



Addressing  
**DISRUPTIVE  
AND  
DANGEROUS**  
Behavior

in the Classroom and Around Campus

**The NaBITA 2017 Whitepaper**



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## Introduction

Faculty and staff on college campuses are on the frontline of working with students in every aspect of the college experience. While this work is essential and rewarding, it can also be demanding, draining, and difficult. Our best intentions for a student can be derailed when the student becomes disruptive, and our best efforts are challenged when faced with dangerous behaviors. The purpose of this whitepaper is to provide a brief overview of foundational concepts related to the management of disruptive and dangerous behavior on campus. It can be shared with faculty and staff as a resource for the attitudes and techniques helpful during these challenging scenarios.

In conversations with faculty and staff across the country, the words we use to describe these difficult student situations do not change, whether at a four-year institution or a two-year community college. Taken together, they read like a spectrum of escalation: entitled, frustrating, annoying, demanding, disrespectful, inconsiderate, aggressive, threatening, and violent. It can be easy to default to blaming this on a generation of students or parents and K-12 educational systems. Like a rotten apple in the center of a bushel of apples, it can be tempting to cast generalities about today's college students. There is a tendency to paint with broad brushstrokes and see a single poorly behaved student as evidence of a generational lack of respect or focus, and we run the risk of seeing other students' frustrations and behaviors through the same lens as the student we previously encountered.

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So, as we continue to discuss disruptive and dangerous student behavior, we'd like to offer a caution. Do not extrapolate a single student's behavior to an entire class, generation, or population of students. While each generation may have unique characteristics based on the time in which they were raised or the prevailing attitude toward parenting and each subpopulation may also have distinctive attributes, each student brings a unique worldview and subjective context to their behavior. We can only differentiate disruptive from dangerous behavior when we see each student as an individual and avoid overarching statements such as "all these kids lack the kind of respect I had for professors" and "this whole generation is entitled and adverse to the kind of hard work needed to be successful at college." These statements create blind spots for us and make our jobs more difficult.

A mindset that we would encourage instead is to see these moments of crisis and disruption as opportunities to better connect with students. It may not seem possible when a student is yelling and angry, distraught and hopeless, or even threatening and scary. Nothing in the paper below suggests that you sacrifice your own safety for that of a student or the campus, but we would propose that an open mindset that considers the unknown elements of a student's experiences and background will help you during these difficult and challenging moments. We have a tendency to isolate and avoid those who are annoying, difficult, or scary. By taking a moment to consider opportunities to better connect and understand the context of the concern, we are better able to engage in interventions and prevent scenarios from escalating.

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-

ing behaviors. Passing information on to the campus BIT is the best way to ensure a centralized group of trained faculty and staff is putting together the pieces of this puzzle related to what is occurring with the individual of concern. In essence, where you may have a singular view of the student's situation, the BIT has the whole picture. To use an analogy, a staff or faculty member, or even a coach, may have one or a few frames of the student's life, where the BIT has (or can get) the whole movie – or at least more of the movie than a single individual or department has access to.

Additionally, the BIT comprises members who are trained in risk and threat assessment; meet regularly to address these types of situations, and use objective measurement tools to identify the behavior and assign a level of risk to the behavior. Conversely, a staff or faculty member is likely to apply their subjective lens to the behavior and, at worst, attempt diagnosis or over- or under-assess the risk. This could lead to everything from letting little issues become big issues, ignoring mental health crises, or violations of disability law, all of which increase the exposure of the institution and its members.

### DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIORS

- Taking/making calls, texting, using smartphones for social media, etc., while waiting in line in front of you and ignoring their turn or in the classroom.
- Frequent interruption while talking and/or repeated asking of irrelevant, off-topic questions.
- Inappropriate or overly revealing clothing, including extremely sexually provocative clothes, pajamas, or sleepwear.<sup>1</sup>
- Crosstalk or carrying on side conversations while you are trying to speak. Maybe to a friend or on a phone.
- Interruptions in conversation, frequent unnecessary use of the restroom or smoke breaks that have a student up and down in class, etc.
- Poor personal hygiene that makes it difficult to continue a conversation or teach class.
- Lack of focus or paying attention to conversation.
- Excessive sighs or eye rolls or other gestures that disrupt the class environment.
- Misuse of alcohol or other substances. Attending a meeting while under the influence of a substance. Being intoxicated in class.
- Overtly disrespectful talk to staff, faculty, or other students. Interrupting the professor.
- Arguing points of contention or asking for special treatment after staff or faculty ask the student to stop.
- Eating or consuming beverages in meetings or class without permission (or in violation of office norms or class policy).
- Showing up to meetings or class in inappropriate or strange clothing that clearly disrupts the academic environment (tactical military gear, Halloween costumes when it is not Halloween, etc.).<sup>2</sup>
- Reading magazines, newspapers, or books, or studying for other classes/doing other homework during a conversation with you or during class.

