

# A Faculty Guide to Addressing Disruptive and Dangerous Behavior

By **Brian Van Brunt, W. Scott Lewis** [www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415628280/](http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415628280/)

**The following is an excerpt from the final chapter of our book. In this chapter we highlight 10 core concepts that are helpful in working with disruptive and dangerous students in the classroom. Here we outline concepts 1, 4 and 6.**

Questions? Contact me at [brian@nchem.org](mailto:brian@nchem.org)

## 1. Confidence

Nothing is more effective than a professor, instructor, educator or teacher who possesses a sense of confidence and has the ability to follow through with their students with pose and equanimity. Confidence starts with a strong knowledge of the content material being taught in the classroom. Have you ever had a new lecture topic assigned out of the blue or had to make up a presentation without enough time to prepare? If so, you know well how hard it can be to feel confident in front of an audience when you haven't obtained a mastery of the lecture material you are covering. This is why it can be difficult for new professors and instructors to excel at classroom management while trying to also deliver the course material in the most effective way.

Imagine you are driving in an unfamiliar city. You have a general understanding of where you are going, but lack the on-the-ground familiarity to remember landmarks, look at your map and retain more than one or two segments of the trip. GPS gives you some more specific directions and you have some basic idea of where you are ultimately headed, but these things are a far cry from being comfortable with navigating. In this kind of situation, trying to also appreciate the landscape of the city or the diversity of the people are far from your mind. Finding the next stop sign or the turn sign that indicates where to get back onto the highway takes up all of your attention and focus.

It can be the same for a new professor in the classroom or an instructor teaching new material for the first time. The more they are focused on the content, the less they are focused on the management of the overall classroom. More seasoned professors learn to do this over time. The same way more seasoned drivers and travelers can better appreciate the journey once they know where all the turns and landmarks are. An instructor who is more confident with the classroom material will be in a better position to manage disruptive and dangerous behavior.

Another very important aspect of a successful professor lies in their ability to keep the class engaged and interested in the course content. It's not enough to read from the textbook or recite PowerPoint slides to your students. Instructors who receive positive classroom evaluations are often the ones who keep their students interested in the material and the learning process. These instructors often have fewer classroom disruptions or distractions to face from students as they are primarily focused on learning the material in front of them.

It brings up the image of that old Billy Joel song, *The Entertainer*. Simply put, professors who "entertain" their students while teaching the materials are more effective, receive higher marks on course evaluations and, in our subjective experience, tend to be more satisfied with their role as a teacher and in their interactions with their students when compared to those who police their classrooms with an iron fist and see the education process as a 'dumping' of knowledge from the top of the hierarchy to those receptacles below.

We're not suggesting that professors should just be entertaining, you know, like a clown juggling balls in order for students to behave well. We're not suggesting that instructors who fail to entertain students are then responsible for creating the idle hands that then end up engaging in disruptive or dangerous behavior. Students are in school for the privilege to learn and bring with that undertaking a responsibility to behave properly in the classroom.

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*We are suggesting educators who know their classroom material well and share it with their students in an creative and interesting manner often spend less time dealing with classroom disruptions since many of the students are focused on the content of the class.* Also, knowing your students can reduce the likelihood of these issues as well. There can be times, certainly, where a particularly innovative debate may backfire and create an argument between students. But most of the time, inventive and energetic delivery of course content leads to the development of a more positive learning community.

## 4. Grace and Mercy

And suddenly the chapter takes a turn and begins to sound more like a good old-fashioned Baptist revival with concepts like grace and mercy from the Lord! Rest assured, you haven't lost your place or found a new yourself reading in a new book. While there are certainly religious connotations to the concepts of grace and mercy, we believe there are some very real practical applications of these concepts when it comes to teaching students in higher education and managing disruptive and dangerous behavior.

We should not enable disrespectful student behavior or hand them the keys to the school. We should not lower standards or give into their demands when we are faced with a student who falls short in terms of living up to the expectations in the classroom. There is a need for faculty to engage students with caring and respect—especially if the student is not displaying these qualities themselves. The heart of institutes of higher education is the education--- the teaching of students in both the course content, and the equally important qualities of respect, caring, empathetic listening and the truth of the old golden rule: "Treat others how you wish to be treated."

Our admonition to those working with disruptive, frustrating or annoying students is to understand the strength and power inherent in the demonstration of grace and mercy when encountering those who try our patience, and to behave in a way that demands a caring, developmentally appropriate corrective action. Addressing rude, entitled and frustrating student behavior is one way to prevent this behavior from festering and escalating into violent or dangerous behavior.

Perhaps there is also an argument here for treating students fairly. By this we mean following that golden rule and treating them how you would like to be treated in a similar situation. The issue is not one of giving them what they deserve, but instead offering them an opportunity to climb there way back out of a hole they have dug themselves into. Perhaps recalling times in our own scholarship and schooling where professors shared some of this grace and mercy with us.

Imagine a graduate student comes to you after class, distraught about her grade on a quiz. She explained she was having some serious health issues, but didn't want to withdraw from the class. You encouraged her to talk to the Dean of Student's Office to see if there was any assistance they could offer since the condition was medical. She said she would, but even if she took an abbreviated load, she wanted to stay in your class – hence her panic over her quiz grade. She asked if there was any way we could meet during your office hours to go over the concepts and if you would mind emailing her when she felt she was struggling. You agree to both, and go one step further.

