

**Responding to Disruptive or
Threatening Student Behavior:
A Guide for Faculty and Staff**



California State University, Los Angeles

INTRODUCTION

Occasionally, California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA) experiences threatening and disruptive behavior on the part of some students, a trend paralleled nationally at other campuses. As a faculty or staff member, you may find yourself having to contend with a disruptive or emotionally disturbed student at some point during your career. Student behaviors that you may encounter range from simple disruptions in class or in a campus office to ongoing harassment or verbal and physical threats.

The guidelines in this booklet are designed to: 1) assist your area in thinking through its response to situations in which students may behave in unusual or unpredictable ways; 2) help you handle an actual threat; and 3) assist you with referral and protocol procedures. When your department has prepared its faculty and staff adequately for such situations, the chances of serious disruption may be lessened.

DEFINITIONS

A student is considered disruptive when he or she engages in behaviors that interfere in a significant way with your normal teaching or administrative duties as a staff or faculty member, or that significantly erodes the learning environment for other students. Disruptive behavior may sometimes threaten or endanger your physical or psychological well-being or safety or that of others. Disruptive behavior can assume many forms, including the following:

- A student who persistently arrives late to class or leaves early in a manner which is disruptive to the regular flow of the class.
- A student who talks incessantly while you are delivering a lecture.
- A student who loudly and frequently interrupts the flow of class with inappropriate questions or interjections.
- A student who responds inappropriately, disrespectfully, or with anger to the comments or opinions of others in the classroom.
- A student who displays highly confused, disoriented or delusional thinking, speaking, or writing.
- A student whose use of personal electronic devices or food consumption causes a disruption to the regular flow of the class.
- A student who brings individuals to class who are not enrolled, including infants/children.
- A student who exhibits inappropriate conduct while on field assignments or off-campus placements connected with a course.

- A student who uses obscene or profane language.
- A student under the influence of alcohol or another controlled substance.
- A student who persistently calls your office and hampers your ability to continue normal work or to assist other students.
- A student who becomes belligerent when you confront his or her inappropriate behavior.
- A student who verbally or physically threatens you, another faculty or staff member, or another student.
- A student who writes you a threatening letter, email, or leaves a disturbing message on your voicemail.
- A student who attempts to contact you at your home in inappropriate ways or otherwise attempts to contact you outside the boundaries of your professional role.
- A student who displays behaviors indicating a romantic or other obsessive interest in you.

THREE LEVELS OF THREATENING OR DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR

For the purposes of these guidelines, disruptive and threatening behavior has been categorized into three different levels.

- The first level, which is the least serious, includes any situation that can be handled informally between you and the student, leading to a prompt resolution. It may also involve consultation with your department chair, who often has unique insights into classroom culture and conflict management. Supervisors are also familiar with relevant campus procedures and practices that can aid staff.
- The second level involves an ongoing problem, or a more serious incident. In addition to consulting with your department chair or supervisor, you should also consult with the Judicial Affairs Office (JAO) at (323) 343-3103, which will assist you in evaluating and resolving the situation directly through the student conduct process, refer you to Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), and/or notify the student Conduct Assessment, Response and Evaluation (CARE) Team.

The purpose of the CARE Team is to proactively identify, assess and offer a coordinated institutional response to students whose behavior is concerning, extremely disruptive or who pose a potential risk to themselves, others and/or the campus community.

- The third, and most serious, level is reached when there is immediate danger. If this occurs, you should call University Police immediately.

LEVEL ONE INFORMAL RESOLUTION

a) In the classroom

As the course instructor, you serve as the primary source of authority in your classroom. You are authorized to establish appropriate academic and behavioral standards. There are a number of ways you can influence how individual student behavior impacts the learning environment.

It is helpful if you clarify behavioral and other expectations at the beginning of a course, and reach an agreement with students on standards for classroom conduct. When you are establishing guidelines for behavior in your course, it is important that you only articulate the standards that you are willing to enforce. Apply these standards fairly and consistently. Students will quickly recognize and resent perceived unfairness.

Describing basic behavioral standards in the course syllabus will assist you in discussing them the first day of class. Information should specify what behaviors are prohibited, how you will manage behavioral issues, and any consequences that may result. A statement in the course syllabus might read:

“Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students’ ability to learn and an instructor’s ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Judicial Affairs Office for disciplinary action.”

It is also common to include a statement of warning about cheating and plagiarism and the consequences of these forms of misconduct.

When a student is disruptive in class:

- Address the behavior immediately. This may mean employing informal action such as standing next to students who are talking, reminding the class of the agreed standards for behavior, or directing specific comments to the disruptive student.
- If the behavior continues, direct the student to leave the room. Inform the student that an office hour visit will be required before the next class meeting. You may contact your department chair/supervisor or the JAO prior to that meeting in order to solicit advice on how to proceed with the meeting, including consideration of having a third party present.
- If the student does not cease the behavior and remains in the classroom, notify University Police for assistance.

