

# COPING WITH SEVEN DISRUPTIVE PERSONALITY TYPES IN THE CLASSROOM

Based on a Magna Online Seminar titled  
“Coping with 7 Disruptive Personality Types in the Classroom”  
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A Magna Publications White Paper



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## ABOUT THIS WHITE PAPER

This Magna Publications white paper is based on an online seminar delivered on May 12, 2009, by Dr. Gerald Amada. Dr. Amada is the author of eleven books and more than 100 articles and book reviews on the subjects of mental health, psychotherapy, and disruptive college student issues. He is also the author of two recent novels.

His books include *Coping with the Disruptive College Student: A Practical Model*, *Coping with Misconduct in the College Classroom: A Practical Model*, and *Mental Health and Student Conduct Issues on the College Campus: A Reading*. These works provide guidance and information for college administrators, instructors, and mental health counselors involved in dealing with disruptive students and managing due process and student conduct codes. They cover topics such as effective principles and strategies for dealing with classroom misconduct and coping methods for responding to the many disruptive incidents that are apt to occur when teaching in a college classroom environment.

Dr. Amada was a cofounder of the mental health program at the City College of San Francisco. He retired after a thirty-year career at the City College and a forty-year career as a private psychotherapist. One of his well-known keynote addresses is called “Virginia Tech: What Have We Learned?” Another of his presentations is a seminar titled “Coping with Misconduct in the College Classroom.” Dr. Amada received his BS and MSW from Rutgers University and his PhD in social and clinical psychology from the Wright Institute in Berkeley, California. Dr. Amada’s books may be viewed and purchased on his website: [geraldamada.com](http://geraldamada.com). His phone number and email address are posted on this website.

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## INTRODUCTION

The typical college professor is bound to run into his or her share of difficult students during the course of an academic career. Some students create nuisances by engaging in annoying behavior, such as interfering with classroom proceedings, making irrelevant comments, and causing noisy interruptions. They may turn assignments in late, disregard the course expectations, and insist on special treatment for themselves. Other students, however, may pose a very real threat to the safety of the professor and fellow students.

Relatively few college professors are trained in how to recognize and respond effectively to these challenging or threatening behaviors. Sometimes, faculty members will have difficulty distinguishing between a student who is a mere nuisance and a student who poses a very real hazard to the community. It is comforting to know that many of the most difficult and disruptive encounters with students tend to fall into predictable, known categories.

This white paper will also help you to set enforceable standards, expectations, and boundaries flexibly with students, depending on the exhibited personality style.

After reading this white paper, you will know how to better manage passive-aggressive behaviors such as sleeping in class, lateness, and procrastination. You will learn essential principles regarding the value of collaborating with on-campus resources to resolve disruptive crises. This white paper also provides guidance to help professors know whether and when they need to report certain disruptive incidents.

Perhaps most important, this report provides the guidance necessary to help instructors and administrators recognize “red flags” that portend physical risk when dealing with potentially dangerous students.

The seven disruptive personality styles are: explosive, antisocial, passive-aggressive, narcissistic, paranoid, litigious, and compulsive.

We will cover each personality style in turn and then look at likely situations in which each could manifest troublesome behavior in the classroom and elsewhere on campus. We will then suggest various ways for instructors to respond effectively to disruptive students according to the students’ personality style.

Before proceeding, a few words of explanation are in order. First, it is important to understand that the personality styles described herein are not clinical diagnoses or psychiatric designations. In other words, there is nothing especially scientific, medical, or

psychiatric in the use of these terms. They are simply imprecise, descriptive terms to suggest certain social personae.

Second, the personality styles in this paper are not pure types or reifications of actual individuals; rather, the styles loosely describe, represent, or match a set of distinguishing personality characteristics that will most likely not precisely describe any single individual. Therefore, as we discuss the various types of personality styles, you will note that they tend to overlap with one another to some degree.

Third, although it will be helpful for instructors to recognize and understand the various personality styles of students in order to respond appropriately to students' perturbing idiosyncrasies, it is also essential that instructors never address students by using these designations, either in speaking to or about particular students. This is because these words ordinarily have a pejorative connotation, and some students will perceive them as insulting.

# 1

## THE EXPLOSIVE STUDENT

### Characteristics

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The student with an explosive personality style is easy to recognize in the classroom. That is because the explosive student is inclined to be volatile in ways that draw everyone's attention. Explosive students will shout, use profanity with abandon, engage in bullying behavior, and sometimes make veiled or explicit verbal or physical threats. Explosive college students have also been known to pick fights and interrupt lectures with loud and abusive remarks. Sometimes they will use office meetings with instructors to intimidate and harass them.

For a wide range of reasons, some explosive students display explosive behavior only intermittently and rather harmlessly. Others, however, may be on a rampage from the day they arrive on campus, and their explosive behavior may get out of control repeatedly. Therefore, these students are apt to pose a persistent threat to other students and to their instructors.

It can be a big shock to a professor to experience this sort of outburst in the classroom. It is not the sort of thing one ordinarily expects to experience while teaching, and therefore it can be very difficult and confusing to know what to do, especially if there have been no warning signs of impending trouble before the offending outburst.

### How to Respond

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- Safety first

When instructors are faced with a student who is severely out of control with rage, either in an office or in a classroom, their first concern should be the safety of their students and themselves.

Consider the frightening situation of a student who, in a rage, threatened to kill. When this possible scenario was posed, one instructor stated that she would most likely respond by escorting the student to the campus psychological service.

Unfortunately, this is not a good idea. The reasons for not carrying out such a measure should be fairly obvious. The student may in fact be an imminent threat to others and should therefore not be chaperoned anywhere by a defenseless instructor.

The instructor should instead immediately dismiss the class and enlist help from the campus security office. Many college classrooms come equipped with a telephone for calling for assistance when needed. The instructor should use it. The responding security officers could then have the student transferred to the psychological service, taken to an off-campus psychiatric facility for observation and evaluation, or taken into custody by a law enforcement agency in the community. This is clearly the safest way to proceed in this situation.

After the student who has leveled a lethal threat has been taken into custody, the instructor should proceed to document the incident and then forward the documentation to a designated dean or judicial affairs office for further investigation and evaluation.

Of course, that is a worst-case scenario. Many explosive situations are less severe than a blatant, imminent physical threat. Sometimes, a student may simply lose control, begin yelling, or jump up from his or her seat in a very disruptive way. In this situation, instructors must respond calmly and firmly.

- **Ask student to quiet down, return to seat, or leave**
- **If student persists, dismiss class and contact security**

When explosive students lose control in the classroom, instructors, of course, have the option to ask the student to quiet down, return to his seat, or leave. However, if the student persists in such explosive behavior, it probably behooves the instructor to dismiss the class and then contact the security office to report the offending student.

Generally, it is not advisable to enlist the help of classmates to physically control the out-of-control student, unless it is likely that the student is about to seriously harm someone else if he is not immediately, forcibly restrained.

Also, be aware that other students should not be sent as couriers to report such incidents, since the offending student may target them later for retaliation. Dismissing the class and reporting the incident should suffice in most instances.

It may be surprising to learn that some explosive students have disruptive episodes that are short-lived and not at all dangerous. Some of these students suffer from organic or neurological disorders. It is possible that in some cases, such as those in which the explosive episode is merely distracting but not especially frightening or dangerous to others, the behavior can be tolerated—at least for the time being. This may be the case when a student has a condition such as Tourette's syndrome.



However, in situations in which the explosive episodes are too frequent, too disruptive, or too dangerous, it is usually necessary for instructors to document and report these incidents to designated administrators while requesting their intervention. Students should be given prior warning to control their outbursts, of course, as required by due process considerations.

- Document incident and send to designated dean or judicial affairs office
- Prior warning required by due process

Here is one final comment about the explosive student. Many explosive students disregard and violate academic and social boundaries when they lose self-control by, for example, shouting, leveling epithets at others, or displaying physically aggressive behavior. They may then defend their actions by arguing that they have the constitutional right to express themselves in any manner they please—the right of free speech.

Instructors should know that within the milieu of the college classroom there are several essential dimensions that may legitimately and legally be applied in abridging and controlling speech.

- **Exceptions to free speech**
  - Decibel level
  - Obscene or abusive language
  - Relevancy to topic
  - Time: no long, effusive monologues

One such dimension relates to decibel level. Ordinarily, students simply are not permitted to shout, scream, or yell while in class and should be admonished or warned for doing so.

