

When Students' Academic Needs Clash with Behavioral Sanctions

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Abstract

Some college students engage in behaviors that violate their campus code of conduct and consequently face disciplinary actions that may impede their access to academic services or facilities needed for student success. This paper focuses on four case studies involving sanctioned students who were referred to the Student Behavioral Consultant Team with a variety of behavioral concerns. All experienced academic challenges as a result of the sanctions. Strategies and techniques used to address these matters are discussed.

Introduction

Some college students, unfortunately, engage in behaviors that are in violation of their campus code of conduct and consequently face disciplinary actions that may impede their access to services or facilities directly needed for student success. These student behaviors range in severity but may include harassment, stalking other students and/or faculty, and disruptive behaviors in and outside of the classroom (Grasgreen, 2012). Often, these students are given sanctions which may include restriction from campus buildings and/or a no-contact order, following conduct hearings (Armada, 2004). While these sanctions may help maintain campus safety, educate the students, and prevent recurrence, they may also have a serious impact on the students' educational progress and academic success.

Responding to incidents of disruptive behavior, harassment, and/or stalking seem to be an inevitable part of the working environment of many college officials and educators. The issues leading to the disruption are often resolved by pointing out to the responsible students how their behavior disrupts the teaching/learning process. Sometimes, students persist with harassment, stalking, or other disruptive behavior, and disciplinary action may be needed. The key is for the campus to take some action to stop the disruptive behavior, reactivate the students' participation in the learning process, and prevent other students and/or the college community from being affected (Murphy, 2010).

Administrative measures that could impact academics may include temporarily or permanently removing students from a class, dismissing students from a department or major, restricting students from one or more buildings, instituting no-contact orders, or removing them from the institution altogether. While these measures may be necessary, any one of these actions may harm students' academic progress and, in the long run, may put their completion of a degree in jeopardy (Johnson, 2012).

Any of these measures may have a negative impact on the learning process. For instance, students banned from faculty office buildings may lose access to tutoring or contact with their faculty advisors. Restrictions on entering other buildings may prohibit students from using the library, science laboratories, seminar rooms, student support centers, counseling, and/or other key university offices. The students may need alternate work assignments or arrangements to meet with faculty advisors, which may or may not be successful.

There are a variety of behaviors that may lead to students being sanctioned, including disruptive conduct in and outside the classroom; threats of harm; harassment of fellow students, faculty, and college staff members; and stalking of faculty, staff, or students. Many of these

behaviors are serious, potentially violent, and may result in injury or death. For example, a former student in Chicago, Illinois was arrested for stalking a professor in June of 2009 (Morgan & Kavanaugh, 2011). The student threatened the professor with a crowbar, but was disarmed and the professor was fortunately not injured. The student was arrested at the scene soon after the incident took place. Altercations like these, however, can end very differently. Seven years before the Chicago incident, a University of Arizona nursing student murdered three professors before taking his own life after receiving a failing grade in a class (Holguin, 2002). All three faculty members had been stalked and harassed by the student before the murders took place.

Significant research has been conducted on college campuses assessing the prevalence and characteristics of students who harass fellow students. Such research has found a pattern of harassment often similar to that found in the general population. For example, it was found that 13.1 percent of female students had been stalked, with one in eight of those reporting more than one stalking incident. Almost 80 percent of these stalking incidents fit within the domestic violence category proposed by Roberts and Dziegielewski (2006).

While stalking is often associated with romantic feelings, it's more broadly defined as a pattern of repeated and unwanted contacts that are experienced as intrusive by the recipients, and lead them to feel distressed or fearful (McKeon, McEvan & Luebbers, 2015). Morgan & Kavanaugh (2011) expanded stalking research on campuses by assessing the prevalence of student stalking of faculty. The subjects were asked to complete a survey that assessed 28 potential stalking behaviors. Results revealed that approximately a third of faculty members had experienced at least two separate incidences of stalking behaviors that led them to feel intimidated, anxious, or fearful. Similarly, other researchers found data on students stalking faculty members (Osterholm, Horn, & Kritsonis (2007).

Prevalence of stalking among college students and college-age adults are often higher than in the general population (Ravensberg, 2003). Two possible reasons have been identified, including, developmental shortfalls in students' social skills and the organization of college life. Due to immaturity and less experience with adult social situations, young adults may not have all the abilities necessary to appropriately initiate and maintain relationships with significant others. In addition, the structure of college campuses and the tasks of student life may also contribute to the high prevalence of stalking among undergraduates. The availability of social media and other electronic devices may additionally make it relatively easy for students to engage in cyber stalking.

While stalking is a serious concern, many college students also engage in other types of disruptive behaviors both in and outside of the classroom. Types of behavior a disruptive student may engage in include sleeping in class, arriving late, having conversations with other class members or talking on their phones, arguing with instructors, text messaging, playing video games, or becoming hostile and/or aggressive (Ali & Gracey, 2013; Hara, 2011). These behaviors may lead to conduct sanctions, particularly for hostile and aggressive behaviors.

This paper focuses on four case studies involving sanctioned students who were referred to the Student Behavioral Consultant Team with a variety of concerns consisting of stalking, classroom disruption, threats of harm, and harassment. All were negatively affected by the sanctions, which involved being banned from faculty office buildings — limiting their access to faculty office hours and restricting them from taking some courses — and no-contact orders with fellow students and/or faculty. Strategies and techniques used to manage these ongoing concerns will be addressed in this paper. The authors acknowledge a gap in the literature and field research pertaining to the impact that disciplinary actions may have on student academic success and wish to add this paper as relevant research in this area.