- It is appropriate to call University Police any time a disruptive behavior escalates, or when it is reasonable to interpret behavior (including verbal statements) as threatening or harassing to you or to other members of the class.
- It is important that you report any immediate class removal to your department chair. The JAO should also be notified of this action at 323-343-3103. The chair and/or the JAO can assist you in developing a plan of action to be taken prior to the next class meeting. The plan may include a conversation between the student and the chair and/or the Judicial Affairs Officer, which will focus on the conditions for the student's return to class, strategies the student can pursue to participate appropriately in class, the consequences of further disruptive behavior, and referral to University resources. The chair and/or the JAO will notify you of the conditions, if any, given to the student for a return to your class.

Meeting with the disruptive student:

If you feel secure, it may be helpful for you to meet privately with a disruptive student following a confrontation or removal from class. You may also wish to request a meeting with a student who has displayed unacceptable behavior even when a confrontation has not resulted.

In either case, the meeting is an opportunity for the student to understand the inappropriateness of his or her behavior, and for you to discuss strategies that will enable the student to continue in the class. You should consider having a third person present, or leave the door open so that someone in the office can assist you if the situation becomes confrontational.

In the meeting:

- Remain calm. This may be difficult if the student is agitated. However, your reasoned response will assist the student in addressing the behavior in question.
- Do not take the student's behavior or remarks personally, even though they may be directed at you. Disruptive behavior generally results from other life problems or general academic frustration.
- Be specific about the inappropriate behavior that the student has exhibited. Describe the behavior; do not focus on the person. Explain why the behavior is problematic.
- Ask questions and summarize what you hear the student saying. Respectful concern may enable you as the educator to help the student be successful both in your class and in his or her general university experience.
- Focus on areas of agreement between you and the student.
- Recommend additional resources on campus, such as CAPS, or other appropriate services. If you and the student are comfortable, offer to escort the student to the CAPS office or to have the student call the office in your presence.

- Conclude by summarizing any resolution and by articulating expectations for the future. Be clear that continued inappropriate behavior will be referred to the JAO.

b) Outside the classroom, or in a department or office:

You may encounter disruptive behavior by students in a campus office, during office meetings, before or after scheduled classes, or in spontaneous encounters on campus. Should this occur, strategies for responding to the student generally are the same as those outlined previously.

In general:

- Remain calm, and speak in a controlled manner. This will prevent the situation from escalating and may diffuse the tension.
- Identify a more appropriate place and time to discuss the matter if the problem is disrupting normal business operations or professional duties.
- Suggest a short break or a “time out” to allow the student to regain composure, or explain that if the student cannot maintain composure, you cannot discuss the issue at the present time.
- Explain to the student that you will call University Police if inappropriate behavior persists or if a threat is made. Of course, it is important to differentiate between student behavior that is threatening or harassing, or is repeatedly disruptive, and speech that is uncivil, rude, or politically contentious. The latter does not generally warrant the intervention of University Police officers, however, if persistent and seriously disruptive, other disciplinary action may be warranted.

LEVEL TWO

DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR REQUIRING COORDINATED RESPONSE

If the disruptive behavior is not an immediate threat, but involves an ongoing problem that seems to be escalating, or a situation that feels intimidating or threatening, you should report the situation to your department chair or supervisor, and the JAO at (323) 343-3103. If necessary, you can also contact University Police by submitting a Behavior Concerns Checklist. The Behavior Concerns Checklist can be accessed at <http://www.calstatela.edu/univ/police/docs/BehaviorConcernChecklist.pdf>.

If necessary, the JAO may refer your concern to the CARE Team. A team approach will be employed to assess the situation and develop a coordinated institutional response. The Team will assess the level of disruption/danger to individuals and to the University community. The objectives of such an assessment include providing appropriate levels of support for you and others involved; demonstrating concern for other students who may be affected by the student

exhibiting the behavior in question; and, deciding how to handle the student's behavioral problems. The CARE Team will notify you when it has made a decision regarding the course of action to be taken regarding the student's behavior and how it may support you in case of subsequent behavior issues.

The CARE Team membership includes:

- Judicial Affairs Officer, Chair
- Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs
- Director of Public Safety/Chief of University Police
- Director of the Student Health Center
- Director of the Office for Students with Disabilities
- Representatives from Counseling and Psychological Services

The JAO may follow up with the disruptive student directly. Various disciplinary processes can be employed at this point, including, under certain circumstances, interim suspension of the student or the negotiation of a behavioral contract, pending a formal disciplinary investigation.

LEVEL THREE LIFE THREATENING INCIDENT OR IMMEDIATE THREAT

Whenever there is an incident that is life threatening or risks the safety of any person, you should always contact University Police immediately at (323) 343-3700. This includes behavior that could be classified as unlawful harassment, stalking, suicidality, or a threat of death or serious physical harm. University Police is staffed 24 hours per day and can dispatch law enforcement personnel to assist you at your campus location.

After a disruptive incident has occurred and a report has been prepared, University Police will work with the JAO and other campus offices in responding to the incident. You can expect these and other offices to provide appropriate consultation and assistance on an ongoing basis when a serious problem has occurred.