<sup>1</sup> Public institutions should not attempt a dress code as this is covered by the First Amendment.

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## 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.

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.

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One essential technique for managing any crisis involves adopting a calm, cool, and collected stance in the face of upsetting or frustrating behavior. This approach is both an art and a science that requires study and experience to accomplish well. Again and again, the most common error we see with staff and faculty alike when they mismanage a crisis situation is responding to the incident in a reactive and/or emotional manner. They rush to react because the student's behavior is so incredibly rude, entitled, frustrating, or threatening they drop into an automatic response rather than choosing a more appropriate and effective response for a given situation.

This brings up the larger question of how to remain calm, cool, and collected in the face of chaos. How does one remain “chill,” so to speak, when a student is out of control and escalating? How can this be done when everything seems to happen so very fast?

Well, it starts with Goldilocks.

You remember that girl, right? The girl with the yellow hair who had a penchant for eating bears' porridge? That little girl offers some useful advice to those looking to find the best kind of stance

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when it comes to working with disruptive or dangerous student behavior: finding a middle ground. Aristotle offers a bit of a fancier take on this simple concept: “Virtue is the disposition to choose the mean, in both actions and passions.”

Our argument is one for the mean. Find a stance based in calmness, confidence, and a flexible curiosity when attempting to manage at-risk behavior. Like Goldilocks and the porridge, too hot or too cold misses the mark. A staff who approaches a student with their buttons pushed and ready for a fight is going to be just as ineffective managing the crisis as a staff member who approaches the situation with a lack of caring and attention. The “just right” porridge is where the staff member approaches the student with a balanced calm, adjusting as the situation demands.

Don't forget, when addressing disruptive or dangerous behaviors, the important element of trying to view the situation from the other person's perspective. While this is never 100 percent achievable, we encourage you to make every attempt to look through the eyes and experiences of the student you are trying to help. Not because you have to, but rather, because this provides you a better insight into addressing the scenario in a manner that increases the success of your interventions.

## Seven Steps

To prepare for and respond to disruptive and dangerous behavior, faculty and staff can use the seven steps outlined below to help guide their actions.

## 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.

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## 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



“Bring me the red folder” or “Can you get Dr. Strong on the phone?” An upset student may see through this and become more enraged at the subterfuge.

#### **4. Be Prepared**

Don't wait until a crisis occurs to think about what you would do. Planning how to respond to a crisis during the crisis is a bad idea. Think about working tabletop exercises or example scenarios into staff meetings and orientation events at the start of the year. Think about possible exits around the office or classroom. Know how to contact campus police and the difference between calling them on a direct line versus calling 911; sometimes 911 routes to an off-campus response that can take longer. We all do fire drills every year, with the hope that we never have to actually use the knowledge.

#### **5. Understand Their Perspective**

Another approach to keeping calm when facing a disruptive or dangerous student is normalizing their behavior. Imagine the student's behavior within the context of their background or experience. While it may be more reasonable to expect graduate students to have figured out the basics of balancing family, career, parking, and an off-campus internship, some first-year community college students may have a bit of a learning curve when it comes to acclimating to the college environment. Perhaps the student in question has just received some upsetting news and their behavior would be more reasonable if you fully understood the context of it occurring. This technique does not excuse the student from responsibility for their poor behavior. It is designed to help the staff understand how to help defuse an emotional reaction in the student. Sometimes, a little bit of compassionate inquiry goes a long way to understanding.

#### **6. The Biology of Aggression**

In our books, we discuss the biology of affective violence and aggression. A central premise of crisis response is this: the earlier we intervene, the better chance we have at success. If a student is escalating and becoming increasingly upset, there are biological changes that are occurring related to their heart rate, blood pressure, and adrenaline production that limit the student's ability to think rationally and be reasoned with by staff or faculty. Identifying and intervening during the early stages of frustration and building aggression makes it easier than waiting until the student is more escalated in their aggression.

#### **7. Persuasion and Body Language**

When trying to persuade someone to comply with a request, understand that people are more likely to listen and follow the advice of people they are similar to and have something in common with than someone they don't know or don't see as having a real understanding of their issue. A first step in crisis escalation is helping the student see the person they are angry at as a person and not a job title or bureaucratic cog in the larger university organizational structure. Additionally, staff should consider their tone of voice and body language when communicating with someone who is upset and frustrated. Lowering one's tone of voice, using inclusive and open hand gestures, nodding, and making appropriate eye contact are all ways to encourage conversation.

## 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 reagravated. 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.