

Best Practices: Preventing and Managing Challenging Classroom Situations

Deb Wingert and Tom Molitor

Abstract

Professors currently face significant challenges in the classroom. Over the past two decades, teachers have increasingly been called on to handle minor classroom disruptions, accommodate learning needs of students with disabilities, and recognize and address warning signs of significant student distress and potentially volatile behaviors. Particularly vulnerable to these challenges are future and early career (EC) faculty as they begin to build their teaching repertoire. Through our work in mentoring hundreds of future and EC faculty and a review of research on best practices in faculty development, we present a basic toolkit of strategies and resources to support and to improve the overall teaching and learning environment.

Keywords

future and early career faculty, identification, prevention and managing challenging classroom situations, challenging classroom behaviors, recommended classroom strategies

Introduction

A crisp, sunny day in April, a rare time Minnesotans cherish. Spring semester of 2007 is winding down. The class of 30 interdisciplinary doctoral students enthusiastically buzzes about final exams, pending degrees, and upcoming interviews as they focus their sights on academic careers in the professoriate. As more students arrive for class, news spreads quickly of a horrendous tragedy unfolding at Virginia Tech; the class demeanor abruptly quiets. Serious class discussion emerges, centering on what happened, why it happened, and, especially, whether this could happen to us here or on any campus where we might be teaching.

This paper focuses on the rich fruits of that discussion. What potentially difficult situations do professors face today? With little or no training beyond their discipline, how can professors discern which classroom behaviors are potentially dangerous or could lead to tragic circumstances? What is the role of the professor in guiding a distressed student to the appropriate skilled, trained personnel? Where can a professor find consultation and support, rather than going it alone? With professors on the classroom front lines, what essen-

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tial support systems can faculty access in a collaborative effort to identify, prevent, and/or manage disruptive or disturbing student behavior? Such situations are particularly challenging in research institutions, where classes are often large, with enrollments of 30, 50, 100 students or more.

Campuses Today

Disruptive student behavior, from mild antics to dangerous, potentially lethal aggression, in college and university classrooms has increased significantly over the past two decades (Kitzrow, 2003). Professors have struggled with students who arrive late, leave early, chat through class, dominate the class, or refuse to participate at all. Meyers (2003) found that at least 20% of all college students demonstrate classroom incivility during their college years. Likewise, the 2004 American College Health Association Survey found that 94% of 47,000 students surveyed felt overwhelmed at times; 45% felt depressed, seriously enough that the depression adversely affected their functioning; 63% felt hopeless at times; and 10% had seriously considered suicide.

Challenging classroom situations can seriously interfere with the teaching and learning process, adversely impacting faculty, students, and the overall learning environment. In such situations, faculty feel increased stress and tend to spend more time dealing with disruptive behavior than teaching critical material. Teaching excellence takes a hit. Caught in this unfortunate crossfire, students experience derailed learning due to the tense or chaotic learning environment (Morrissette, 2001; Schneider, 1998).

Challenging Classroom Behavior

Over the past 25 years, we have taught higher education students with a myriad of challenges. Through programs offered by the Center for Teaching and Learning, we have mentored hundreds of future and early career faculty. From such experiences and from research on best practices in faculty development (McKeachie and

Svinicki, 2006; Richardson, 1999; Braxton and Bayer, 2005; Sorcinelli, 1994; Meyers, 2003; Morrissette, 2001; Schneider, 1998), we have compiled an array of strategies and tips to support future and early career faculty in effectively handling common challenging classroom behaviors seen in today's college and university classrooms. Six common challenging classroom behaviors in higher education are described in the sections below and briefly listed in Table 1. Each behavior, briefly described as a short scenario in the left column, is paired with suggested strategies to prevent and/or manage the behavior in the column to its right. These scenarios, with the corresponding strategies, have been used in faculty development workshops to engage faculty in further developing and strengthening their teaching excellence.

Unprepared Students

One of the most common concerns of future and early career faculty remains how to deal effectively with students who may not have completed the assigned readings or assignments and can contribute little in class.

