening in at-risk situations. Behavioral intervention teams exist on college campuses to provide a 360-degree view of situations in order to better respond to concern-

DANGEROUS BEHAVIORS

- Racist or otherwise exaggerated (not just expressed once to push buttons) thoughts such as, “Women should be barefoot and pregnant,” “Gays are an abomination to God and should be punished,” “Muslims are all terrorists and should be wiped off the earth.”
- Bullying behavior focused on students, faculty, or staff in the waiting room, outside the office, in the classroom, or in the residence halls.
- Directly communicated threats to staff, faculty or students, such as “I am going to kick your ass” or “If you say that again, I will end you.”
- Prolonged nonverbal, passive-aggressive behavior such as sitting with arms crossed, glaring or staring at staff, and refusing to speak or respond to questions or directives.
- Self-injurious behavior such as cutting or burning, including during a meeting or class, or exposing previously unexposed self-injuries.
- Physical assault such as pushing, shoving, or punching.
- Throwing objects or slamming doors.
- Storming out of the office or room when upset, screaming and yelling about getting revenge.
- Conversations that are designed to upset other students or staff such as descriptions of weapons, killing, or death.
- Psychotic, delusional, or rambling speech.
- Overuse of an office or staff function or time; especially when already instructed not to overuse the staff or office and on appropriate boundaries.

Your Most Important Tools in a Crisis

One of the greatest challenges in responding to a crisis is first acknowledging that you are experiencing something outside of your everyday experience. It's difficult to train staff to respond to disruptive and dangerous behavior without first addressing the idea that each staff member, regardless of gender, age or experience, has a different tolerance for the variety of disruptive and dangerous behaviors encountered in the department or office setting.

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While one staff member may be experienced and comfortable talking to a student in an emotional crisis, another may be less confident about how to approach the situation. Faculty and staff should consider what scenarios might prompt an immediate response and what types of issues they may have become jaded toward because of the nature of their work.

1. Know the Signs of Danger

Prior to a student escalating to a physical attack, there are often several signs, or tells, they share with the target. Knowing these signs gives a staff or faculty member some important added knowledge in assessing the likelihood of a physical attack. These may include a clenched fist, a student moving in and out of your personal space, verbal declarations of an intention to act violently, and the target glancing around the office for something to throw or use as a weapon. Also, movements that are quite different from their baseline (or usual) behaviors (i.e., the calm person suddenly becomes very emotional or vice versa). People don't simply explode in violence—they escalate over time as their adrenaline floods their system and they become trapped, afraid, angry, or enraged. Attending to some of these escalation behaviors can give staff the chance to better respond.

Look through the eyes and experiences of the student you are trying to help because this provides you a better insight into addressing the scenario in a manner that increases the success of your interventions.

2. Keep Yourself Safe

There is this myth that we are expected to do everything for our students with little regard for our needs. While this may be true in some customer service scenarios, the exception to this rule is when we feel unsafe with the student. This could be a feeling in our gut or a more direct response to behaviors or direct threats issued by the student. In these situations, it is recommended to consider a safe escape path or removing yourself from the interaction. While we want to keep others safe around us and have a responsibility to intervene when we come across disruptive or dangerous behaviors, our own personal safety is paramount.

3. Know Your Backup

Have an awareness of what resources are around you in terms of calling for help. A staff member alone in an after-hours office or a faculty member teaching a night class should approach a potentially violent student scenario differently from staff surrounded by assistance and across the street from the campus police department. Some schools are fortunate and have invested well in technology and panic alarms fixed in certain locations (think under a bank teller's desk) in the event of a crisis. These are common in financial aid, conduct, counseling, and the registrar's office—anywhere that would be considered a "hot spot" on a given campus. In the event your school hasn't invested in this, other options could involve using a wireless doorbell situated at the front desk connected to someone in the back office who could manually call campus safety. Other creative options involve web-based panic alarms that can trigger a police response from a computer terminal or smartphone. Another option is coming up with a code shared with another worker such as "get me a coffee with extra cream" that is a covert signal to call for help. In terms of practicality, make sure your code word isn't overly transparent like

Final Thoughts

When the initial crisis has calmed, it is important to make sure that you have reported the incident to the appropriate areas on campus. In some situations when an immediate danger exists or assistance is needed because of the nature of the disruption, campus police or security will be called to respond. In many cases, faculty and staff are able to respond to the initial disruption or concern and de-escalate the situation. It would still be important to report the incident to a campus behavioral intervention team to allow them to consider the larger context of the behaviors occurring, interventions to prevent future behaviors, and helpful resource referrals. Remember, you are not alone in responding to these concerns. This report allows you to close the loop in terms of the concerning behavior and offers you an opportunity to debrief with others who understand the nature of what you experienced.

Once the initial crisis has been addressed, faculty and staff can adapt a bit more of a supportive role with the student, helping them with problem-solving and overcoming obstacles. This should be done with an appreciation for the values and boundaries that are set forth as part of the job description. In other words, how does the staff or faculty member encourage the student to begin to develop their own critical thinking skills to better problem-solve the difficulties they encounter?

Even after the initial crisis is resolved and faculty and staff have done all they can to form a relationship, the student may keep coming back with new issues and concerns or previous problems reaggavated. In some cases, the difficult behaviors don't change and staff/faculty begin to become stressed to the point of burnout attempting to deal with the behaviors in front of them. At this stage, we encourage the use of additional resources, exploring supportive philosophies such as positive psychology, goal-setting, and building self-care capacity for staff and departments.