A second dimension relates to obscene or abusive language. Unless the use of obscene language is appropriate, such as in the case of a quote from a book or the enactment of a stage play, such language should be curtailed by admonitions or warnings and, if necessary, documented in reports to a designated administrator.

A third dimension relates to the matter of relevancy. If, as often happens, a student veers from a class discussion on a designated topic in order to discuss his or her personal life experience, which in no respect happens to be germane to the topic under discussion, that student may legitimately be blocked from doing so, with reminders or admonitions to cease the autobiographical oration, on the grounds that it is simply not relevant.

A fourth dimension relates to the factor of time. Some explosive students tend to grandstand by engaging in long, effusive monologues. This can be detrimental to the morale and integrity of the classroom environment and therefore should usually not be permitted.

One way to discourage this practice is to let students know beforehand how long they can speak and then interrupt them with reminders if they have exceeded the limits you have established. Those who persist in exceeding these limits after receiving such a warning should be reported accordingly.

## 2

## THE ANTISOCIAL STUDENT

### Characteristics

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The next personality style is the antisocial personality style, otherwise known by the more sinister term “sociopath.” Students who exhibit the antisocial personality style, as the term suggests, engage in antisocial behaviors such as cheating, stealing, forging documents, exploiting other persons, and, worst of all, physically hurting or even killing others. These individuals suffer from a deficient or flawed conscience, which means that they are likely to make life miserable for others, including their instructors.

What makes the antisocial personality style such a formidable challenge is the fact that this student plays by a completely different set of rules than do most people. He has his own set of amoral values and precepts and has low regard for the requirements of the law or conventional codes of conduct.

This means that if you attempt to deal with the sociopath on the basis of empathy and goodwill, he is likely to eat you alive by perceiving your good qualities as weaknesses and vulnerabilities to be exploited. This statement is not meant to be taken literally, of course, unless the student’s name happens to be Hannibal Lecter.

This type of behavior, by the way, is how Seung-Hui Cho at Virginia Tech managed to induce instructors to accommodate his ongoing mischief, how Ted Bundy seduced one of his psychologists to fall in love with him, and how Bernie Madoff convinced friends and business associates to invest in his Ponzi scheme. Oddly enough, sociopaths often possess considerable charm, wit, intelligence, and charisma, all of which enable them to be all the more engaging and seductive in order to accomplish their objectives.

It is estimated that sociopaths make up about 3–5 percent of the general population, so if the student population at your college is 30,000, you may have roughly 900 to 1,500 sociopaths on your campus, without, of course, counting those among the administrative, instructional, and counseling staffs.

How might antisocial students manifest their antisocial behavior on campus? One way is through stealing. Many students and instructors alike have had personal belongings stolen from their backpacks, purses, and, in the case of instructors, offices. Thieving is rampant at most colleges now, unfortunately.

Research also suggests that 75 percent of all students will cheat during a given academic

year. But the student with the sociopathic personality style is likely to be more blatant than other students in his cheating behavior, not only in terms of how often he resorts to plagiarism but also to the extent to which he uses plagiarized information. Although we know that honor codes seem to work quite well in curbing plagiarism with most students, these codes are less likely to impress the sociopathic student than other students.

Sociopaths seem to gain a special thrill from the experience of outwitting others. If a student is caught cheating in your class, you might keep an eye out for whether the guilty party evinces contrition and remorse. If there is little evidence of remorse, this may signal that the student is likely to be an antisocial individual generally.

## How to Respond

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- **Employ honor codes**

In dealing with antisocial students and issues like cheating, honor codes work reasonably well. Also, because cheating is so prevalent on campus, you might begin each semester with a short commentary on the problem by saying to students the following: “The problem of cheating is widespread. The competition for good grades is fierce. Good grades are a path to a good grade point average, and a good grade point average is a passport to graduate school or a good job, so there are strong temptations to cheat. However, it’s important for you to find ways to resist that temptation, because not only is it ethically wrong to cheat, but the consequences for being caught cheating can be grave, including a failing grade on a paper, failing the course, or possibly a suspension.” This way the problem is out in the open, and all the students, including the antisocial ones, are forewarned.

- **Define “plagiarism” in the syllabus**

It is also important to recognize that students sometimes plagiarize without realizing that they are cheating, as when, for example, they fail to provide attribution with quotation marks. This is why it is important for instructors to define “cheating” and “plagiarism” clearly for them, possibly in the syllabus. Then, if someone plagiarizes and is caught, he cannot legitimately claim he did not know he was indeed cheating.

- **Make penalties proportionate and apply them to all students in equal measure**

Keep in mind that it does not matter what kind of personality style you are dealing with when it comes to cheating. Cheating is an important form of academic dishonesty and should,

when detected and verified, have adverse consequences for the student. The penalties for cheating should be proportionate and spelled out at the outset of each semester, and they should be standardized. In other words, they should be applied to all students in equal measure in order to avoid unfair discrimination.

Here is another example of troublesome antisocial behavior that seems to recur year after year. It goes something like this. An instructor in the English department has concerns about a student who wrote in a submitted essay that he was ruminating about killing himself or others, possibly by blowing up a building. The instructor, understandably distraught, seeks help in determining the level of risk posed by the student and refers the student to mental health services for an evaluation. If the student refuses to go, an administrator is required to see the student.

When the student is confronted with questions about the alarming lethal content of his essay, he almost always denies that it had any substance. In other words, he dismisses violent references in the essay as idle fantasizing.

Often, in considering this pattern and its causes, it is apparent that these essays have been written atrociously. The conclusion is that many if not all of these students had been overwhelmed by the requirement to write a coherent, acceptable essay and therefore decided to insert violent imagery into their writing in order to derail the instructor from attending to the deplorable quality of their essays, in the hopes that they could prevent the instructor from conferring on their papers a poor but warranted grade.

As we can see, the student often succeeds in this endeavor, at least until the element of risk is investigated and resolved. The instructor then regains composure enough to focus on judging the essay entirely on a scholarly basis, at which point he usually gives the paper a failing grade for the woefully inferior quality of the writing.

There is one small caveat, however. Students who have submitted essays that include veiled or explicit threats of violence should be questioned by college authorities as to the nature and intent of their ruminations. If, in the end, it can be firmly established that the students were simply stretching their creative literary muscles, perhaps the matter can be dropped.

In contrast, if a crisis intervention team or a college counselor forms the clear impression that the violent imagery in the essay is likely to be a precursor of dangerous behavior, other measures such as psychiatric hospitalization or suspension, combined with contact with the student's family, may be in order.

The point is that a student with an antisocial personality style will sometimes cook up clever

ruses in order to frighten and mislead college personnel, as Mr. Cho at Virginia Tech did when he verbalized threats of suicide at the point when he most feared that he would be disciplined for stalking.

Another concern that sometimes arises with antisocial student behavior is an unwillingness to follow rules or accept the Code of Student Conduct. Fortunately, there are legal precedents to support our ability to invoke the Code of Student Conduct successfully.

The Code of Student Conduct at a college is fairly unassailable. It has been hammered out in the courts. Students have challenged these codes over the years, and the codes have evolved out of an extensive legal history. Because the matter has already been adjudicated, it is sound—much like traffic regulations. A person could challenge those laws again, but nobody is going to sanely argue that we should not have traffic regulations. There have to be laws. So that part is not up for debate.

If a student, for example, decides to challenge the essential centerpiece of the regulations at the college, which is the Code of Student Conduct, and asserts that it is not legitimate and he does not have to conform to it, it is not necessary to take the student very seriously. This is a bit of an exaggeration, but it is a little like saying, “I do not agree with the law that says that murder is a crime. I think I might just try it out.” It is a form of insanity to think that way, which would certainly fall under the rubric of sociopathy. You might be willing to have a brief discussion about it for the sake of educating the student, but it certainly is not open to debate.

Some sociopaths might very well abate that argument by saying, “Look, the rules and regulations of this college do not apply to me. I have my own set.” The response to this is fairly simple and straightforward: “Well, you can have your own set, but you can’t have it here.” That is what such students need to be told.

Tell the offending student, “If you do not want to abide by this and do not want to comply, you can keep your belief, but you just can’t be here. If you decide that you’re going to act in such a way as to flout that particular requirement, you just can’t do that here, and here are the reasons why. . .” It is not necessary to spend a long period of time trying to argue somebody out of something like that, because it is too bizarre of an assertion in the first place. The response should be simple, straightforward, and direct.

