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Addressing Disruptive and Dangerous Behavior in the College Setting

Authors

Amy Murphy, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Angelo State University
amy.murphy@angelo.edu

Brian Van Brunt, Ed.D.
President, NaBITA; Partner, The NCHERM Group, LLC.
Brian.vanbrunt@tngconsulting.com

Jeff Solomon
School and Workplace Safety Consultant
jsolomon@dprep.com

Abstract

Disruptive students can detract from others' ability to learn, make it more difficult for faculty members to teach, and can create downright dangerous conditions on campus. This paper discusses ways to address disruptive and dangerous behavior in the classroom and around campus to prevent an escalation towards violence and support students who may be experiencing emotional and mental distress.

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 paper is to provide a brief overview of foundational concepts related to the management of disruptive and dangerous behavior on campus.

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, as institutions are starting to revisit policies like no child left behind and programs such as positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS) and reconsider the role law-enforcement may play in campus safety (Pollack & Eden, 2019). 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.

When addressing disruptive and dangerous behavior, avoid extrapolating 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 sub-population 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 which makes staying out in front of behavior problems more difficult for instructors.

These moments of crisis and disruption should be seen as opportunities to better connect with students even though this may not seem possible when a student is yelling and angry, distraught

and hopeless, or even threatening and scary. While instructors should remain vigilant when assessing their personal safety in a crisis, there is also an opportunity to cultivate an open mindset that takes into account the unknown elements of a student's experiences and background to better understand their motivation. Instructors have a tendency to isolate and avoid those students who present as annoying, difficult, or scary. By taking a moment to consider opportunities to better connect and understand the context of the concern, instructors 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. There should not be a disregard for inappropriate behaviors, but rather exploring the opportunity to apply grace and understanding that can be lost in the escalation of a situation. Students come to college with a broad array of previous life experiences, including past experiences of trauma and abuse (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). Exercising 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 (Crosby, 2015; Meyers, 2003; Simonsen & Myers, 2015).

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.

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. The threshold for reporting concerning behavior should

be set at a very low bar. Reporting concerning behavior from students should not be viewed as a discipline process rather an intervention in hopes to prevent small problems from becoming large problems.

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 (Sokolow, Lewis, Van Brunt, Schuster & Swinton, 2014). Behavioral intervention teams exist on college campuses to provide a 360-degree view of situations to better respond to concerning 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 and who meet regularly to address these types of situations, using objective measurement tools to identify the behavior and assign a level of risk to the behavior (Van Brunt, Schiemann, Pescara-Kovach, Murphy & Halligan-Avery, 2018). Conversely, staff or faculty members are 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.

Some common disruptive behaviors include:

- 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.
- 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.).
- Reading magazines, newspapers, or books, or studying for other classes/doing other homework during a conversation with you or during class.

Dangerous behaviors, on the other hand, include:

- 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.

The 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 can be difficult to train staff to respond to disruptive and dangerous behavior without first addressing the idea that each faculty and staff member, regardless of gender, age, or experience, has a different tolerance for the variety of disruptive and dangerous behaviors encountered in the classroom, 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.

One essential technique for managing any crisis involves adopting a calm, cool, and collected stance in the face of upsetting or frustrating behavior (Bickel, 2010; Forthun & McCombie, 2011; Van Brunt & Lewis, 2014). This approach is both an art and a science that requires study and experience to accomplish well. Faculty and staff can mismanage a crisis by responding to the incident in a reactive and/or emotional manner. They rush to react because the student's behavior is so often rude, entitled, frustrating, or threatening they drop into an automatic response rather than choosing a more appropriate and effective response for a given situation.

It would be fair to consider 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? The best stance for faculty and staff working with disruptive or dangerous student behavior is to find 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."

Faculty and staff should 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 member 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.

For faculty members, cultivating the following traits for effective classroom management can help in becoming a better professor and addressing situations before they escalate.

1. Confidence. Faculty members must exude confidence, not just in the knowledge of the materials being taught, but also in their ability to manage the classroom. Students pick up on instructors' confidence levels, and that in turn helps them see you as a competent (or incompetent) classroom leader (Emmer & Stough, 2001). Exuding confidence requires that you:

- Know the content of what is being taught inside and out to avoid allocating all of your class-time energy into focusing on that.
- Consider the value of entertainment. This does not mean be like a clown juggling balls to keep students behaving well, but rather knowing the classroom material so well that it can be shared in a creative and interesting manner with students.
- Avoid treating your classroom like your personal stage. "Winging" everything that is done in class can lead to missing opportunities to set your classroom up for success. Consider explaining your institution's and your expectations for classroom behavior.