When an incident is sufficiently serious and attracts media attention, senior officers of the Student Affairs Division and University Police will take the lead in communicating with the press, in conjunction with Public Affairs and other offices, as appropriate. If you are contacted by the media, please refer them to Public Affairs.

COUNSELING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES (CAPS)

You can consult with CAPS about a student who seems to be showing signs of emotional distress, unusual behavior, or difficulty in adjusting to college life. CAPS is located on the second floor of the Student Health Center at Station 4, and can be reached at (323) 343-3314. Its experienced and well-trained staff of psychologists and counselors can assist you in determining an appropriate response to your concern. CAPS professionals are also available to present interactive workshops for faculty and staff regarding assisting emotionally distressed students.

WHEN A COMPLAINT IS FORWARDED TO THE JUDICIAL AFFAIRS OFFICE

When you report disruptive behavior (Level One, Two, or Three) to the JAO, staff will investigate the matter to determine if it constitutes a violation of the [Student Conduct Code](#). Following receipt of your complaint, the student will be required to meet with the JAO to discuss his or her behavior. In some cases, the complaint can be resolved administratively without further involvement on your part. In other cases, it may be necessary to convene a formal disciplinary hearing of the matter. Should this happen, you will generally be involved as the complainant at the hearing. The purpose of a disciplinary hearing is to discuss the facts in the case, to hear the accused student's perspective, and to determine an appropriate disciplinary response. Sanctions may include disciplinary probation, work assignments, research, essays, service to the University or the community, training, counseling or other remedies intended to discourage a repeat of the misconduct or as deemed appropriate based upon the nature of the violation. Violations of a more serious nature may warrant suspension or expulsion. Disciplinary decisions take into consideration the needs of both the campus community and the accused student, but the overriding goal is to ensure an environment conducive to providing an appropriate educational environment.

All students, including those who have a disability, are expected to adhere to the Student Conduct Code. If you believe a student is genuinely experiencing difficulty in exhibiting appropriate behavior because of a disabling condition, report the situation to the Office for Students with Disabilities for assistance. A disabling condition will not constitute an acceptable excuse for violating the Student Conduct Code. Your decision to initiate a complaint against a student should be based on the student's behavior and not the student's disability.

TEMPORARY REMOVAL OF A STUDENT FROM CAMPUS

While you, or University Police, may order a student to leave a class session in which he or she is displaying disruptive behavior, permanent removal cannot occur without a formal Judicial Affairs investigation.

There are two formal procedures for temporarily removing a student from campus. Each of these procedures is used only under the most severe circumstances. Actual violence or a direct threat of violence against a specific individual constitutes grounds to consider either of these procedures.

Interim Suspension: A student may be temporarily suspended from campus when there is reasonable cause to believe that such an action is necessary to protect the personal safety of persons within the University community or University property and to ensure the maintenance of order on the campus. Authority to impose an interim suspension rests with the Vice President for Student Affairs, who serves as the President's designee for student discipline. The conditions for imposition of an interim suspension are provided in [CSU Executive Order 1073, Student Conduct Procedures for the California State University](#). While on interim suspension, a student is denied entry to any campus of the CSU, except to attend a disciplinary hearing. Interim suspensions are not for the purpose of removing a student from a single class or campus location while the student is otherwise allowed to attend all other classes or locations. Contact the JAO if

you have information about behavior that may warrant an interim suspension. Information regarding the timeline and outcome will be provided to employees who have a *legitimate need to know* under FERPA guidelines.

Withdrawal of Consent to Remain on Campus: Pursuant to Section 626.4 of the California Penal Code, consent to remain on campus may be withdrawn from a person when there is reasonable cause to believe that the individual willfully disrupted the orderly operation of a campus. The chief administrative officer, or designee, administers this procedure. Once consent to remain on campus is withdrawn from a student, he/she may only come on campus to attend a disciplinary hearing. Each withdrawal of consent lasts for a maximum of 14 days.

THE ACCUSED STUDENT’S RIGHTS AND SUPPORT

As always in situations involving students, you should observe appropriate confidentiality. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) protects the privacy of student education records (including disciplinary records), and the student may inspect only that information which relates to him/her. CSULA expects students to be treated as independent, responsible, and adult members of the University community. They also have due process rights that must be respected. A student who believes that he or she has been treated improperly in the aftermath of an incident may seek assistance through established departmental, school, division and University grievance procedures.

DOCUMENTATION

Resolving disruption can be helped if the specific behavior is documented, including dates, times, brief descriptions of what happened, and the names of witnesses who may have observed the behavior. Such documentation should always be factual and not include personal interjections.

NOTES

This guide was adapted, with permission, from the following publications:

- University of Southern California, Disruptive and Threatening Student Behavior: Guidelines for Faculty and Staff
- California State University, Northridge, Responding to Disruptive or Threatening Student Behavior: A Guide for Faculty and Staff

IMPORTANT TELEPHONE NUMBERS

University Police	(323) 343-3700
Office of the Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs	(323) 343-3103
Judicial Affairs Office	(323) 343-3103
Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)	(323) 343-3314
Office for Students with Disabilities	(323) 343-3140
Office for Equity and Diversity	(323) 343-3040