Case Study A

Overview: “A” is a male student in his mid 30s who is a military veteran and current National Guard member. He was a chemistry major who struggled academically, often repeating courses multiple times to achieve a passing grade.

Incidents and Team’s Response: While taking a class in his major, he met regularly with his female professor for tutoring and subsequently developed a crush on her. When he learned of her engagement and upcoming wedding, he sent her hundreds of emails and texts. He stalked her and showed up at her off-campus swim club and often cornered her at various sites on campus. As a result of this behavior, he was referred to the Student Behavioral Team and Conduct Office, and was ultimately banned from the faculty office building, where the professor’s office was located. A no-contact order was also issued. Despite the ban, the faculty member remained fearful that the behavior would continue.

Academic Implications: “A” was unable to get needed tutoring or visit other professors during their office hours in the restricted building and as a result, he failed a major subject. This contributed to him leaving the college without earning a degree.

Case Study B

Overview: “B” is a 22-year-old male student majoring in biology. He

appeared socially awkward though grandiose when discussing his academic prowess. He perceived himself to be a serious scholar and strong student, while in reality, his grades were average to slightly above average.

Incidents and Team’s Response: “B” developed a growing romantic interest in a fellow classmate and laboratory assistant, but she did not reciprocate. In response, “B” harassed the female student by sending numerous texts, emails, and posts on social media to her and her friends. In his posts and texts, he frequently referred to the woman as stupid and promiscuous, and implied that she should not be in a science major.

Academic Implications: The ability to enforce the no-contact order was limited despite employing all standard strategies because the academic department is quite small. To complicate the issue, the two students had to take classes together because there was typically only one section of each required course offered during the semester. In addition, parents on both sides became very engaged in the situation, leading to difficulties enforcing the sanctions. Also, the female student faced academic challenges, as she felt threatened in class though the communication from “B” was not perceived as overtly threatening. Ultimately, the female student took classes outside her major for a semester and later returned to finish her Biology major and graduated. “B” left the college without degree completion.

Case Study C

Overview: “C” is a 21-year-old female majoring in mathematics.

Incidents and Team Response: “C” developed a negative attitude toward a male professor in her discipline and made vague threats and disparaging remarks about the professor in public. As a result, the professor did not feel comfortable working with the student outside of class during office hours or in the mathematics lab. After reviewing the situation, a no-contact order was issued even though the student had to continue to take courses from this professor because no one in the department taught this required subject area. “C” was banned from working in the computer lab and had to make alternative arrangements to complete assignments.

Academic Implications: The student was unable to access appropriate tutoring and subsequently was placed on academic probation.

Case Study D

Overview: “D” is a male student in his mid 20s. He majored in accounting and was close to graduation when the behavioral referral took place.

Incidents and Team's Response: Faculty, students, and department assistants felt threatened by the student, who barged into the departmental office and started shouting at the staff. He was rude, disruptive, and aggressive during classes and in interactions with professional staff. As a result, he was banned from classroom buildings, the departmental offices, and faculty offices. A behavioral agreement that included mandated counseling and conduct meetings was required.

Academic Implications: As a result of the building bans, "D" was unable to receive tutoring and failed his last class. Alternate arrangements for completion of the capstone course and the degree were made, despite the department's standard requirement that the capstone course had to be taken at the campus. "D" successfully took the course at another campus and graduated.

Case Management Challenges

Overall, the management of students with sanctions can be a challenge from both a Behavioral Intervention Team and an academic perspective. These students, while creating problems for the campus, remain students and have academic needs that may not be met due to their sanctions. The team needs to work closely with academic affairs to develop a plan that enables the sanctioned students to have access to the facilities and services needed to enable academic success within the confines of the sanction.

While there are confidentiality issues, deans, department chairs, and faculty members may need to be aware of no-contact orders or other restrictions placed on sanctioned students, as they are in a position to assist the student conduct office and/or Title IX coordinator in monitoring these order. This can be achieved by sharing with instructors that no-contact orders exist without sharing specific information about the cases. A no-contact order might involve moving students from one section of a course to another to prevent contact with another student or faculty member. While this is not always possible, as indicated in Case Study B, it may be feasible in other, similar situations.

A building restriction might require students to meet their advisors or tutors in different buildings or in a neutral space, similar to what occurred in Case Study B. The student in that situation was able to find support in the college's tutoring center but still was unable to pass all his courses. Students who need to work in laboratories might have to consult with their instructors to schedule a specific time to avoid students with whom they have been ordered to avoid contact.

All of these plans were developed by members of the BITmembers working with colleagues in academic affairs.

Summary and Conclusion

As disruptive and potentially serious behavioral incidents on campus increase, the corresponding number of sanctions rises. These sanctions may have a negative impact on students' academic progress and may result in students failing to graduate. The case studies presented here demonstrate that the individuals highlighted are not simply "cases" of difficult students with behavioral issues, but also students with multiple challenges, including the need for academic support. BITs will likely encounter an increasing number of these issues, and the challenge will be to protect the campus community while preserving the ability of the institution to provide the best possible academic support to all its students.

BITs may need to collaborate more strategically with academic departments and student conduct professionals in order to work as a team to educate students about appropriate behavior and foster a community environment in which academic success can occur. Faculty training must include information on how to address behavioral concerns early on to minimize the impact that such behaviors may have on the classroom environment. This training should also include classroom management skills, a review of recommended syllabi content in order to establish clear expectations and boundaries at the beginning of every semester, and information on the college's BIT and student conduct system. Through this collaborative approach, BITs can lead the problem-solving and decision-making processes needed to address the complexities of students' behaviors and provide the mechanisms to ensure academic success.

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