2. Humility. Exercising humility creates a sense of likability and trust between instructors and their students (Gatongi, 2007; Jones, 1996). Some humble practices that lead to better classrooms include:

- Let students know the instructor is not infallible, but that their intent is never to be harmful. That provides a good entry into talking about what behaviors you see as harmful to your classroom and to learning.
- Be as transparent as possible. When reviewing class expectations, draw attention to your specific expectations and explain the reasons for these to increase buy-in from your students.
- Avoid a hard-liner stance. When instructors reflect back on their own college experience, they often recall at least one professor who started their course with some variation of, "This is my classroom and these are my

rules.” Instructors also have had at least one instructor who did not take set clear expectations. The ideal approach is to achieve a midpoint between those two.

- Communicating and treating your students as you would like to be treated if you were in their shoes. This may seem like very obvious advice, but it can be forgotten when frustration over some students’ behavior set in.

3. Timing. While a professor may say the right things, they also need to say them the right way (Guthrie, 2002; Marzano, 2017) For instance, stopping mid-lecture to say, “Here’s Brian, who is late to class again,” may provoke the student and do nothing to keep him from tardiness in the future. Second, the student may not be in the right frame of mind to hear what you have to say, however constructive it may be. The best strategy may be just enduring the mild disruption and addressing it after class. Consider such statements:

- “I want to talk to you more about this after class or at the next free time we both have available.”
- “What you have to say is important, and I want to make sure I understand it. But right now, I feel distracted and not focused on getting through my lecture. I would prefer to talk later when I can give you my full attention in a private setting.”
- “I can see you are upset and I’m starting to feel upset as well. Let’s hold onto this until after class, when we can both talk about your concerns.”

While scripts may be useful for very new faculty members, they should communicate in a genuine manner. Acknowledge the disruptive students and what they are trying to express, and then share the concerns you have regarding their behavior. Aim for a mix of empathy, authority and authenticity.

4. Empathy. This is the ability to understand and share feelings from another. One of the most impactful things you can do is show empathy to a student that is exhibiting behaviors of concern. It is sometimes difficult to switch from instructor mode or speech mode to one of “active listening.” Most adults in conversations are waiting for opportunities to speak rather than actively listening. This doesn’t come naturally and takes practice.

- Use minimal encouragers: “I see, Uh-huh, yes.”
- Use emotional labeling: “I’ll bet that hurt you,” “You sound angry.”
- Paraphrasing: “What I hear you saying is...,” “Let me make sure I understand you.”

4. Grace and Mercy. This is about recognizing that you may be dealing with students who may be going through a difficult point in their lives, whether they dug themselves into difficult situations or

ended up there through no fault of their own (Van Brunt and Lewis, 2014). Try to:

- Listen to students and what they are going through. Professors should reflect on how they would appreciate being treated under those circumstances just described.
- Be willing to extend undeserved courtesies. Those in teaching positions tend to have an inherent respect for fairness, but sometimes, exercising grace and mercy means giving certain students something they may not deserve. For instance, a student who missed an assignment deadline because a family member passed away could certainly use an extension, and it would be merciful to provide it, even if your policy is never to give extensions.

5. Sense of Equity. Many students struggle with personal difficulty (Crosby, 2015). Professors should be prepared to respond when another student says, “Why can’t I get an extension on an assignment if you gave that student one?” A good alternative may be to give everyone a couple more days to finish an assignment if an instructor is considering doing that for one based on that student’s extenuating circumstances. Always treat similarly situated students similarly.

- Do not become an enabler. A student can’t possibly keep getting into car accidents on their way to class, for instance.
- Make courtesies “real-world” courtesies. Most companies will not let employees get away with sloppy work or missed deadlines because they were distracted by the loss of their favorite football team. However, they would extend supports if a loved one just died.