# 3

## THE PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE STUDENT

### Characteristics

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We will next consider the passive-aggressive personality style as it is manifested in some students. The term “passive-aggressive” suggests behavior that appears at first glance to be passive and compliant but upon further scrutiny is recognized to contain strong elements of defiance and dissension.

For example, if you have raised or taken care of children, you may have encountered passive-aggressive behavior when you requested that a child perform a simple task such as taking out the garbage. The child typically responds agreeably by promising to carry out the task, adding as an aside that it will be done “later.” When “later” comes and the garbage remains in the kitchen, you remind the child to take it out, and the response is, again, “later.” This unnerving game of cat and mouse may continue until tempers flare, and the child eventually takes out the garbage only after being angrily demanded to do so.

What does the child’s dilatory behavior represent? It represents, I think, a poorly disguised form of defiance. Since the child obviously does not want to take out the garbage but prefers not to take the risk of saying so, he stalls and temporizes, perhaps in the hope that you will give up in despair and carry out this unpalatable task yourself. In other words, the word “later” authentically translated into what the child is really saying might come out sounding like this: “I do not want to take out the garbage. I hate taking out the garbage. Take it out yourself.”

Keeping this example in mind, let us now take up the matter of how some college students display a passive-aggressive personality style. Let’s begin with the problem of chronic lateness. As you know, some students habitually come late to class. Those who come late only occasionally may have encountered unavoidable delaying obstacles. Those who come late habitually, however, are probably displaying a form of resistance or defiance—and it is wise to see it as such.

When questioned about their habitual lateness, students are apt to justify or excuse it on the grounds that they have other tasks to attend to, such as child care or job responsibilities that preempt punctual class attendance. Many instructors are thus made to feel guilty and are thereby disarmed by such reasons or excuses. They allow students to talk them into considering these excuses as authentic extenuations.

If you are one of these instructors, here are a few strong opinions on this subject that may change your perspective on the matter.

1. Arriving to class punctually is an important responsibility borne entirely by the student, not the instructor.
2. Although child care or job responsibilities are clearly time consuming, and when combined with the demands connected with attending college can be downright overwhelming, it is again largely the responsibility of the student, not the instructor, to decide which takes priority—one's job, one's child care responsibilities, or punctually attending classes.
3. Lateness is often a rude and disruptive form of behavior, especially when it is accompanied by doors opening and shutting, loud noises, and students distractingly passing in front of the instructor to get to their seats.
4. Habitual lateness to class, much like when friends or family members habitually arrive late for social gatherings and usually infuriate us because of their thoughtlessness, is typically a sign of devaluation of and contempt for instructors and other students who have arrived to class punctually.  
Even more important, it is most likely a sign of devaluation and contempt for one's own education, albeit unconscious, since the student's habitual lateness will necessarily curtail his or her time in class and cause the student to forfeit important opportunities for learning.
5. Instructors who habitually arrive late to class themselves are poor models for their students and should find any reasonable means possible to correct this form of unprofessional behavior.

## How to Respond

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### Poor attendance and lateness

- **Strict rules and adverse consequences usually improve attendance and punctuality**

Generally speaking, strict rules and adverse consequences for chronic lateness almost always improve attendance and punctuality. Remember, this form of passive-aggressive behavior can be remedied if you allow yourself to use a clear, fair, and proportionate set of adverse consequences to deal with it.



- **Keep records; mention in syllabus that a certain number of late arrivals counts as an absence, and a certain number of absences contributes to a lowered grade**

Once you accept the argument for discouraging habitual, passive-aggressive lateness, here is a simple antidote. Keep close records of students who arrive to class late. Let students know in the syllabus that a certain number of late arrivals (say, 10 to 15 minutes late) to class will equal an absence, and a certain number of absences will result in a lower grade. This number can be flexibly bent and revised in cases of extraordinary crises, such as documented accidents, illnesses, or the death of a significant friend or family member. Please keep in mind that some schools or districts do not permit instructors to lower grades based on lateness or attendance. They are in the minority, but check first before you institute such a practice.

### **Sleeping in class**

- **Rude and unacceptable**
- **Ask to discuss after class—rule out medical problems like diabetes or narcolepsy**
- **Warn that they will be asked to leave immediately if caught sleeping again**

Another passive-aggressive form of behavior that sometimes exasperates instructors is sleeping in class. Of course, one must be circumspect before applying that term to sleepers, as the occasional sleeper may be a diabetic who is experiencing an excessively high or low blood sugar level, or a narcoleptic who cannot fight off an episode. But as you know, most students who fall asleep in class are not just tired but are bored and probably engaging in a passive defiance of what they regard as an uninteresting or unimportant lecture.

Now let us consider a few thoughts about classroom sleepers. Sleeping in class is usually rude and unacceptable. The classroom is not a bedroom and should not be used as one. Permitting students to sleep in class sends a detrimental and powerful message to all students. This message, usually delivered nonverbally and unintentionally by the instructor, is that the behavior of sleeping in class is no more unacceptable than is remaining awake and participating actively. That is, of course, a very destructive message to send to the students, but it will be sent if you entirely ignore sleeping students.

Ordinarily, students who fall asleep in class should be asked to discuss this problem afterward in the privacy of the instructor's office rather than be confronted at the time they are detected sleeping. If medical problems like diabetes or narcolepsy can be confidently ruled out, sleeping students probably should be warned that the very next time they are

detected asleep, they will be asked to leave then and there, perhaps to their acute embarrassment.

Finally, instructors who have discovered that a disproportionate number of their students are nodding off might reasonably surmise that they are guilty of inflicting dull lectures on their students and therefore should seek help in finding ways to enliven their style of teaching and lecturing. The act of sleeping during a talk that is inordinately boring is, of course, somewhat forgivable, as we all remember Vice President Dick Cheney nodding off during President George W. Bush's self-congratulatory farewell speech.

### Procrastination

- Act of defiance, usually unconscious, unintentional
- Discussing may motivate some to overcome pattern
- Mention campus counseling service as a resource
- Give periodic unscheduled quizzes
- Compliment and show interest when students submit assignments and keep up with readings

Another very familiar form of passive-aggressive behavior is procrastination. It is quite common for students to read assignments and submit papers well after the deadline established by the instructor. With the possible exception of delays due to serious crises or disruptions in a student's life, procrastination is definitely an act of defiance, albeit one that is usually unconscious and unintentional.

The process of procrastination begins, of course, when the instructor issues the assignment. The serious student has, it seems, every intention to fulfill the requirements of the assignment in a timely way—at least at first. However, once the student takes the assignment home, a derailment from the initial intention may take place. The student thinks about the assignment and then a feeling of dissatisfaction or aversion sets in. The assignment is perceived to be difficult, time consuming, and an odious burden.

Despite the fact that procrastinating students understand that an early start on an assignment, and a piecemeal approach to the challenge, might work best, and that doing well on assignments is generally essential to their future economic and emotional well-being, an unfortunate psychological detour takes place at this point. Such students allow themselves to be lured away from the unpleasant prospect of mental exertion by their desire for immediate hedonistic gratification.

It is then that they make a pivotal decision without realizing it is so pivotal. For immediate pleasure, they will pick up the phone to call friends, watch escapist television programs, or

play equally escapist video games. In short, they will do virtually anything rather than plunge into the drudgery of the assignment. Often, this form of escapism continues for days or weeks until the reality of the deadline approaches and the student is in a virtual panic, cramming to meet it.

When therapists have pointed out to such students the ways in which their procrastinating seem to represent unconscious feelings of rebellion and defiance against the unpleasant academic demands made by their instructors, their first reactions are usually defensive and skeptical. Upon closer examination of the sequence of choices and decisions that undermine their ability to work on their assignments, however, these students often grasp how their defiance tripped them up, and they find ways to resist their rebellious pleasure seeking and even come to view their difficult assignments in a more positive light.

Part of this process often involves shedding light on how much they resented, as children, their parents' sometimes-authoritarian demands that they carry out unpleasant tasks like, yes, carrying out the garbage. If it has not occurred to you as of yet, consider now the fact that instructors, like therapists, are often targeted with many of the same intense feelings, both negative and positive, that students have long harbored toward their parents. The psychoanalytic term for this is, of course, "transference." Therefore, instructors can only hope that they will have only students who were raised in happy, nurturing families! Most of us will have to deal with students who were raised in less-than-perfect households and who exhibit behaviors learned in those settings.