Quizzes. A highly successful technique we have used (and recommend) is the frequent employment of quizzes, especially Instant Feedback Assessment Techniques (IF-ATs). IF-ATs refer to quizzing techniques that provide instant feedback to students. Instructors can administer IF-ATs for full credit or partial credit during each class session, rather than solely for traditional mid-term or final exams. Students tend to prepare more for class sessions when they know they are held accountable for mastering content. The use of IF-ATs tends to increase student learning, retention, and engagement, a significant student motivator (Brosvic et al., 2004). For example, if the instructor uses PowerPoint, s/he can incorporate a slide, every 7-10 slides or so, that contains a multiple-choice test item based on the previous slides. If they know that questions are coming, students focus strongly on essential information, especially when the instructor tells them

Challenging Behavior	Potential Management Strategies
<p>1. Unprepared: A small group of students often attends your class, but its members have not read the assigned readings, and therefore contribute little in discussions. How would you handle this situation?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give brief, periodic quizzes • Provide study questions or study guides to be completed by class session (can be submitted for grading) • Assign students to present selected content to the class
<p>2. Inattentive: A few students enjoy reading the paper during class or frequently carry on their own conversation, which, at times, annoys others. How would you handle this situation?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try using small groups (increases engagement) • Use Think/Pair/Share (call on inattentive students, after asking a question that students think about and share with a peer) • Use Write/Pair/Share (call on inattentive students, after asking a question, having students write down an answer, and having them share their answers with a partner) or One-Minute Paper (call on those students, after asking a question, and students write a one-minute answer) • Move around the classroom for proximity to inattentive students • Rotate class seating or re-group students • Confer with student(s) privately
<p>3. Reluctant to Participate in Class: (Name) comes to class, sits in the back of the class near the door, rarely speaks to classmates, and has yet to ask or share information in class. How would you handle this situation?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use structured small groups: assign group roles and require group processing • Randomly select group members to share a summary of group work • Use Think-Pair-Share and Write-Pair-Share
<p>4. Hostile/Oppositional Behavior: (Name) seems to have a chip on his/her shoulder. His/her comments in class often sound either angry or hostile. Even his/her nonverbal behavior seems contentious (looks of contempt, etc.). How would you handle this situation?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge student as an individual (encouraging comments on assignments, confer with student on assignments, respond in a constructive manner, etc.) • Meet privately with the student and respectfully ask him or her to moderate his or her behavior. • Listen carefully and respectfully. Then state your position, calmly presenting the issue to entire class, and encourage responses

Challenging Behavior	Potential Management Strategies
<p>5. Argumentative/Heated Discussions: A lively class discussion has turned into an intense argument involving 4-6 students. Hostile and damaging comments are being exchanged. How would you handle this situation?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use constructive controversy/structure a debate (Johnson, D. & Johnson, R., 1997): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Encourage discussion of multiple views -Instruct students to debate the opposite view -Encourage discussion of multiple views • List evidence of views on board (T-Chart or Two-Column method or more, representing each view) • Slow tempo of voice and ask an open-ended question • Use Rotating Chair technique (speaker summarizes previous statement before sharing their comment) • Circular Response Discussion (each student shares a comment)
<p>6. Cheating/plagiarizing Student Behavior: You just discovered a student cheating on an exam in your large lecture class of 150 students. How would you handle this situation?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review University's policy [e.g., (Office for Student Conduct and Academic Integrity)] • Remind class about consequences of cheating (e.g., failing assignment/test, lowering final grade, failing course, etc.) <p>To Prevent Cheating:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review policy in syllabus • Require multiple drafts of paper • Use different forms of the same test or randomized test items

Table 1. Potential Classroom Management Strategies

that the IF-AT questions indicate what “might be on an exam.”