You connected her with an older student who had done exceptionally well in your class to see if her peer could help her with the concepts. They meet, it helped, and her work improved. Her email questions waned as she picked it up. A cynical professor might think, "Look out, she will take up all of your time." As it turned out, she picked up the material and helped others who were struggling. She, in essence, became an advocate, and her talking about your compassion to others served to a) keep other students engaged, b) reduce the likelihood of any disruptions, and c) keep her in school and motivated.

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## 6. Active Listening

Listening is one of the most effective ways of de-escalating a disruptive or dangerous student. The simple act of not talking and encouraging a student to share what they are upset about helps reduce the student's desire to raise his voice, yell or become more frustrated with the situation happening around him. People yell when they are not feeling heard or understood. When an instructor takes the time to listen to a student who is upset, it conveys the message that they are paying attention and reduces the student's urge to escalate their behavior in order to be heard.

Admittedly, it does require a bit of patience to listen to someone whose viewpoint is so far off from your own. Students try to make a case for a classroom exception (extra credit or turning in a paper late) or explain away a behavior (crosstalk or misuse of technology). It's normal for an instructor to want to shut the conversation down quickly with a "well, that's not the way it is." While this kind of statement is an accurate representation of the situation at hand (and no amount of arguing on the student's part will change the professor's mind), we need to allow the student to feel understood so he aren't tempted to 'raise his voice' through more disruptive or dangerous actions

Another aspect of handling a disruptive student is having the discussion apart from an audience. This audience tends to 'add fuel to the fire' and ends up escalating the student behaving in a disruptive or dangerous manner. If you have ever watched the TV show *COPS*, you are familiar with the first step when the police show up to a domestic violence scene. One officer directs the guy in a ripped white t-shirt over to sit on the curb to tell his side of the story. The other officer talks with the wife at the kitchen table to listen to her version of the story. Like fire and gasoline, as soon as they get back together the couple is back at each other's throats.

The classroom audience follows this example. A professor is always in a much better position to have a conversation alone with a student in order to give them the space and attention they need in order to feel heard. The exception here is when the student is threatening or unsafe for the instructor to be around in a closed, private area. This requires the professor to always be concerned first with his their personal safety when handling a disruptive or dangerous student. (For those of you who started the book at the end, there is a whole section on "Staying Centered" in Chapter three, for those who didn't, you may want to re-read it. Please know that it is the short version of a workshop we teach.)

\*\*\*On the backside of this page, I've included a sample story to highlight the concept of active listening. Throughout the book, the reader will have the opportunity to read dozens of personal reflections and stories entitled **From the Trenches**. These captivating stories arise from experienced faculty from across the United States who share their wisdom and experience in handling behaviors in community college classrooms. These funny, seasoned teaching veterans create narratives that appeal to newly minted and timeworn professors who have been teaching for decades. They offer some creative ideas and approaches to handling a wide range of disruptive and sometimes dangerous behaviors from seasoned professors.

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### Atlanta International Airport

I travel as part of my consulting practice and this is how I found myself in the Atlanta airport on a Tuesday afternoon. I waited in line to use one of those airlines check in kiosks that let you type in your confirmation number and then you get a copy of your ticket. I waited and watched a sixty-five-year-old gentleman struggle with the machine. From where I stood, it looked as if he was typing in his number over and over again and the machine was not accepting his code. The line was rather long and a airline representative comes over to help the traveler figure out what isn't working with the machine. The exchange goes like this:

**Airline representative:** "Sir, I'd be happy to help you. What seems to be the problem?"

**Older man:** "I keep entering my number and this damn thing isn't working. It won't let me enter the entire code." He shows her a printout of his ticket order.

**Airline representative:** "Allow me." She reaches for the printout.

**Older man:** "I've entered it already five times and each time it stops and won't let me enter any more numbers. I don't know why you have all these computers around if they aren't..."

**Airline representative:** "Sir, I'd be happy to...."

**Older man:** "...working. I mean, I pay all of this money and in my day there was a thing called customer service."

**Airline representative:** "If you would just give me the printout you have..."

**Older man:** "You aren't listening to me! I already typed that in."

**Airline representative:** Looks around frustrated at the backup in the line. "Sir, if you just let me see your paper there, I can fix the problem."

**Older man (now disgruntled):** "I don't know what you are going to do differently. I followed what it said to do." He holds the paper out.

**Airline representative:** Takes the paper from his hand. "Here, you just have to enter the confirmation number, not the ticket number." She types quickly and then his ticket comes out of the bottom of the machine.

**Older man (grumbling):** "I don't see why this all has to be so complicated."

While the representative meant well, she tried to solve his problem before listening to his frustration. People who are upset about something want other people to understand why they are upset. Sure, they want a resolution to their problem, but they also want to be understood and cared about. Instructors would have an easier time working with disruptive students if they first listen to the problem and allow them the chance to explain their frustration. They should seek to do this in private, as long as it can be accomplished safely, and should use open-ended questions to help the student explain why they are upset. These questions could include: "Tell me more about why you are upset?", "What have you tried so far to solve the problem?" and "What would you like me to do in order to help you?"

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