Now that we have a more dynamic understanding of the nature of passive-aggressive procrastination, what can instructors do about it? First, discussing the subject with your students might lead to some interesting insights on how to motivate some of them to overcome their pattern of procrastination. At the same time, instructors might mention that the counseling or psychological service on campus is an excellent resource for dealing with such problems.

Some instructors who are aware of the prevalence of procrastination let their students know that they will periodically but without notice give unscheduled quizzes, adding a cautionary statement that the students should keep up on their readings in order to be prepared for these assessments. Even if this does not solve the problem, it will at least hold the offending students accountable for their behavior.

A friendlier tack would be to compliment and show consistent interest in the progress students make in submitting their assignments and keeping abreast of their reading. Of course, students need to know that you are not only interested in the punctuality of the work but, even more important, also in the quality of their scholarship. If compliments are

merited, do not be stingy. If they are not, do not extend inauthentic compliments for shabby work; instead, offer heartfelt empathy, encouragement, and hope for something better next time.

A question that arises from time to time is whether procrastination is always passive-aggressive as opposed to simply being an innate tendency that a certain person has. This topic comes up frequently in counseling and therapy conversations with students. If you closely examine the behavior, the motives, and the attitudes of students who engage in procrastination, it becomes apparent that it is a form of passive-aggressive behavior. Under investigation, we find that it is not just an innate tendency. That is what students would prefer for you to believe. Their view is, “Oh, it just happens. I’m just lazy,” and they write the behavior off.

Procrastination is not just laziness. There is an underlying dynamic here. When you look at these students’ behavior closely, you see that they take the assignment, go home, and at some point turn away from it. They have an aversion to it, and that leads to a moment of rebellion. That is the moment of defiance. The feeling is, “I don’t want to do this,” and they do not put it in words. They cannot even articulate it.

The student, perhaps subconsciously, thinks, “Look, I’ve had enough of people telling me what to do. My parents have done this, and now here comes an instructor giving me an assignment to do. It’s one more thing I don’t like, and I’m not going to do it when that instructor wants me to do it. I’m going to do it on my terms—when I want to do it—even if it’s the night before the exam.” And that is quite clearly an act of defiance and passive-aggressive behavior.

In contrast, what about those students who require accommodations such as extensions on an assignment because of legitimate reasons? Where would an instructor draw the line between understanding real need and enabling students to continue to procrastinate? This can be a big issue on campuses that deal with a lot of nontraditional students, many of whom are working full time or are single parents.

The fact is that too many instructors assume the burden, the onus, of taking care of other parts of the student’s life. That is usually a mistake. One can be very empathic and understanding and, at the same time, encounter a pitfall when students appeal for extenuation because they had to take care of their kids that night, somebody had strep, or something else. The kids were sick. They had to go to the doctor. The boss asked this person to stay on a few extra hours, or they couldn’t get enough sleep, etc., etc. The list goes on and on.

The issue here is that a great many students are attending colleges and universities across the country and are managing to get to class punctually and regularly. This should not be forgotten or dismissed lightly. It is a disservice to those students when instructors provide extenuations to students who petition for them by telling those students, "All right, I'll have a different standard for you." It is not to say that the students are lying about the circumstances, but, ultimately, it really is the student's responsibility to take care of his or her own life.

If the student discovers over time that child care responsibilities are precluding his or her ability to attend class on time or to take tests on time, then the student is faced with the decision about whether he will have to give up some or all of his classes at some point if he cannot properly take care of all that. That is the student's decision.

The same holds true for a job. This situation is only getting worse. Without being hard-hearted about this, it is true that this situation is increasing on college campuses, and instructors can expect to hear more and more of these appeals and these petitions for extenuation.

Where does it all end? Keep in mind, when you give an extenuation to one student, what are you going to do about the next one who comes in with the same reason or excuse? And what about the student after that? Are you going to keep doing it? We all have our breaking points.

If you continue granting exceptions and extensions, you are going to open the floodgates to lying. To some extent, you are giving students the impression that you are an enabler who is willing to carry them through all kinds of extenuating circumstances so that they at least complete the semester. Do you want to be in that position? It is a tough question, but this probably is not a position that you want to maintain.

Now, there are some special circumstances, and these go beyond child care and work, and one should be on the lookout for these situations, such as when there has been a death or an accident. Obviously, if somebody comes into your office in a full body cast and says that he has been run over by a Mack truck and could not be there for class, for common sense and legal reasons, you want to provide that extenuation.

Also, sometimes there really are extenuating circumstances to consider. A university located near a military air base, for example, had to institute a set of empathic, flexible accommodations for students who were called away on military duty. The policy allowed these students to compensate for missed or incomplete attendance without compromising their or the university's academic integrity. If your college is faced with a similar challenge,

you will need to make similar humanitarian accommodations. However, these are not instances of passive-aggressive behavior.

# 4

## THE NARCISSISTIC STUDENT

### Characteristics

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The narcissistic personality style is marked by arrogance, self-centeredness, self-entitlement, and a noticeable tendency to devalue or denigrate others. Students with this personality style are disinclined to respect other people's personal boundaries, including those of faculty members and instructors. They are apt to "walk on" others, monopolize class time, and otherwise behave as though they are more important than anyone and everyone else.

For example, instructors at many colleges report that some of their students, in the heat of a dispute over a grade or some form of disciplinary measure, will advance the argument that they are the customer and that the customer, as the instructor should know, is always right.

It is not surprising that opportunistic and self-entitled students use such a tactic when faced with an adverse academic situation, but it is disappointing and frustrating to see how many instructors fail to see the fallacy and deviousness of this argument. Let's face it: a college is not a department store, and even in department stores, customers are not normally permitted to engage in antisocial behaviors such as fighting and shoplifting. Self-entitled students need to grasp the underlying fact that, like it or not, college matriculation is not a right but rather a privilege earned by maintaining an acceptable grade point average and conforming to the Code of Student Conduct.

The instructor is not an institutional flunky for students to bully and denigrate. Rather, instructors have the bureaucratic and legal right to evaluate and grade scholarship, as well as the right to set and enforce—within reason, of course—behavioral standards in the classroom.

Therefore, when self-entitled students tell you that they and their families pay taxes that underwrite your salary and therefore they can determine their own grade, or they attempt to set their own behavioral standards, you may want to suggest to them that the next time they are pulled over for speeding that they take that same tack with the state trooper, whose salary is also subsidized through taxes, and see where it gets them.

Because students with a narcissistic personality style tend to devalue others, not only are they apt to challenge instructors on relatively minor matters, but they will also cast scathing aspersions on their professors' characters and their very qualifications to teach.

For example, one rather young, unmarried, and childless psychology instructor at a Midwestern college once complained about how some of her older students who were parents would blister her with complaints that she did not know enough about the psychology of children because she didn't have any. A pertinent question here is how they even knew that she had no children. In this particular case, she had shared this personal information with them when they pressured her to disclose it. Clearly, there was no reason for her to share this information with her students, and they were crossing personal boundaries by pressuring her to disclose it. Had she remained firm and tight-lipped about her personal life, she might have averted this particular form of attempted denigration and devaluation.

This struggling instructor merely needed to be reminded that there are many people with children who have poorly understood and atrociously raised them. Conversely, there are many people who do not have their own children but who, like she does, understand the psychology of children exceptionally well.

In other words, having children does not necessarily qualify a person to teach child psychology, and not having children is not a disqualifying factor for this assignment. Students who attempt to devalue and demean instructors in this fraudulent manner should simply be told that the college deems its instructors acceptable based entirely on their professional qualifications, and they will endeavor to fulfill the requirements of that position to the best of their abilities. If students are not satisfied with that explanation, they are free to consult an administrator about their concerns.

## How to Respond

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This type of student can be very hard on an instructor's confidence and sense of self-worth. When confronted with a student who challenges your worth, remind yourself that you were hired to do your job based upon the strength of your qualifications.

- **Remember: College hired you based on your qualifications**

Keep in mind, for your own protection, that self-entitled students do not respect personal boundaries or privacy especially well. They may attempt to intrude on your privacy by asking inappropriate questions. Try to refrain from answering personal questions asked by students with personal self-disclosures unless you are absolutely certain that your disclosures provide an absolutely relevant and positive contribution to the topic under discussion.



A short, straightforward comment to inappropriate inquiries is all that is required, such as, “I’m sorry, but information about my personal life is neither relevant nor essential to the topic under discussion, and therefore I prefer to maintain my personal privacy here and will do all I can to respect and protect yours.” That should suffice.