IF-ATs are a lower technology tool. The lower, less expensive tech resource includes an actual IF-AT form resembling a lottery ticket, in which students simply scratch off a given rectangle to expose the correct answer. The IF-ATs are constructed so that the answers cannot be changed and instructors can tell how many trials it took to get the final answer (IF-AT information available at: epsteineducation.com). Instructors can choose from a variety of response tools, including some higher-technology tools. High-tech response tools include the iClicker (Cummings, 2008; iClicker information available at: Pearsonhighered.com). Faculty may prefer response forms currently used by

their departments or even simpler forms at the low end of the tech spectrum: sticky notes, or small pieces of paper collected either after each question break or at the end of the class. We recommend that faculty incorporate quizzes/questions directly into their class session materials and select the appropriate response tool for their particular setting. Holding students accountable increases preparedness.

Study Guides. Many future and early career faculty search for ways to ensure that students complete required readings and master massive amounts of content before class. We encourage future and early career faculty to develop study guides consisting of a small set of questions based on content to be addressed in each class. Effective professors develop questions that address

the most critical content of the upcoming class. We recommend creating questions that require the students to demonstrate their understanding of the assigned material by applying the material in some way, rather than to regurgitate material. To ensure that students use the study guides, we recommend that faculty require students to submit their answers prior to the class session. An easy way for them to do so is to submit their work online through a course WebVista site or other similar academic software that offers a grading option in which they earn credit for submissions. Students who are required to complete study questions at home tend to be more prepared, allowing class time to be more productively used; if they have read the assigned material, they can follow and even contribute to analyses of the content, and they can be expected to use higher-level, critical-thinking skills in class discussions. In concert with IF-ATs, well-designed study guides both help students navigate large amounts of complex material and increase the probability of their coming to class with the reading done.

Students Present Selected Content. Effective ways to engage students abound. One of our most successful strategies involves assigning specific content for students to share/teach/present to peers, usually in small groups. Students particularly enjoy the jigsaw, in which students, usually in small groups of 4-6, divide up a portion of an assigned reading, each taking responsibility for a different part (Aronson et al., 2007). We require students to read the assigned reading outside of class. While we sometimes have them answer study questions online before class, as described in the previous paragraph, at other times we wait until they are back in class to give them questions on the reading they have prepared and then have them share their responses, comparing and analyzing their answers in their jigsaw groups. After sharing, groups complete either an individual or small-group IF-AT as previously described. Using a jigsaw exercise means that chances are lower

that students will attend class unprepared, but, should they do so, other options are available to the instructor. Here are two of our suggestions: (1) do not give unprepared students credit for this class session/activity; or (2) assemble unprepared students into a separate group and give them lower credit for the session.

Inattentive Behaviors

Inattentive students can significantly derail a class session, annoying others with their incessant chatter, online gaming, and other distracting behavior. To regain their attention, professors can implement a few strategies. First, inattentive behavior can be a cue to initiate a brief, classwide think-pair-share (or write-pair-share), which involves asking a question related to the course content and then instructing students to think about (or write) a possible answer, pair up with partners next to them and share their responses. Reminding students to be prepared to share with the class tends to increase their accountability. After allowing a brief moment for general student sharing, respectfully ask the inattentive student to contribute.

Whether the class is large or small, even in a seminar or lab, the instructor can place students in small groups, either deciding who should work together or asking students sitting near each other to work together. Merely separating inattentive students into different groups can decrease inattention. Further, students who are both given a specific task (i.e., to address specific questions) and held accountable (i.e., expected to be prepared to submit or present answers/findings) tend to function with increased attention and focused participation. Crucial to this strategy is group processing, in which the small group submits a written description of one thing that they did well, as well as one suggestion to improve their group's performance. Having to hand in a self-evaluation contributes to both accountability and on-task behavior.

A very simple strategy to decrease inattentive behavior quickly pertains to physical proximity. Moving

away from the front of the classroom and speaking to the students from the sides or aisles can increase their attention. Standing close to the inattentive students and engaging them briefly with respectful eye contact (no glaring!), as if conversing with them, can be particularly effective.