6. Awareness. Exercising awareness of classroom surroundings, different students, and an instructor’s personal mood can go a long way toward heading off behavioral problems. Some suggestions include:

- Look for signs of potential dangerousness. Slamming doors, storming out of class, and shoving others are behaviors to be very concerned about. Speech can be an indicator of dangerousness as well. Conversations that are designed only to upset others, such as direct threats and descriptions of weapons or killing, delusional or rambling speech, and objective language that depersonalizes you or others in class are all reasons for concern.
- Alert the campus CARE team or BIT about any concerning behavior or speech in your classroom (Sokolow, Lewis, Van Brunt, Schuster, & Swinton, 2014, Van Brunt & Lewis, 2014). That way, if the concerning behavior or speech is manifesting itself in other areas, a pattern can be seen and more effectively addressed.
- Look for potential motivating factors behind behavior. For

example, is a student always getting argumentative? While it may be the students does not like their professor or they are a difficult individual, it may be just as likely they came from a family that communicates loudly, so that may be his normal way of expressing views. Instructors should be willing to question what they see without jumping to conclusions.

- Know how far you can push your students. This is particularly important when a professors teaches a class where sensitive or graphic issues or materials are discussed.
- Understand what pushes an instructor's own buttons, so that you can prevent such behaviors early in class by discussing that along with other expectations for classroom conduct.

7. Active Listening. We expect our students to be active listeners, but do we model that behavior (Amada, 2015; Brown, 2012, Van Brunt & Lewis, 2014)? Consider:

- Encouraging students to share why they are upset. Remain quiet and attentive while they do so. This is one of the most effective ways to de-escalate disruptive behavior. Students who feel that they are being truly heard will not feel an urge to raise their voices or escalate their behavior to be heard.
- Remaining calm in the face of disruption. If an instructor raises their voice to be heard over a student who is yelling, the student will just yell louder to be heard.
- Trying to understand the source of students' frustrations. Students may not be mad at an instructor personally, but they could represent what the student is upset with, like the institution. Consider the impact of a bad grade on a test for a first-generation student. This may be perceived as a failure of their entire collegiate career and family. In that scenario, the instructor may represent the shame that may be brought upon him and his family. It's not the grade that's the huge deal, but rather the thought of the impending loss from that grade.
- Implementing a tactful delivery. If the professor's response to a student's angry tirade begins by telling them why they are in the wrong, the professor will not get the response they are looking for. The message may be right, but the delivery may be wrong.

8. Willingness to Clarify. It's not enough to place a statement explaining the kind of behavior an instructor expects from students in their class syllabi (Brown, 2012; McNaughton-Cassill, 2013). It would additionally be wise for them to:

- Use the first class to review expectations. Instructors should take the time to explain everything you want students to understand. You should also explain personal preferences about classroom behavior. This may include chewing gum

in class, discretely checking cell phones, and wearing baseball caps.

- Take time to address questions about class expectations. These may include rules on attendance and punctuality, academic issues, and how students with questions or comments are recognized.
- Provide a rationale for each rule outlined in the syllabus. If you set a limit about food in class, you might consider explaining that the odor is distracting to you and others, as is the noise from the packaging. Students may still not like a rule, but they're more likely to abide by it if they know why it's there.
- Explain to students the potential consequences of their actions if they fail to abide by the rules. When students know what could happen for failing to meet your classroom expectations, they're less likely to break your rules.
- Ask students what they want to get out they would like to take away from the class. Why are they taking the class? Is it for a major and future career, or just an elective they have to take? What standard would they use to measure whether the class was a good one at the end of the term? The answers to questions like those will help instructors make the class a better learning experience for students, and likely result in better evaluations for the instructor.

9. Self-Knowledge. No one is immune from reactivity. Something happens and a professor instinctively reacts. But when it comes to managing the classroom, teachers need to learn how to choose how they respond. That comes through self-reflection (Emmer & Stough, 2001). Take time to:

- Consider how past experiences have affected current expectations. What pushes a professor's buttons and why? Are you particularly sensitive today because of something that happened earlier? Evaluate and recognize your mental and emotional mood, so you can then center yourself and be the kind of instructor you want to be.
- Reflect on your own college experiences. Who were your favorite professors and what did they do that you liked? What approaches to teaching and classroom management did you learn from them and have adopted in your own classroom? Likewise, think back to your least favorite professors. What did they do that you disliked? How did those experiences as a student shape your teaching practices?