- **Do not answer personal questions unless doing so provides a relevant and positive contribution**

The narcissistic student often feels entitled to be nosy and intrusive. It is part of the narcissistic constellation of traits to refuse to give other people the same level of courtesy and respect that the person expects and demands of himself. Do not fall for this unacceptable double standard. You will, at times, need to actively resist the intrusiveness and contemptuous behavior of these students by safeguarding your personal privacy with firmly established boundaries of your own.

- **Self-entitled students do not respect boundaries—safeguard privacy with your own boundaries**

Doing this will help you restore the self-respect and self-esteem that these students will attempt to deny you through their devaluation of your work and reputation.

Right now, the term “narcissistic personality” is very much in vogue. This term is tossed around a lot these days because we seem to be seeing more and more of this behavior in our society. There is some indication that this current generation of college students includes more people who exhibit self-entitled behavior.

Assuming this is correct, we can expect to have to deal with more narcissistic traits than we might have seen a mere generation ago. In the past, students seemed to be somewhat more deferential, more conforming, and more self-sacrificing than are some of the students we are seeing on campuses today. If this is the case, then instructors will have to adjust their behavior accordingly to accommodate the growing presence of certain narcissistic characteristics among their students.

# 5

## THE PARANOID STUDENT

### Characteristics

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Our next subject is the paranoid personality style. Students who exhibit this personality style tend to be highly suspicious of others. They are likely to level unfounded accusations of wrongdoing against their instructors, and they are given to feeling persecuted and unfairly picked on.

They can be, to use a nonclinical term, nuisances who blame their own limitations and failures on other people, such as when they fail a test or do poorly on a paper and then fault their instructors for being incompetent. Many instructors report how such students will harass them with constant emails or phone calls, making unreasonable demands for attention and special treatment while usually including some backhanded accusatory remarks about the instructor's alleged deficiencies.

Many instructors find it very difficult to set reasonable limits with such students. They sometimes find themselves bending over backward to accommodate unreasonable demands, often out of a sense of fear or guilt. Unfortunately, an instructor's excessive tolerance for this form of misconduct often makes matters worse, because students with a paranoid personality style usually feel vindicated and emboldened when their instructors are cowed into submission by their excessive demands. It might be helpful at this point to keep in mind that even paranoiacs have real enemies, and part of the reason may be because they can be highly obnoxious and offensive.

Here is a helpful anecdote that relates to how instructors may deal effectively with this type of student. An administrator in a group home for male adolescents had to meet regularly with the parents of a rather severely disturbed boy. They held scheduled monthly meetings to keep abreast of their son's adjustment in the group home. Right from the get-go, the parents used these meetings to berate the administrator with criticisms about the quality of care in the group home. Most of their early criticisms were noticeably about picayunish matters, such as the assortment of fruit kept in the refrigerator. Each month, the administrator regarded their criticisms as legitimate and did his utmost to fulfill their requests for improvement.

Their demands quickly escalated, however, and over the course of the next few months these parents were clobbering him with impossible-to-fulfill demands. At wit's end, the administrator finally consulted the agency's psychiatric consultant, related the problem to him, divulged that he was fed up with these harassing and ungrateful parents, and asked for advice.

Without much ado, the consultant told him to tell the parents that since it was evident that the administrator could not adequately meet their demands, and they were generally dissatisfied with the care provided by this agency (which, by the way, was really an excellent agency), they should consider removing their son. They could either take him home or transfer him to the care of another agency. Somehow, the administrator had overlooked the rather obvious fact that he had the option to do that, and he was very grateful for the advice.

At the next meeting, the parents predictably and immediately launched into a host of wild accusations directed at the administrator and the agency. After hearing them out, the administrator parroted the advice given to him by the consultant and counseled them to consider removing their son from the institution. In other words, he called their bluff.

The transformation in the parents' attitudes and behavior was immediate and quite remarkable. Both became contrite, apologized, and rather meekly stated, "Well, that isn't necessary. Conditions in the group home aren't really that bad. They're really good enough." Of course, the last thing in the world they wanted to risk was taking their very disturbed son home with them or to a lower-quality agency. Problem solved!

## How to Respond

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How does this tale possibly apply to you, the instructor? Here's how. If students with a paranoid style of relating persistently harass and bully you with unreasonable demands, keep in mind that you, like the administrator of the child care agency, have a prerogative at some point to say that enough is enough. It is not within your job description to put up with bullying, intimidation, or violence, and you do not have to tolerate it.

Let the offending student know that if he is inordinately dissatisfied with the quality of your work, he should either find a more suitable instructor, in his personal view, or immediately desist from harassing you with constant complaints.

If the student chooses instead to remain in your classroom but persists in leveling more complaints, inform him that you will report him as a disruptive student and seek to have him disciplined appropriately.

- If dissatisfied, the student should find another instructor or immediately stop harassing you

Are we seeing more paranoia than we used to? This is possible, but doubtful. This problem has always been around. Perhaps today, though, under mounting economic, financial, and social pressures, more and more students are feeling the need to be defensive and

accusatory in order to achieve, get ahead, and outcompete their peers. So, we may see more paranoid and compulsive behavior in some respects.

Despite the growing pressure and competition, however, accusatory and harassing behavior remains unacceptable and instructors are within their rights to defend themselves appropriately against being taken advantage of by students inclined to such actions.

# 6

## THE LITIGIOUS STUDENT

### Characteristics

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The litigious student, as the name implies, is prepared to file a lawsuit at the drop of a hat. There are, it seems, students—and parents—on practically every campus who like to invoke the threat of a lawsuit in response to the slightest provocation, whether real or imagined.

Certainly, threats of lawsuits by students are discouraging and disheartening. Nonetheless, this is the age we live in, and faculty members are wise to take steps to protect themselves from legal challenges, even when they are completely unfounded. No instructor or administrator has a foolproof method for preventing lawsuits, but there are ways to discourage and curtail them.

### How to Respond

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- Follow due process procedures
- Issue warnings, verbally and in writing
- Cite Code of Student Conduct and possible consequences
- Allow them to contest allegations in a hearing

You will need to be extremely careful in all your proceedings when dealing with students who exhibit this personality style. This effort may be time consuming and inconvenient, but it is nonetheless necessary in protecting yourself and your institution against legal threats.

First, you will need to learn to follow your college or university's due process procedures in dealing with disruptive students by issuing warnings verbally and in writing, citing for students the Code of Student Conduct and the possible disciplinary consequences for misconduct that violates that code, and allowing litigious students opportunities to contest your allegations in a meeting or a disciplinary hearing, if necessary.

This means that if you are not currently up to speed on the due process procedures at your institution, you will need to take the steps necessary to inform yourself. A good starting place would be to speak to your dean or immediate supervisor about your concerns and your need for information, and then follow their recommendations.

Bear in mind that most universities also have legal departments that can provide recommendations in particularly difficult situations. So, there are existing campus resources available to help you in dealing with this situation. Use them.

If you have taken all these steps and protected yourself by following the university's due process recommendations, then you are duly justified in standing your ground against threats of legal action. Do not be cowed or intimidated into changing grades or mitigating disciplinary measures simply because a student says he is going to file a lawsuit.

The reason is simple: if you permit yourself to be intimidated by the specter of a lawsuit in this manner, you will assuredly open the floodgates to a lot more mischief. If a student threatens you with a lawsuit and you have covered your legal bases, hold firm.

If the student persists, you may want to go so far as to tell him that you would be glad to assist him in finding a good attorney, if he wishes. Pursuing legal action is his right. You and the university will need to be well prepared to defend yourselves against allegations should the student actually follow through on the threat.

# 7

## THE COMPULSIVE STUDENT

### Characteristics

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Our final personality style is the compulsive personality style. People who exhibit this personality style tend to be preoccupied with orderliness and perfectionism and will exert considerable emotional energy in an effort to control other people. These particular traits cause compulsive students to constantly check for the mistakes and imperfections of their instructors.

Because they also tend to devote excessive time and effort to work and productivity, these students may neglect leisure activities and friendships. They are also inflexible about rules and moral principles and, as a result, can be extremely critical and intolerant of the opinions and behaviors of others.

What does all this mean for their instructors? Well, instructors who have a relaxed, informal, and relativistic teaching style are likely to cause such students to be judgmental and critical of them. Instructors who espouse opinions that allow for ambiguity will be challenged to provide the absolutely right answers to complicated questions. Instructors who state or quote a range of diverse and conflicting viewpoints will offend the student with a compulsive personality style and may incur his annoyance or wrath. When an instructor makes a discernible mistake, as we all do from time to time, the compulsive student may in response display a contemptuous attitude toward the instructor.