Finally, in order to maintain a high-quality learning environment, faculty should establish class ground rules (i.e., only one person talks at a time; students and faculty criticize ideas rather than people; laptops should be used for note-taking only, and so on), state them in the syllabus, review them, and revisit them when inattentive behaviors recur. If necessary, the professor might also consider meeting the student(s) privately to discuss course expectations and the importance of participation in class, including consequences of continuing inattention, such as low grades or even removal from the course.

Reluctance to Participate in Class

For various reasons, some students do not participate in class. They may feel self-conscious, anxious, embarrassed, unconfident, or uninterested. The reluctant student in your class may be a reflective learner, needing time to formulate a response, or may be afraid of public speaking, especially if he or she is an introvert or perhaps comes from a culture which discourages students from speaking out. Many of the small-group techniques suggested for inattentive behaviors also apply for reluctant students. Likewise, using think-pair-shares or write-pair-shares or even short one-minute writes can be particularly effective in engaging reticent students. Activities such as think-pair-share provide students with a chance to organize, prepare, and share their thoughts. A one-minute write entails asking students to use the last minute of class for writing about a topic such as the main points that they will take with them from the session or their response to the content presented during the session. Such activities address the problems of the reluctant and/or reflective learner.

Oppositional Behavior

One of the most frequently expressed concerns of our future and early career professors relate to hostile, oppositional student behavior in the classroom. Oppositional behavior can manifest as criticizing other students' opinions, professor's comments, course materials, or grading policies. Ignoring oppositional behavior often increases contention within the classroom. Both McKeachie (2006) and Brookfield (1995) recognize that the hostile student usually needs to feel heard. Dialogue can be initiated through written communications (we recommend journals, student writings/reflections, one-minute papers) or verbal communications (i.e., private conferences outside class). The professor can choose to model effective communication during the class session by first empathically acknowledging the student's stance, then calmly stating his or her own perspective and going on to encourage responses from other students, opening the discussion to the entire class. If there is a chance that other students might see this strategy as a chance to vent their hostility toward the disruptive student, simply enforcing the ground rules for civility in the classroom and announcing that everyone can contribute twice to the discussion but must wait to make the second comment until after everyone else has spoken can help maintain a respectful, spirited discourse.

Argumentative, Heated Class Discussions

Heated discussions handled well in class can ignite meaningful learning and enhance the overall learning environment. Effective professors harness and guide the students' interests. A few tips: Start by reviewing the class ground rules previously discussed. Two of our favorite strategies to facilitate productive heated discussions are T-charts and constructive controversies. In the first, we draw a large T on the whiteboard, assign a student to serve as scribe, and begin facilitating the discussion. Comments from one perspective are listed on the left side of the T, and comments from an oppos-

Challenging Problem Behavior	Potential Management Strategies
<p>1.</p> <p>Student(s) with Attention-Deficit Disorder (ADD): You receive an accommodation notice from the disability specialist about a student in one of your classes who has Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). A request is made for allowing him/her an extra week on a research paper. You believe that this is too much time and that the extended time may put the student behind on the next assignment.</p> <p>Students with a Learning Disability Condition: Several days after the first exam in your class, a student approaches you and tells you that s/he has a learning disability, which affects his/her ability to take multiple choice exams. S/he has failed the exam and asks that you provide him/her with a make-up exam in essay format.</p>	<p>What do you do?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact and consult with Disability Services <p>What teaching strategies are indicated?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vary your teaching format (i.e., break up lecture with active learning strategies such as: small group discussion, think-pair-shares, IF-ATs,) • Use repetition, extreme clarity, and explicit organization (Lecture outlines, handouts of PowerPoint slides with bullets and partially complete content in order for students to take notes; clear, specific and concrete directions of all activities and assignments) • Present information about assignments/exams verbally AND in writing
<p>2.</p> <p>Student Suffering from Depression (and Anxiety): In a private conversation, a student tells you that s/he has missed several classes during the past two weeks because s/he has been severely depressed. S/he has been seeing a psychologist for therapy and a psychiatrist for medication. S/he tells you that his/her medication is affecting his/her memory and s/he is having difficulty taking notes in your class. S/he asks you for copies of your overhead transparencies and all your class notes. You wish to help, but are unsure if you should accommodate this request.</p>	<p>How should you proceed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact Mental Health and Disability Service professionals. (They can provide support and guidance for next steps and strategies)

Table 2. Disabilities in the College/University Classroom

ing perspective are listed on the right. This method can also be adapted to use a blank, two-column PowerPoint slide that can be posted and/or emailed.

