Managing Disruptions and Related Behaviors

Faculty, staff, and student employees have many resources available when faced with behavior they perceive to fall outside accepted campus norms or standards. The following information and guidelines for responding to such situations refer to Penn State’s Code of Conduct and have been prepared in consultation with University Police, the Office of Judicial Affairs, and Counseling and Psychological Services.

Determining whether behavior may be disruptive, threatening, or dangerous requires careful observation, interpretation, and analysis. Active listening skills can help to resolve many of these situations. Employees who are prepared to engage in non-defensive, open, and safe interactions with students may better diffuse potential problems, show greater support for the students involved, and ultimately help the students move to a safer space where they can openly express their concerns and frustrations—hopefully heading off future crisis situations.

Examples of questionable, disruptive, and threatening behaviors and suggestions for responding to each are provided below. It may not always be clear what type of behavior is being displayed. If there is any suggestion of violence, employees always should err on the side of safety by calling University Police or other appropriate policy agency serving the campus.

For additional information, including the Managing Disruptions in the Classroom Informational Report from the University Faculty Senate (September 2004) and all policies referenced in this document, refer to the Code of Conduct and the Judicial Affairs website found online at www.sa.psu.edu/ja.

Links to contact information for campus police or other appropriate police agency for each Penn State location can be found at http://www.psu.edu/dept/police/

Identifying and Responding to Questionable, Disruptive, and Threatening Behavior

Questionable Behavior. Some behavior(s) may not be disruptive but may nevertheless make others uncomfortable. It is important that University personnel always maintain respect for students’ individual rights of expression, while, at the same time, fostering an environment that is civil, non-threatening, and supportive of learning. Examples of questionable behavior include:

- unsolicited attempts at conversation about unusual or controversial topics
- entering a work area that may not be available to the public
- inappropriate affect, such as speaking louder than may be necessary to communicate information
- continual interruptions
- an unannounced or pre-scheduled group demonstration
If these types of behavior are having a negative impact, the employee initially should request that the behavior cease or be modified. Only in those cases when a person refuses to respond and his/her behavior becomes further disruptive would additional action be appropriate.

**Disruptive Behavior.** When a person’s behavior results in some disruption of the workplace/community, additional steps may be necessary in response. Penn State’s Code of Conduct defines disruption as “… an action or combination of actions by one or more individuals that unreasonably interferes with, hinders, obstructs, or prevents the operation of the University or infringes on the rights of others to freely participate in its programs and services.” *University Code of Conduct, 2007.*

When assessing whether or not behavior is disruptive, the immediate and practical consequences of the conduct should be considered as well as whether it interferes with unit or academic operations or prevents others from participating fully in those activities. Disruptive behavior should be confronted quickly and calmly by an employee. In most cases, simply making individuals aware of their behavior will resolve the situation. (Note: student workers may be reluctant to confront peers; however, they should be expected to confront disruptive behavior in the absence of full-time staff.)

When behavior is determined to be disruptive, if appropriate and possible, a conversation should be initiated with the person in a private area unless there are safety concerns. When responding to disruptive conduct, the employee should:

- speak calmly and explain to the person the behavior viewed as disruptive and/or interfering with the learning process (or in some cases, posing a risk to University personnel and/or facilities), and ask them to stop
- focus on behavior, not individuals or traits, and avoid personal accusations and threats
- if necessary, explain that others, such as a supervisor or the police, may be informed, making clear that this possibility is being noted for the person’s consideration and that behavior will determine the course of action
- listen to what the person is saying and acknowledge any concerns she or he may raise
- when possible, suggest options to resolve the situation without further disruption or formal action (stay within own expertise)
- look for others to assist if uncomfortable confronting behaviors alone
- consider contacting University Police or the appropriate police agency serving the campus if the behavior persists and the disruptive person refuses to cooperate with clearly stated requests

If the disruptive person is a student and the behavior is not considered threatening, the employee may explain to the student that a report will be submitted to the unit supervisor who may also wish to involve the Office of Judicial Affairs. Faculty have the authority to request a disruptive student to leave class but not to expel or force a student to drop a class on a temporary or permanent basis; this can only be done through the Office of Judicial Affairs. If the student becomes combative or the behavior escalates, the police should be called.
Threatening Behavior. Behavior is considered threatening if it suggests the possibility of violence and physical harm. Immediate attention to safety is the priority and employees should first assess their own level of safety. If it is felt that it is appropriate to stay with the threatening person, the employee should remain in an open area with visible means of escape or enlist the help of another.