Of course, compulsive students are often their own worst enemies, as they condemn and berate themselves for their less-than-perfect academic accomplishments. For this reason, instructors may need to provide a high degree of empathy to such students when they have received a B+ on a paper instead of the A they passionately expected and worked hard to achieve.

For example, one highly compulsive student who received a B+ in a math class sought therapy over the grade because he was considering suicide. The B+ was his only grade lower than an A thus far in his college career, but his older siblings had all graduated college with straight A averages, and as he saw it, he must achieve the same level of perfection.

## How to Respond

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- **Feel free to remain imperfect**

When some students place undue pressure upon you to be perfect in your knowledge and behavior, do everything you can to realize that this is an irrational and unrealistic expectation to impose on another person, including you. Feel free to remain imperfect; do not strive to be a flawless automaton because some of your compulsive students expect perfection from you.

If necessary, acknowledge your more glaring mistakes with humor, equanimity, and any necessary apologies. Then remember: just because these compulsive students may be uncomfortable with the imperfections of the world does not mean you have to share their discomfort!

- **Remind them you are a qualified instructor and expect to be treated with respect and dignity**

If some student with a compulsive personality style tends to harass and bully you because you have not met his perfectionistic expectations, let him know that you are a qualified instructor with the requisite skills to be his imperfect teacher and you expect to be treated with the respect and dignity to which you are entitled. If that is not good enough for him, he may need to be disciplined for being disrespectful.

Here is an illustrative anecdote: Many years ago, Isaac Bashevis Singer, who later became a Nobel laureate for his many wonderful Yiddish tales, gave a lecture. Singer spoke at length, and with erudition, on the subject of the roots of Jewish literature. At the end of this lecture, there was a question and answer session that began with a question from a man who had a nitpicking, pompous, and irritating air.

He began his remarks by saying that he believed that Mr. Singer had contradicted himself at certain points in his lecture and then proceeded to long-windedly explain how and why. Singer listened patiently and then calmly explained certain points that indicated he had not contradicted himself. He then took a look at the audience, with an impish smile on his face, and said with his charming Yiddish accent, “However, if I did happen to contradict myself, I wouldn’t commit suicide.” A roar of laughter followed.

Singer was clearly the wiser and deeper of these two men—one who strove for an unrealistic, perfect consistency in his life, and the other, the true sage, who was content to live with his own personal imperfections and ambiguities and enrich the world with his enchanting,



imaginative tales nonetheless.

It seems that there has been an increase in cheating and plagiarism in college recently, and some of that may be due to compulsive behavior. Of course, cheating has always existed in college; certainly, older generations of students and fraternity members were apt to reuse term papers from their files. Nevertheless, compulsive behavior is probably a bit more evident now than it used to be a generation ago. This may be due in part to high levels of competition and pressures to succeed. So, the average instructor can expect to run into instances of this type of behavior from time to time.

Beyond the realm of cheating and annoying perfectionism are other related issues, including compulsive movements, such as rocking or verbal comments. If rocking and verbal comments markedly disrupt the ability of other students to learn and the instructor's ability to teach, the instructor should meet with the offending student to discuss the disruptive behavior. If, in the course of this meeting, it comes to light that the behavior is somehow involuntary and symptomatic of a documented disability, the instructor may request that the student seek an accommodation through the disabled students' office of the campus.

The instructor may also request the student's permission to share with other students the fact that the student suffers from a disability that causes the rocking or verbal comments. This might serve to destigmatize the behavior and make it more socially tolerable.

However, whether the student suffers from a disability or not, be aware that under the law instructors are not required to make sweeping accommodations in either their pedagogical methods or their curricula in order to sustain a highly disruptive student in the classroom. If matters reach such serious proportions that the compulsive rocking or verbal comments require sweeping accommodations in order to retain the student, it is probably time for the instructor to report the matter as a case of disruptive student conduct and request that a disciplinary sanction be used.

## CONCLUSION

Faculty members can expect to deal with increasing numbers of difficult students as educational access widens and students who might not have attended college in decades past now find their way to campus. This means that instructors will need to be better informed and prepared to respond to a wider array of challenges than they might have been expected to deal with previously.

Clearly, the most important priorities in dealing with disruptive students have to be maintaining safety and protecting the campus community from threats posed by potentially dangerous, troubled students. These priorities require recognition of the warning signs of trouble and preparedness to respond appropriately and decisively.

Other priorities include maintaining a classroom atmosphere of respect and civility, avoiding being manipulated by students with unreasonable demands, responding appropriately to unfounded allegations, and protecting oneself and one's institution from frivolous lawsuits.

By following due process, consulting with administrators, and delivering early warnings as indicated, instructors can guard against many of the hazards of dealing with the more difficult students in the classroom.

Understanding how the range of student misbehavior tends to cluster along certain distinctive, recognizable styles is empowering and helpful to instructors. "Unusual" behaviors no longer seem random and unpredictable; instead, they are manifestations of known personality styles that exist not just in the college classroom but in the wider society as well. As such, they become more manageable, familiar, and controllable.

Many instructors report additional concerns or questions beyond the seven disruptive personality types already identified; these are addressed in the following section, "Additional Issues and Concerns." This last section of this white paper deals with extenuating circumstances, nonverbal behaviors, and, perhaps most important, "red flags" that portend physical risk when dealing with dangerous, threatening students.

## APPENDIX A: ADDITIONAL ISSUES AND CONCERNS

### **Extending special consideration to nontraditional students with jobs, families, and minimal support for attending college**

As college instructors, we want to apply the same expectations to every student, but occasionally exceptions are necessary. Nontraditional students sometimes require special provisions in college, whether these are people for whom English is a second language or who may be struggling to try and enter the mainstream within the academy and within society.

Many schools offer a full array of special services to assist students with particular areas of difficulty, such as ESL services, counseling opportunities of various kinds, and tutoring. Students should be directed to these when applicable and expected to avail themselves of these support services as needed.

Certainly, instructors and faculty members should continue to try to identify students who are scared, lonely, or desperate in some ways. It is important to look for those students who may be just on the verge of dropping out and reach out to them in whatever helpful ways are possible.

Instructors cannot do everything, however. When students in classes have psychological struggles, faculty members are limited in the help they can provide. This is where referrals for counseling come into play. Instructors do not have to delve into issues that are beyond their purview and expertise. This would be inappropriate.

What instructors can do is meet with the students individually to try to identify what it is that they need help with in their course, and to determine ways they can be assisted academically.

At the same time, instructors should provide additional help by affirming the students' inner strength—that is, by letting these students know that you see their potential to grow and to learn. Think optimistically with these students about what the future may hold for them if they apply determination and perseverance as they proceed with their academic careers.

**Dealing with conflicts that are not between students and faculty but are rather between two (or more) students or even between two faculty members:**

Sometimes, a faculty member is not involved in a conflict but is nevertheless affected by it. This could happen if two students in a class bear animosity toward each other. As long as these students are not disrupting the class, the best response may be simply to ignore it.

If two students in a class hate each other, for example, but they do not manifest that hatred in any noticeable way within the classroom, the instructor need not be especially concerned with it. The faculty member does not know what students are feeling toward each other unless they begin to manifest their feelings overtly in the classroom. If this is what is happening, do not become involved as a mediator or peacekeeper. That is neither appropriate nor necessary.

If two or more students are engaged in some kind of acrimonious arguments in the class, and this happens on a regular basis and interferes with the functioning of the class or with the integrity of the course, then it is high time for the instructor to meet with the students. You may want to do that separately with each student to explain that this is not acceptable behavior. Point out that it is not supposed to happen and that it will not be tolerated.

If one student claims that it is the other person who is starting the problem each time, let that student know that he is still responsible for his own behavior in the classroom and that you will meet and deal with the other student as well. This way, that student will know that this is not going to be an unfair or discriminatory process. You are going to have to deal with everyone involved, but you are dealing with this particular student at this particular time, and he has to take care of the problem to the extent he is capable. Then you must proceed by meeting with the other student(s) who is involved, as promised.

In general, it is helpful to see discipline as a graduated process. Begin by admonishing the parties. It does not have to be a severe admonition at first, but it should be early on when the problem first manifests itself. Do not ignore it and hope it goes away. Also, do not allow it to escalate. That, unfortunately, is what happens in too many classes: a small problem escalates and spreads. You want it to stop, so it is imperative to confront and warn the students right away.