Likewise, a constructive controversy, also known as a debate, planned and implemented effectively, can help students see several perspectives on a given issue/topic (Johnson & Johnson, 1997). When a professor wants to give direction to a heated, course-related discussion, s/he can assemble groups of 4-5 students and ask each group to prepare one side of the controversy. Within each group, members are assigned roles such as presenting the position, providing evidence for their side, rebutting the opposing view, and making a closing statement. When they have assembled their cases, including evidence drawn from course content and strong reasoning to make the evidence compelling, each group presents its side. Since each student and group has prepared for the debate, all are expected to ask questions during this time, with the class ultimately discussing and voting for one side, based on the evidence and analysis presented by a group.

Other effective strategies to use in facilitating productive heated discussions include rotating chair, circular response discussion, and open-ended questions. Rotating chair helps to slow down the discussion and increase listening during heated debates. In this exercise, each student is required to summarize the previous student's comment before sharing his or her own. Paired with the instructor's slower tempo of speaking and the use of open-ended questions (no specific right/wrong answer), the heated discussions tend to cool down naturally, in concert with increased reflection and analytical comments. Finally, implementing a circular response discussion, in which each student shares his or her thoughts and opinions without judgment from the rest of the class, allows all students to share their comments, rather than enabling a few students to dominate discussions.

Cheating/Plagiarism

Recent research indicates a continuing increase in student cheating (Hinman, 2004). The good news, particularly for future and early career faculty, is that a few simple strategies can help prevent or significantly reduce the likelihood of cheating, including plagiarism. Review your college's or university's policy on academic integrity with your students on the first day of class. State this policy clearly in your syllabus, including specific consequences for cheating (i.e., failing assignment/exam, receiving a lower final grade, failing the class, etc.), as determined by you and/or your department. Be sure to define plagiarism clearly, so that students will understand what is and is not responsible use of sources. Requiring students to sign an honor code has also been found to reduce the likelihood of cheating (McCabe & Pavela, 2005). To keep students from benefitting from paper mills or finding online articles and using cut and paste in order to simulate original work, require multiple-draft submissions of a major paper or project. When it comes to cheating on exams (especially traditional, objective exams), we find that the most effective preventive measures are using different forms of the same exam and/or randomizing both the test items (for same or different forms of an exam) and, for multiple choice tests, the possible answers for each question.

Increase in Students with Disabilities on College/University Campuses

More than ever before, students with a wide range of disabilities attend colleges and universities. Both technological and pharmaceutical advances have made educational opportunities available to persons with conditions that would previously have barred them from higher education (Kitzrow, 2003). The reassuring news for future and early career faculty, who may feel apprehensive about working alone on the front lines of teaching and learning, is that many campuses have highly qualified disability service and mental health professionals to support faculty as they work with an

increasingly diverse student population and to oversee the identification of students in need of help, refer them to the appropriate services, and identify and implement appropriate accommodations for them.

The University of Minnesota's Disability Services serves as a national model, supporting effective learning and working opportunities for students, staff, and faculty with disabilities. Its comprehensive range of services include online access (<http://ds.umn.edu/disabilities/>) to extensive resources, information, and teaching and learning strategies helpful to students with conditions including deafness (also hard-of-hearing and deafblind); mobility impairments (paraplegia, quadriplegia, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, amputation); systemic disabilities (diabetes, seizure disorders, lupus); traumatic brain injuries; visual impairments; and invisible disabilities such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD and ADD), learning disabilities, and psychiatric disabilities. In this section, we will focus on strategies to support students with these invisible disabilities.