There may be situations deemed safe enough to ask for the behavior to cease before calling the police (e.g., some departments have established a “code blue” system that alerts others in the area or in another office to offer immediate support). If the employee confronting the behavior or other employees in the office/unit feel threatened in any way, the police should be called. Examples of threatening behavior include, but are not limited to:

- mention of a weapon
- verbal comments which mention the desire to harm self or others
- unwanted physical contact
- comments referencing previous dangerous actions in which the person was involved
- highly agitated or unpredictable behavior
- aggression or violence

Aggression and violence will vary from verbal or physical threats to verbal and physical abuse. It is very difficult to predict aggression and violence; however, some indicators of potential violence may include:

- anger problems including violent fantasies (e.g. contents of writings, drawings)
- fascination with weapons, accoutrements, and cruelty
- loner or very withdrawn behaviors
- suicidal/homicidal ideation and victim/martyr self concept expressed
- stalking behaviors
- non-compliance and disciplinary problems
- interest in previous shooting situations
- unusual and aberrant behavior
- history with law enforcement
- mental health history related to dangerousness including paranoia

If an employee feels threatened or a situation escalates, the employee should remove him or herself from the situation and if possible call University Police or the police agency serving the campus.

If the behavior seems questionable, the employee should stay calm and set limits with the threatening person. Again, if there is any question of safety, the police should be called to assess the situation. It is far better to be safe and call the police when they may not be needed than not to call with the possibility that their assistance is required.

Resources

University Police. Police services vary across campuses. For information regarding police support and/or safety contacts by campus location, see [http://www.psu.edu/dept/police/](http://www.psu.edu/dept/police/)

At University Park, the University Police are available every day, all day, to respond to calls on
campus. Members of the University community should not hesitate to call if they or others feel threatened, if they suspect that someone has committed criminal acts or Code of Conduct violations, or if they have been instructed to do so by their supervisors or unit heads. University Police officers will arrive, investigate and carefully assess each situation. Follow up will occur with the Office of Judicial Affairs (Penn State students) or outside agencies (local and state police, if necessary, for non-Penn State students) to determine resolution.

On occasion, a person’s disruptive behavior is motivated by emotional or psychological issues. University Police have been trained to assess these types of situations and when necessary, will contact a third party such as Counseling and Psychological Services or Can Help, a local community agency.

Office of Judicial Affairs. The Office of Judicial Affairs may be notified by University personnel, students and/or University Police when it is believed that student misconduct has occurred. The Office of Judicial Affairs will make contact with each student named in the allegation to determine if a violation of the University’s Code of Conduct has occurred and what the appropriate response should be. Administrative sanctions range from disciplinary warning to expulsion. Judicial Affairs staff members also have the option to assign educational sanctions in addition to, or in lieu of, administrative sanctions. In cases where the student’s misconduct may have been motivated by emotional or psychological issues, Judicial Affairs staff will refer to the University’s protocol which can be found at www.sa.psu.edu/ja. In the event that a staff member wishes to refer a student to Judicial Affairs, contact can be made with the Judicial Affairs office at the campus. A staff member will assist in determining the appropriate procedure.

Student Counseling Services. Arrangements for counseling services vary by campus. The counseling service may be contacted when it appears that an individual’s behavior is related to an emotional condition or disorder.

At University Park, the Center for Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) provides a full array of individual and group services for individuals experiencing moderate difficulties to serious disturbance. Staffed by psychologists, psychiatric providers, social workers, and specialized counselors, CAPS is able to respond to the full range of emotional and psychological conditions.

Crisis services are available at CAPS throughout regular business hours (8:00a.m.-5:00p.m.) and after hours through an agreement with the CAN HELP Crisis Service, a local community agency (1-800-643-5432). In the event that a faculty or staff member wishes to refer a student to CAPS, contact may be made with the office at 814-863-0395. Immediate crisis appointments are available or a student may be scheduled for an intake consultation. Depending on the nature of the presenting concerns, the student will be seen at CAPS until the situation is resolved or referred to the community for services befitting his or her needs. Additional information about CAPS is available at http://www.sa.psu.edu/caps/.

Follow-Up

At times, follow-up to a disruption will be necessary with members of the community who may or may not have witnessed the confrontation. Clearly communicating persistent behavior problems among unit faculty and staff is essential to consistent responses and prevention of misinformation through
rumor or gossip. It may also be necessary to address concerns that accurate information is shared and, if appropriate, confidentiality maintained.

Communications authorizing specific actions or responses should be issued by supervisors or administrators. While doing this, the privacy and confidentiality of the person in question must be respected and appropriate staff brought into the situation to maintain the safety of the campus.

Specific information about administrative actions or sanctions, medical issues or treatment, educational or disciplinary records are considered confidential and should not be shared with staff who have no legitimate need to know the information. Names, physical descriptions, descriptions of behavior and suggested responses may be shared. Include supervisors or representative staff from all impacted shifts, work areas or service points and communicate information in a timely manner to appropriate groups.

**Additional Information**

*Penn State University Student Code of Conduct*
http://www.sa.psu.edu/ja/conduct.shtml

*Student Guide to General University Policies and Rules*
http://www.sa.psu.edu/ja/pdf/PoliciesRules.pdf

*Judicial Affairs (814-863-0342)*
http://www.sa.psu.edu/ja/

*Center for Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) (814-863-0395)*
http://www.sa.psu.edu/caps/

*Managing Classroom Disruptions*
http://www.sa.psu.edu/ja/pdf/classdisrupt.pdf

*University Police (814-863-1111)*
http://www.psu.edu/dept/police/home.html

*Campus Police and Security Contacts*
http://www.psu.edu/dept/police/

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