

Student Disruption, Disrespect, and Disorder in Class: A Seminar for Faculty

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NOTE: This paper was written several years before the Internet was commonly used.

... students who arrive late and leave early, students who make frequent trips to the bathroom, students who talk while the professor is talking, and a host of other seemingly adolescent and immature student behaviors that erode a healthy classroom environment.

The notion that a college professor will need to assume the role of disciplinarian has been met with extreme disappointment by faculty. Faculty appear uncertain how to respond to student disruptions. Unlike previous generations of the professoriate, new faculty report that they are unable to rely on the authority of their role to help them maintain class decorum.

No one appears exempt from the changing climate. Even the most seasoned and caring professors have shared similar experiences and concerns with us. Although many report still being able to control the class through charismatic and experienced teaching methodology, they too acknowledge that the professorial role no longer commands the automatic respect it once did.

Feelings of concern and discontent are not only owned by faculty. ... Clearly, the issue of school disorder is perhaps one of the most pressing educational concerns facing faculty in the 1990s. In response to our faculty's concern, the Counseling Department was asked to offer a "Better Teaching Seminar," designed to help faculty begin to understand and interpret these occurrences.

In the first part of the seminar, counseling professionals provided faculty with several perspectives from which to examine the dynamics that underlie disrespectful student behavior. The goal of this initial phase was to promote enhanced sensitivity by faculty toward students. The following six psychosocial perspectives on student behaviors were discussed. [NB: only two are presented here.]

1. Understanding negative behaviors as a defense mechanism. Counselors discussed how students may engage in noncompliant and other counterproductive behaviors as a way of warding off feelings of anxiety. For example, such feelings and behaviors as appearing disinterested, irritability, inconsistent class attendance, and low frustration tolerance were viewed within the context of student defenses against failure, especially for those with academic deficits.

2. Understanding high external stimulus needs of students. Student expectations that college be "exciting" were viewed within the context of learned responses derived from students' highly action-oriented environments. Student restlessness, freedom from distractibility, and lack of attention and concentration in class were related to distorted student perceptions about college and college professors.

Note that faculty were claiming that students were highly distractible (and restless with lectures) way back in the early 1990s, before the widespread use of the Internet or smartphones.