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADHD/ADD) and Learning Disabilities

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD/ADD), a set of symptoms of inattention, remains one of the most common invisible disabilities, affecting an estimated 3–5% of the child population, 60%–70% of whom experience attention-related problems into adulthood (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

A learning disability (LD) is a lifelong disorder that significantly compromises a person's ability in one or more of the following areas: speaking, listening, reading, writing, computing, recalling, and/or organizing information. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that LD can be found in 5% of the population, although others report higher estimates (2001).

Although LD is different from ADHD/ADD, these two conditions often overlap. An important factor for future and early career faculty to consider in their

academic planning is that effective teaching and learning strategies helpful to ADHD/ADD students often benefit students with learning disabilities as well. A few selected problems and strategies are briefly described below and summarized in Table 2.

First and foremost, contact and consultation with Disability Services is essential. On most campuses, disability services staff provide both valuable support for faculty and needed services for students. Professors can share their concerns with trained personnel and seek expert assistance as they try to figure out what steps to take with ADHD/ADD and LD students. Support for students can include reasonable accommodations that do not compromise required course competencies (i. e., private test space) and referrals to mental health services, if necessary. Even if students refuse accommodations, Disability Services can provide faculty with classroom strategies to help LD and ADHD/ADD students in the classroom.

One of the most effective classroom strategies for students with LD and/or ADHD/ADD is to vary your teaching format. Break up traditional lectures with opportunities for students to process and apply the material that you have just presented. We recommend that faculty use the IF-AT or an alternative method of inserting multiple-choice test items in PowerPoint presentations, as we described earlier in this paper, being sure that the questions require students to think critically about the content presented in the prior 10-12 minutes. The professor does not need to grade the test items: students can discuss answers with their peers and share their answers via class vote, taking less than a minute to do so. We find that while all students respond well to this very brief activity, it is particularly valuable in helping LD and ADHD/ADD students to organize, recall, process, and apply course content in manageable chunks. Other ways to vary your teaching format include the use of brief and structured small-group discussions; think (or write)-pair-shares; one-

- Absenteeism (pattern of missing class)
- Failure to identify oneself by name
- Failure to complete assignments
- Significant change in interaction level (no longer interacting with peers)
- Inability to interact with any peers
- Hostile interaction pattern with peers and or faculty, TA, etc.
- Fatigued and disheveled (dirty clothes, uncombed hair, etc.) appearance
- Mention of suicide or comment that s/he has no reason to live
- Hostility toward peers
- Sending of toxic, vitriolic notes/emails to faculty, TA, peer or campus official
- Sending of threat(s) via note, letter or email to faculty, TA, peer or campus official
- Significant decrease in student grade point average (GPA)
- Bizarre behavior (hearing voices, calling oneself by another name, hallucinations, etc.)
- Extreme fatigue
- Inability to sleep
- Frequent agitation
- Harassment or stalking of other(s)
- Invasion of privacy (e.g., taking cell phone pictures without permission) of another
- Substance abuse
- Possession of weapon(s)

(Sokolow & Lewis, 2007)

Table 3. Warning Signs

minute writes; writing/sharing their “muddiest point” (whatever they find most confusing in the class session so far); and short case studies/problems that require students to apply course content.

Revisit course content with brief reviews. This can be as simple as asking questions (i.e., IF-ATs, PowerPoint slide with sample test item/question or think-pair-share) at the beginning of class regarding the previous session to revive students’ memory of the older material so that the instructor can build on that foundation as he or she presents new concepts and information. Reviewing material outside of class can be encouraged in a variety of ways. A class favorite presents the review in the form of a *Jeopardy*-style game (template available at: decsoftware.com) created by the instructor for students to play with peers or alone. This type of activity helps students easily revisit, engage, and master essential course material without sacrificing additional course time.