You may admonish them first in the class, but if problems continue, meet with the students individually in an office and deal with them a little bit more severely than with an admonition. Deliver a clear warning: "Look, if this behavior continues, then I'm going to report you." Explain what this entails if you must follow through: "I'm going to report you as a disruptive student to an administrator, and I'm going to write that up and give you a copy

of it. That could result in you being suspended from this class.” It could be worse than that, such as expulsion, but most likely it would result in a suspension; let the student know this.

This all, by the way, comes under the rubric of due process, which consists of the steps you will need to follow to justify your actions and protect yourself. That is a legal requirement, and you want to make sure that you are proceeding legally with the students in handling a disruptive student-to-student conflict. Contact your administrator to be sure that you understand what due process entails at your institution.

Matters are a bit more complicated when dealing with a faculty-to-faculty conflict. The same principles apply in some ways if two faculty members do not like each other. It is certainly commonplace in all colleges that some faculty members do not get along or see eye-to-eye on everything.

Different faculty members may have all kinds of problems philosophically, socially, personally, ideologically—whatever way in which they hate each other. All that is fine and acceptable as long as it does not explode into some form of unprofessional conduct.

It is only the conduct that concerns us. If this sort of dissension causes disruptions in staff meetings or faculty meetings, for example, then it has to be taken care of by the chair of the department. If these unprofessional blowups keep happening, then an administrator may have to lay down the law and explain that this unacceptable behavior is not going to be permitted.

Do not allow these interpersonal issues to interfere with whatever business is being conducted at meetings. But keep in mind that it is not within anyone’s ability to stop people from hating or despising each other. It would be pointless to endeavor to change anyone’s feelings like that. The essential strategy is to remind people that they must conduct themselves professionally while at work and to point out what is not professional about their conduct at the time it is occurring.

**Responding to individuals who exhibit covert behavior in the classroom, such as unpleasant facial expressions or under-the-breath comments:**

Sometimes students misbehave or express their displeasure in subtle, nonverbal ways. Anyone who has ever watched a teenager roll his or her eyes at you understands what this means. But it is not always so clear cut. Facial expressions are a tricky thing for an instructor or authority figure to try to interpret. If a facial expression is in some way unpleasant, it may be because of how we perceive it rather than what it really is. There is a subjective nature to

it, which may be why some students feel that they can get away with this sort of behavior.

However, it is possible that the offending person may just have an unpleasant facial expression generally. Some people grimace a lot. People who are depressed tend to have unpleasant facial expressions. It is not fruitful to invest a lot of time and attention trying to fathom what people are really communicating with a particular facial expression, especially if the behavior is not attracting a lot of attention or creating a disruptive situation.

In contrast, if a facial expression is transformed into something that everybody in the class suddenly has to look at and pay attention to, and it becomes highly disruptive, then this is a form of behavior that probably needs to be addressed. Because of the nature of the offense, that conversation should most likely be handled in the privacy of an office. Drawing attention to the behavior in class is likely to increase the level of attention the covert behavior receives.

To give one example, Seung-Hui Cho at Virginia Tech attended class with reflective sunglasses and a hat on. His facial expression under those glasses was very disconcerting to other students, and some people actually did not attend or left classes with him because of their discomfort with his behavior, mostly due to his expression. As it turned out, of course, they were right to have been concerned and uncomfortable.

At various points during the course of Cho's time at Virginia Tech, there were some attempts to address this covert behavior. There were multiple reports about how disturbing his behavior was, and these reports included mention of his facial expression. Also, when he was asked a question by an authority figure, he would frequently not respond unless he was cajoled into doing so.

Even during his K-12 school days, Mr. Cho's teachers would take attendance and ask for him to speak up, but he would not do it. He simply would not say who he was. Somebody else would have to answer for him. Some of his actions probably crossed the line of what is acceptable behavior, and he should have been confronted for his refusal to answer.

Remember, though, that accommodations might be necessary if a person has a documented disability that affects his or her behavior. It is important to look out for that possibility, because there are some people who physically cannot change their facial expression.

For example, one man in therapy had a terrible expression on his face. An intern was sure the look portended some form of dangerous behavior; she thought he was truly dangerous, judging by that look on his face. As it turned out, this man was not dangerous at all. He just showed that look whenever he began to reflect on something in a very serious manner. She

had seen him as a potential menace when actually he was a Yale graduate who had done very well in college. So we have to be careful with our perceptions. We do not want to draw unwarranted conclusions based on superficial appearances.

Comments under the breath are another matter, however. They can be very disruptive and disturbing (not to mention disrespectful), especially if they are directed to other people or when the muttering is audible to others. In that situation, instructors will want to speak with the student about the situation if the comments are disturbing, unnecessary, and rude. It would be advisable to address this in the privacy of an office. If the muttering continues or if it is repetitious behavior, then a warning might be in order.

### **Meeting retention goals while dealing with students with these personality styles:**

The personality styles enumerated and described in this white paper exist practically everywhere. They are present in people spread throughout the population, some who frequently get into trouble and have trouble functioning, and others who lead successful lives. Even those students who completely fit the description of these personality styles can often make it through college and graduate. Retention is an important priority of many colleges, so we want to do what we can to help students finish their programs despite their personal characteristics.

If students have certain idiosyncrasies as described here, then we work with each one individually—perhaps by tailoring our responses to each one. For example, if a student says, “I’m the customer here and I have the right to take tests late or hand them in late, or not attend classes at certain times, or you must change my grade because I’m entitled to that; I pay taxes,” that is indicative of his personality style, and you want to tailor your responses to that by suggesting to him that his approach to the problem is not going to work with you. Explain firmly and clearly that you are going to set these requirements and that he is not a customer—he is a student.

As the instructor, you have the prerogative to set academic requirements and behavioral expectations. If the student fails to meet those requirements, he or she will suffer the consequences. That has to be explained, not in a punitive or hostile manner but just in a matter-of-fact and straightforward manner. You are simply exercising your rights as an instructor to set these reasonable expectations and limits.

If a particular student is paranoid and continually approaching you with endless demands that you be perfect and meet all his or her requirements, then the same response applies. You

want to keep that student in the class, ideally, but the student has to stop badgering you and behaving in a hateful, attacking manner, or the student will not make it through the course. Therefore, that relates to the whole issue of retention. You want to retain that student, but the student has to desist behaving that way, or he or she will not be able to stay in the class.

In dealing with sociopaths, it may be helpful to remember it is the personality makeup of about 3–5 percent of the population. It is a part of reality that you are not going to be able to change.

So the issue is not whether the person has that specific personality type; the issue is how the student behaves in your class. Certainly, many sociopaths have graduated from college and been successful in the business world and in politics, but they probably managed not to engage in significant misconduct along the way. Or if they did engage in misconduct, it was either undetected or unproven.

Some sociopathic students are apt to cheat or do other things that are delinquent in the classroom or elsewhere that will draw negative attention and get them into trouble. These students have to be warned that their behavior is unacceptable and will have consequences. Warnings can aid in retaining students, if it is possible. They must be warned that if they continue to engage in certain behaviors, they probably will not make it through the school experience. Follow due process, and then the student's behavior will determine the outcome.

It is truly in the interest of students, whatever personality types they exhibit, that they reasonably conform to the Code of Student Conduct. That is the requirement. If you remind students about that, one way or the other they will probably succeed and be retained if they are willing to respect and conform to that particular non-negotiable requirement.

### **Handling a student who responds with anger to firm instructions:**

The appropriate response to a student's display of anger depends on the situation. As already mentioned, dimensions that affect the issue of free speech are things like appropriate decibel level or obscenities. Shouting and cursing are not permissible behaviors in a classroom. The term "anger" does not necessarily imply behavior that is unacceptable; it could, but it does not have to in itself.

"Anger" connotes unacceptable behavior, but consider a student who responds angrily by showing displeasure. Perhaps he says something in a civilized way, such as, "I don't accept your point of view. I don't like your decision about this. I don't like your grade. I'm very angry with you." There is probably nothing an instructor has to do about that situation other than



to say, “Well, we agree to disagree, so let’s move on, and I hope that we can work this out. I hope that things will improve.” People are allowed to disagree with one another as long as it is handled in a respectful manner.

If the response, however, is very attacking and explosive, including obscenities and threats of any kind, then the instructor must act immediately and firmly by reporting the matter. This is especially true if the response includes some physical gestures that one might easily interpret as being threatening in some manner.

