

Senate Committee on Teaching and Advisement
Brown Bag Discussion
February 5, 2008
Distractions and Disruptions: Working with Difficult Students

The following summary is based on the discussion among sixteen faculty members who attended the Brown Bag. Every attempt was made to capture all the ideas, opinions and strategies discussed by those attending.

- Cell phones were discussed. Faculty recommended putting a cell phone policy on the syllabus. It was noted that the new emergency notification system has more people leaving their cell phones on during class. The result is that several class members may get a call on their cell phone simultaneously. Those calls were usually handled discretely by all. Many believed that cell phone etiquette has improved in recent years.
- Expectations for course etiquette can be clearly communicated on syllabus as well as verbally by the instructor at the beginning of the course. These issues can be revisited more easily during the semester if prior communication occurred.
- It was noted that youth culture has changed and that presents a range of issues that faculty may or may not see as distractions or disruptions. Examples included class assignment being done in class on available technology while instructor is teaching, text messaging, conversations between students, eating in class, hats worn in class, putting on make up, gathering things as class time is about to end, etc.
- Suggestion was made for faculty to assess what is the problem? What is not getting done because of the student behavior?
- A faculty member highlights the need to respect each other's learning experience with students and as a guideline accepts behavior that does not disrupt others' learning
- It was noted that distractions/disruptions varied depending on faculty perception, nature of the subject matter, teaching style of the professor, physical set up of classroom, level of course, number of students enrolled in class.
- Example discussed where professor noted the nature of the disruptions (students' talking) and revamped instruction to include group work that allowed students to converse, but about ideas the professor provided.
- Suggestions varied regarding students who sleep during class. Some let them sleep, others addressed students privately, another had rest of class leave the room quietly.
- Question was raised how to adjust to new student culture when one has been teaching for years? A faculty member offered these considerations: don't want student behavior to impact how professor interacts with students in and out of class; speak to students privately when there is an issue.
- Other faculty shared incidents where students were disruptive, were asked to leave the class, refused and eventually were escorted out of class by security.

- Question was raised whether or not faculty can deny a student's return to class based on student behavior.
- One faculty suggested if student behavior has to be confronted in class, then the faculty member is already at a loss.
- Faculty shared ideas for students' self evaluation as a strategy to encourage appropriate in class behavior. Ideas including students scoring themselves on their class participation and meeting with professor to justify the score, asking student "What would you do with a student like you in your class?" to prompt a discussion.
- Question was raised whether or not student behavior experienced on our campus was a U.S. phenomenon? Faculty noted different behaviors among the international students in their classes.
- Faculty discussed ways to work with students who monopolize discussions. Various strategies for randomly calling on students were offered—each students' name put on a craft stick in a can, index cards with student names randomly pulled during discussions, professor moves during student response so student talks to class, not just to professor, tally marks made on a class roster as each students participates. Faculty thought it was appropriate to let the monopolizer know that professor wanted to hear from other students too.
- A faculty member suggested we ask ourselves if we are doing our job. Things discussed were planning classes, inviting students to think, starting class on time, communicating the learning process (clear rules/expectations, connecting with students, student responsibilities).
- It was suggested that faculty put their resources toward what can be accomplished.
- A faculty member cautioned others to think before intervening with students' interactions. Students may actually be managing their own distractions, disruptions and conflicts.

Submitted by Jean Harris