Faculty who present course content with concrete clarity in a well-organized manner tend to excel in teaching (Skelton, 2005; Sorcinelli & Davis, 1996). Students, particularly those with LD and ADHD/ADD, learn more effectively when course content is taught in a well-organized and clear manner. Faculty can disseminate class-session outlines or even hand-outs of partially completed PowerPoint slides that give students an organized structure to follow as they take notes. Finally, faculty should provide clear, specific and concrete directions for all activities and assignments, being sure to explain them verbally during class and in writing, including such information in the course syllabus and in rubrics/checklists setting out concrete and specific expectations for all assignments and activities.

The Increase in Mental Health Issues on College/University Campuses

Today’s colleges and universities have experienced a dramatic rise in a host of student mental health issues, ranging from such common problems as stress and alco-

hol/substance abuse to serious psychological/psychiatric conditions, such as major depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, and suicidality (Kitzrow, 2003; UMN Disability Services, 2009; Fogg, 2009). Professors, particularly early career faculty, can benefit from both the collaborative, collegial support of campus professionals and an array of powerful teaching strategies to effectively engage an increasingly challenging student body.

The University of Minnesota recently created the campus-wide Provost Committee on Student Mental Health to review the issues and barriers faced by students with mental health needs. The committee’s goals include raising awareness regarding student mental health, impacting policy change, and helping to improve the overall preventive and management conditions, services, and resources for student mental health. As a result, a comprehensive website (<http://www.mental-health.umn.edu/>) was developed to provide immediate support, resources, and direction for students in distress, concerned faculty, staff, parents, and friends/peers. This website contains valuable, applicable information for both the University of Minnesota and other colleges and universities.

Stress and Mental Health

Dr. Christenson, Director of Mental Health at the University of Minnesota Boynton Health Services, reports that stress both adversely impacts academic performance and plays a major role in mental health problems (2008). He explains that common stressors for students in higher education settings include: shared living space, new relationships, conflict with parent/roommate/significant other, homesickness, increased access to alcohol/drugs, increased independence, poor eating habits, irregular sleep patterns, and financial pressures. The UMN mental health website includes excellent resources that are accessible to all regarding healthy stress management.

Indicators of distress. Dr. Renninger (2008), Senior Psychologist at the UMN's University Counseling and Consulting Services (UCCS), shares the following significant signs/indicators of potential student distress: academic indicators, which include missed assignments, deterioration in work quality, a drop in grades, a negative change in classroom performance, verbal aggressiveness in class, disorganized or erratic behavior, continual excuses (requests for extended deadlines, late submissions), assignments/writings that indicate extreme hopelessness, rage, social isolation, or despair; physical indicators, such as dishevelment/deterioration in physical appearance/hygiene, visible change in weight, hangovers, smell of alcohol, excessive fatigue; personal indicators, including tearfulness, unprovoked anger/hostility, excessive dependency, expressions of hopelessness/worthlessness, expressions of distress over family/other problems; and safety/risk indicators, such as comments about going away for a long time, history of suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts, distribution of prized possessions, or self-destructive/injurious behaviors.

Suggested Next Steps. Professors need not be psychologists or disability experts (sigh of relief) to teach students effectively. Professors can contact campus professionals to share concerns, glean suggestions, and begin the referral process, if appropriate. Disability Services professionals can provide faculty and students with a wealth of support and services such as confidential consultations, determination of disability and appropriateness of reasonable accommodations, and referrals for additional campus health and counseling services. Classroom support might include accommodations in exams and coursework.

Dr. Renninger (2008) provides the following guidelines for professors to use when talking to a student about your concerns: First, write down your specific concerns (see indicators above) and possible campus referral sources. Consult with campus mental

health and/or disability services professionals. If you are concerned about campus or personal safety, contact campus police. Second, contact (email or phone) and invite student to confer at a designated time in your office or a designated private, confidential room. A mental health professional can offer guidance about effective ways to approach a troubled student, including helping you to evaluate whether it is safe to interact with the student without witnesses. Third, share your concerns (what you have observed) in a nonjudgmental manner. Fourth, listen to the student's details, reasons, feelings and concerns about the situation. Fifth, work together in looking at options (i.e., referral to campus professions, follow-up conference); and sixth, follow up, as determined.

