

article written before  
Internet use became  
widely available

## Students Behaving Badly in Large Classes

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A few months ago I received an e-mail from a faculty member: “Could we meet to discuss some problems I’m having in my large class?” She went on to list some of her areas of concern: how to set up group work, how to deal with exam logistics, and so on. She came to the Center for Teaching Excellence to meet with director Jim Greenberg and me, and after we had brainstormed some ideas about group work and exams, the real problem surfaced: the students in her large class were behaving abominably. They wandered in late, left early, read the newspaper, chatted with friends during the lecture, and napped; not surprisingly, a large number of them were failing the course. It was her first semester teaching a large class. She never wanted to do it again.

In addition to these problems, faculty generally have found that large classes have poorer attendance, louder packing up of books a few minutes before the end of class, more cheating on exams, and more off-task behavior during discussions and group activities. They also report a startling array of innovative disruptive behaviors during class, including talking on cell phones, watching portable televisions, sitting through the lecture with headphones on, having pizza delivered during the middle of class, fraternity pledges’ pretending to have a nervous breakdown during an exam, and passionate making out in the back of the classroom.

Note that before the Internet, students used to read the newspaper and talk to friends -- perhaps to fulfill cognitive motivations (newspaper) or social motivations (chatting with friends)

impressive list, particularly the use of portable TVs and pizza delivery