10. Willingness to Consult. In their classroom, a teacher may be the expert, but when surrounded by other professors with equal or more teaching experience and different strategies and perspectives, there is always more for to learn (Ali & Gracey, 2013). Here's how:

- Instructors should talk to colleagues about how they approach different situations they've encountered in class. Just as some lean on what they learned from beloved or hated teachers as a student in college, learn to lean on others for support.
- Use faculty meetings as opportunities for informal training. Brainstorm different scenarios and ask for discussion around the best way to deal with them.
- Be willing to help others learn from you. Share what has worked, as well as what hasn't

11. Ability to Exert Control. At some point, professors may find themselves in a power struggle with a student. Don't be afraid to pull out what Lewis calls "the big nuke." Dismiss the class if managing it has become impossible. (Van Brunt & Lewis, 2014). To do so:

- Say something like, "Unfortunately, the class can't continue today, so I'll see you next class period." And avoid statements of blame, like, "Brian's so disruptive that I can't teach today."
- Call your conduct folks, or campus safety, immediately afterward if the situation demands it. That way, behavior can be appropriately addressed and conditions for the student's return to class established.
- Stick to your role. Don't feel pressured to play the role of mental health counselor, judicial affairs, or campus safety officer. You are there to teach; turn to colleagues in those roles when a student's behavior prevents you from doing so.

Professors who exercise these qualities tend to be happier with their careers and with their interactions with students and tend to receive higher marks on evaluations (Bélanger & Longden, 2009; Feldman, 2007). Professors won't be seen as that "hard-liner" whose class no one wants to take. A professor's students will be more engaged with the content if the professor cares about teaching. This results in students absorbing more of the materials. Avoid saying, "I didn't go into teaching to yell at millennials for using their phones in class." Students will be focused on the material being taught, not on things that could prove distracting for the instructor and others in the class. Finally, instructors who follow these steps will decrease the likelihood of distractions that can escalate into dangerous behavior.

When addressing disruptive or dangerous behaviors in the classroom, as elsewhere, remember the important element of trying to view the situation from the other person's perspective. While this is never 100 percent achievable, teachers are encouraged to make every attempt to look through the eyes and experiences of the student they are trying to help. This is

not because it is required, but rather, because this provides a better insight into addressing the scenario in a manner that increases the success of the interventions.

Seven Steps

To prepare for and respond to disruptive and dangerous behavior in crisis, faculty and staff can use the seven steps that follow 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 (Simonsen & Myers, 2015).

2. Keep Yourself Safe. It is a myth that faculty and staff 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 the gut or a more direct response to behaviors or direct threats issued by the student. In these situations, consider a safe escape path or leaving the interaction. While faculty and staff want to keep others safe, there is also a responsibility to keep a faculty or staff members personal safety as paramount when they come across disruptive or dangerous behaviors.

3. Know Your Backup. Have an awareness of what resources are around you in terms of calling for help (Marzano, 2017; Rock, 2000). 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 “hotspot” 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. Consider reaching out to your local campus police department/security department for assistance. Public Safety can typically assist you in creating a personal protective plan to keep you safe not just on campus but off campus as well. Making Public Safety aware of the problem is also beneficial if they haven’t been made aware through the behavioral intervention team already.

4. Be Prepared. Faculty and staff should not wait until a crisis occurs to think about what they would do (Morrison, 2007). Planning how to respond to a crisis during the crisis is not effective. Mental scripting, the idea of thinking about the “what ifs” pre-event, is essential to give our brains options on responses. We want to work through some of these problems and develop action plans while our brains are not under stress. (Ripley, 2008). Think about working tabletop exercises or example scenarios into staff meetings and orientation events at the start of the year. Think about possible exits for 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. An approach to keeping calm when facing a disruptive or dangerous student is normalizing their behavior (Jones, 1996; Nims & Wilson, 1998). 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 the faculty

or staff member 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. Understanding the biology of aggression is an essential part of crisis de-escalation (Van Brunt & Lewis, 2014; Van Brunt & Murphy, 2017). 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 (Prochaska, Norcross & DiClemente, 1994). 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.

Conclusion

When the initial crisis has calmed, it is important to ensure faculty and staff have shared 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 BIT to allow them to consider the larger context of the behaviors occurring, interventions to prevent future behaviors, and helpful resource referrals (Sokolow, Lewis, Van Brunt, Schuster, & Swinton, 2014; Van Brunt & Lewis, 2014). 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 members can then 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 re-aggravated. 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.

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