In concert with this, Rinehart (2008), UMN Provost for Student Affairs shared, with faculty and staff, a simple model for talking with a person about a sensitive issue, which "...often consists of the following elements: 'I care', 'I see', 'I feel', LISTEN, 'I want', 'I will'." Rinehart suggests the following "basic outline" for an email message requesting a meeting:

Dear (student name),

As your instructor, I am concerned (I care) about how you are doing in class. I see you failed the last exam and you have not been participating in class discussion (specific observable behaviors). I am worried (I feel) that you may fail this class and I would like (I want) to talk to you about difficulties that may be keeping you from succeeding. My office hours are. . . . If these times do not work, please email me suggested times so we can make an appointment (I will meet with you).

Depression and Anxiety. Results from a 2007 health survey conducted by the University of Minnesota Boynton Health Services indicated that one in every ten students surveyed met the criteria for major depression, and had seriously considered suicide in the past year (Christenson, 2008). Christenson reported that

students who have difficulty managing their stress are three times more likely to be diagnosed with depression. Both disability and university mental health services can collaboratively support faculty and assist students with depression to provide appropriate, tailored accommodations. If a professor observes one or more of the previously listed indicators or suspects that a student struggles with depression and/or anxiety, we encourage immediate consultation with both campus mental health and disability service professionals.

Volatile Behavior: Warning Signs of Potentially Dangerous Situations

Several troubling student behavior patterns can alert professors and other university officials to potentially serious or even dangerous emotional functioning (IACLEA, 2007). Sokolow and Lewis (2007) identified that one or more of the following student behaviors, summarized in Table 3, can signify potential warning signs which might be observed not only by professors and instructional staff, but also by student housing personnel, and other university officials.

Sokolow and Lewis (2007) advocate creating a campus Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT) to provide a unified approach in addressing difficult, potentially lethal student behaviors. Representative members comprising this team could include campus police, academic affairs officers, student housing staff, disability services professionals, general counsel, student affairs personnel, counseling/mental health clinicians, and faculty/staff. Instead of receiving fragmented pieces of information regarding a student's behavior from different sources, the BIT team can be centralized to receive information from many areas of the student's college life and quickly detect patterns that could signify serious problems in time to help the student and prevent him or her from endangering himself/herself and others. Intervention can be tailored to the student needs and might include mental health assessment, hospitalization (voluntary or involuntary, depending on the situation), support and

accommodations from Disability Services, and support for faculty/staff. Students who refuse to cooperate with recommendations for assessment and treatment, especially those who continue behaviors such as invasion of privacy, harassment, or stalking that violate the campus student conduct code, could be given the choice of either compliance or withdrawal for noncompliance. Similar to the model described above, the University of Minnesota created the Behavioral Consultation Team (BCT) that faculty and staff can immediately access to relay and discuss concerns about disturbing student behavior.

Finally, the involvement of parents early in the process can help in both sharing essential information and receiving support for plans of actions. Although the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) may limit sharing information with a parent, information can be shared when it relates to the 85 % of college and university students whose parents still claim them as dependents for tax purposes (Sokolow & Lewis, 2007).

Summary and Conclusions

Professors have increasingly faced a myriad of potentially difficult classroom situations, from mild challenges to potentially dangerous dilemmas that can significantly interfere with the teaching and learning process. With solid support from centers for teaching and learning and faculty development specialists, faculty and instructional staff can learn to identify, manage, and prevent a wide range of disruptive classroom behaviors. Campus mental health and disability services can provide both essential support for faculty and appropriate services and accommodations for students. Creating a team that includes members of the campus police, academic affairs, student housing, disability services, general counsel, student affairs, counseling/mental health services, and faculty/staff can expedite the detection of distressing and even harmful

behavior patterns and enable action to be taken more quickly to get troubled students the help they need and keep dangerous situations from escalating. Tragedies such as those experienced by Virginia Tech engender hard lessons for all institutions. From immense loss, we have learned to strengthen our strategies and coordinate efforts by many different offices within the college community to provide a safe, high-quality teaching and learning environment for all. ■■

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