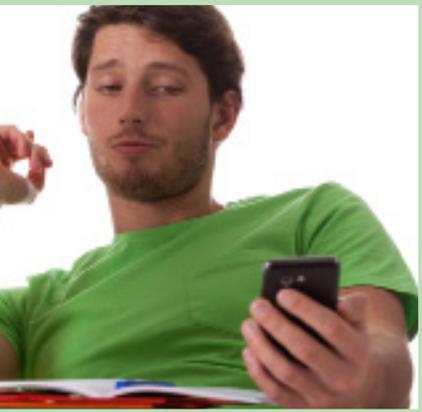
For more in-depth discussion, including case studies and scenarios, faculty and staff can reference one of two books available from the authors of the whitepaper: *A Faculty Guide to Addressing Disruptive and Dangerous Behavior in the Classroom* (Van Brunt and Lewis, 2014) or *A Staff Guide to Addressing Disruptive and Dangerous Behavior on Campus* (Van Brunt and Murphy, 2017).



The vision of the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association (NaBITA) is to make our campuses and workplaces safer environments where development, education, and caring intervention are fostered and encouraged. NaBITA brings together professionals from multiple disciplines who are engaged in the essential function of behavioral intervention in schools, on college campuses, and in corporations and organizations for mutual support and shared learning. Whether it is to combat bullying, prevent violence, support individuals with disabilities, empower the success of those suffering from mental health challenges, or assist those who are in crisis, our members are joined in common purpose and exploration of best practices.

EXAMPLES OF DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIORS

- » Taking/making calls, texting, using smart phones for social media, etc.
- » Students' misuse of technology in the classroom. Sneaking text messages from beneath the desk or having a laptop open to Facebook™ or other social media site during a lecture.
- » Frequent interruption of professor while talking and asking of non-relevant, off-topic questions.
- » Inappropriate or overly revealing clothing in classroom, including extremely sexually provocative clothes, pajamas, or sleepwear.
- » Crosstalk or carrying on side conversations while the professor is speaking.
- » Interruptions such as frequent use of the restroom, smoke breaks, etc.
- » Poor personal hygiene that leads to a classroom disruption or lack of focus.
- » Use of alcohol or other substances in class. Attending class while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.
- » Entitled or disrespectful talk to professor or other students.
- » Arguing grades or "grade grubbing" for extra points after the professor requests the student to stop.
- » Eating or consuming beverages in class without permission (or against the class norms).
- » Showing up to class in strange clothing (dressed in military gear, Halloween costumes when it is not Halloween, etc.)
- » Reading magazines, newspapers (yes, they still read them, although usually the campus one) or books, or studying for other classes/doing other homework.



EXAMPLES OF DANGEROUS BEHAVIORS

- » Racist or otherwise fixated (not just expressed once to press a button) thoughts such as, "Women should be barefoot and pregnant," "Gays are an abomination to God and should be punished," "Muslims are all terrorists and should be wiped off the earth."
- » Bullying behavior focused on students in the classroom.
- » Direct communicated threat to professor or another student such as, "I am going to kick your ass" or "If you say that again, I will end you."
- » Prolonged non-verbal passive-aggressive behavior such as sitting with arms crossed, glaring or staring at professor, and refusal to speak or respond to questions or directives.
- » Self-injurious behavior such as cutting or burning self during class, or exposing previously unexposed self-injuries.
- » Physical assault such as pushing, shoving, or punching.
- » Throwing objects or slamming doors.
- » Storming out of the classroom when upset.
- » Conversations that are designed to upset other students such as descriptions of weapons, killing, or death.
- » Psychotic, delusional, or rambling speech.
- » Arrogant or rude talk to professor or other students.
- » Objectifying language that depersonalizes the professor or other students.



EXAMPLES OF DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIORS ONLINE

- » Student post non-relevant spam or unrelated personal advertising material in the forum discussion board.
- » Frequent interruption of the professors questions, threaded discussion posts with non-relevant comments or off topic personal discussions.
- » Inappropriate or overly revealing pictures shared with members of the online community through the profile.
- » Choosing a screenname or profile name that is offensive to others such as *Smokingthedope420@university.edu* or *assman69@university.edu*.
- » Posting or making comments while drunk or intoxicated. Attending online class discussions or lectures while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.
- » Arrogant, entitled, rude or disrespectful emails or messages to professor or other students.
- » Arguing grades or “grade grubbing” for extra points after the professor requests the student to stop.
- » Inciting other students to argue with the professor over grades or other assessment related expectations.

EXAMPLES OF DANGEROUS BEHAVIORS ONLINE

- » Racist or otherwise fixated thoughts such as, “Gays should be stoned like back in bible times,” “Men should go back to playing football and stop thinking so hard. Leave the mental heavy lifting to the ladies in the class,” “Muslims and Mormons are cults and should be wiped off the planet,” and others posted to the discussion boards to troll for a response or to incite an electronic “riot.”
 - » Bullying and teasing behavior through messages, emails, or online hazing.
 - » Direct communicated threat to professor or another student, such as, “I am going to kick your ass” or “If you say that again, I will end you.”
 - » Prolonged passive aggressive behavior such as constant disagreement with everyone and everything in class, challenging the professor’s credentials, refusal to respond questions or directives.
 - » Mentioning of self-injurious behavior, such as cutting or burning self or suicidal thoughts or intentions in online posts.
 - » Threats of physical assault such as pushing, shoving, or punching.
 - » Threats of online assaults like hacking a website, sharing personal information, or posting pictures online without permission.
 - » Conversations that are designed to upset other students, such as descriptions of weapons, killing, or death.
 - » Psychotic, delusional,,or rambling speech in posts.
- » Arrogant, entitled, rude, or disrespectful messages to professor or other students.
- » Objectifying language that depersonalizes the professor or other students.