It would be advisable to report the incident not only to an administrator but to campus security as well. That is a very important intervention to use. There are cases in which a student has said menacing things to an instructor, such as, “You better watch out!” Anything like that needs to be dealt with officially, because that is hardly a veiled threat; it is pretty direct.

No instructor needs to put up with bullying, violence, or any kind of menacing behavior. Such behavior is clearly unacceptable. It is the student’s behavior to consider, not his or her anger. If the student’s behavior is out of bounds, then an instructor is justified in responding accordingly.

Instructors who are extremely fearful of meeting with certain students because they pose a potential threat need to take steps to protect themselves, and they should be aware of what their options are. One option is not to meet with the student at all and perhaps have somebody else meet with him or her. This may be a good idea if the problem seems to be personal.

Another option is to have someone else present in the office so that the instructor feels safe while speaking to the student. This other person might be a colleague, department chair, or administrator. A third option might be to make sure that the office door is open at all times when dealing with such a student.

You may even want to have a code word or phrase worked out with a secretary in the outer office, so that if you pick up the phone and say, “I’d like a peanut butter sandwich,” the secretary really knows that you mean, “Get the cops over here now!” or “Get the security people over here immediately.” Those are options and safeguards that you should have in place if you feel you might need them in dealing with a particularly difficult student.

At Virginia Tech, for example, the chair of the department, who offered to provide individual tutoring to Mr. Cho, did have a code word worked out for protection. The irony of that situation is that she was willing to give him individual tutoring but also recognized that he

was a potential threat. She worked out a code word with somebody in an outer office so that if something happened, she could covertly alert others to come in and intervene.

Again, it is not anger, per se, to watch out for: it is the behavior. If behavior is highly unacceptable, including obscenities, screaming, and so on, then it is time to use the security people on campus and document the event. Documentation is very important.

### **Responding to disruptive “good” behavior, such as wanting to answer every question:**

Wanting to answer every question is not exactly “good” behavior. Students need to learn how to share the limelight with each other. A student who is overeager to answer each question might be told in the privacy of the instructor’s office that this eagerness to answer questions and participate is duly appreciated, but that she needs to harness some of her enthusiasm in order to allow classmates the opportunity to share their answers as well.

If the behavior persists after this discussion, the instructor may need to both ignore the student’s repeated hand-waving and issue a stronger admonition or warning.

### **Providing protection under the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) for a student with Tourette Syndrome or similar affliction:**

A student with Tourette Syndrome, a neurological disability, is definitely entitled to legally mandated accommodations under ADA. However, it is important for instructors and administrators to understand that there is a legal principle that can be stated as follows: “No college or university is prohibited from disciplining a student for misconduct even if that misconduct is a symptom or manifestation of a disability. In other words, a physical or psychiatric disability does not, in itself, afford a student immunity from disciplinary sanctions for misconduct.”

### **Dealing with bullying behavior and threats:**

Here is a hypothetical situation: A group of large football players surround a professor and threaten him with the ultimatum of giving them all As or facing the prospect of having his home burned down or one of his family members attacked. This is reported to the administration, and the students respond by saying, “We were only kidding. Can’t you take a joke?”

As we know, some college football players regard themselves as a privileged class on campus that is entitled to all sorts of perquisites and shenanigans, including the right to terrify an instructor. If the incident can be reasonably substantiated, the administrator who is told by the offending students that the matter was just a joke should reply that the joke is on the players, and they will have to sit out umpteen games or an entire season for their unfunny, menacing “joke.”

If such discipline is imposed and the players retaliate against the instructor for reporting the incident, depending on the level of threatening behavior they exhibit, they may need to be expelled from the college and charged with a crime. After all, threatening someone with bodily harm is definitely a crime, whether it occurs on or off campus.

## APPENDIX B: RED FLAG BEHAVIORS

Some student behaviors are merely annoying; others may be indications of severe problems. The Governor's Commission in Virginia compiled a list of red flag behaviors or signals in the aftermath of the massacre at Virginia Tech. It conducted a study of the events that led up to that tragedy and detailed quite a number of troubling signs.

There has to be a caveat that goes along with this, however, and that is not to assume that any one of these red flags alone—or even a couple of them—necessarily represents a dangerous situation that requires or warrants some form of alarmist reaction.

Taken together in a constellation, though, these red flag behaviors probably would suggest that if somebody met this description and exhibited all or most of the particular markers, you might want to consider it a reportable kind of situation for your own protection and the protection of others.

Among the red flags to watch out for are things like **anger** and the **impulsivity** that goes along with anger. **Frequent loss of temper** is another thing to be careful about. One red flag that can also be a bit disconcerting is **fascination with weapons** and their accoutrements.

Another red flag to be careful about is people who are **loners**. Quite frequently, we find that the people who have perpetrated these kinds of violent incidents, such as at Virginia Tech, are loners. However, that is not always the case. The perpetrator of a shooting at Northern Illinois University was not such a person, so we have to be careful about overreacting to that potential marker. In Philip Roth's book *Indignation*, one character tends to be a loner, and the dean of his university picks on him because the dean thinks he is a troubled individual, but, in fact, the student simply would prefer not to be socially interactive. So we have to be careful about that one; some people who are not dangerous are merely introverted and reclusive.

**Suicidal and homicidal ideation** is also a possible red flag. Obviously, suicidal or homicidal thoughts should raise our level of alertness. **Stalking** behavior is another red flag that definitely belongs here among those characteristics of people who can cause some major problems. Stalking can be a forerunner of some very dangerous behavior, as it was at Virginia Tech. Cho stalked before he committed his violent acts. He was identified as a stalker, although the people he stalked did not use that term. They used the word "harassment," because the women who were stalked were not willing to have him prosecuted, so they did not press charges. The term was changed from "stalking" to "harassment."

**Imitation of murderers** is another red flag. There is also the **martyr self-concept** that comes into play here. It is not always possible to know about this type of private thought process, but people like Mr. Cho, for example, want to become martyrs. Such individuals have been identified by researchers as people who feel very, very insignificant and inconsequential. They consider themselves ciphers and envy those around them, including more successful students. They want to be celebrated. They want to be famous, even at the risk of losing their own lives. That is why they sometimes are willing to carry out a massacre and then kill themselves, because at least they have achieved one part of what they wanted, which was to be remembered, recognized, and celebrated, even if in a macabre kind of way.

A **mental health history** can relate to dangerousness, but that is not always the case. Many people with serious mental health problems are never dangerous, so one has to know what kind of a mental health history is involved.

One of the best predictors of violence is a **history of committing prior acts of violence**. The problem here is that we do not always know a particular student's complete prior criminal history. You can know that to some extent only. If the campus police wish to, they can trace a person's history through the court and find out what that person has been convicted of previously. If it comes to light that the person has committed dangerous acts or has actually killed, one should be quite concerned about the potential for violence. That is one of the best predictors of future problems.

## APPENDIX C: SUMMARY OF DISRUPTIVE CLASSROOM PERSONALITY STYLES AND RECOMMENDED RESPONSES

- Explosive
- Antisocial
- Passive-Aggressive
- Narcissistic
- Paranoid
- Litigious
- Compulsive

### #1: EXPLOSIVE STYLE

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#### Characteristics

- Characterized by volatility, shouting, profanity, bullying, making threats
- Most suffer intermittently and are harmless
- Others may get out of control repeatedly and pose a threat

#### Response

Remember: Safety first

- Ask student to quiet down, return to seat, leave
- If student persists, dismiss class and contact security
- Document incident and send to designated dean or judicial affairs office
- Prior warning required by due process

Exceptions to free speech

- Decibel level
- Obscene or abusive language
- Relevancy to topic
- Time—no long, effusive monologues

### #2: ANTISOCIAL STYLE

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#### Characteristics

- Characterized by cheating, stealing, forging documents, exploiting others
- Also known as sociopathic style
- Can also physically hurt or even kill others
- Suffers from deficient or flawed conscience
- Plays by a different set of rules
- Has own set of amoral values and precepts
- Low regard for law or codes of conduct
- Perceives others' good qualities as vulnerabilities to be exploited
- Charm, wit, intelligence, charisma enable them to be engaging and seductive

#### Response

- Regarding cheating, honor codes can work well
- Regarding plagiarism, define it in the syllabus
- Make penalties proportionate and spell out rules each semester
- Apply rules to all students in equal measure

### #3: PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE STYLE

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#### Characteristics

- Appears at first to be passive and compliant
- Later demonstrates strong elements of defiance and dissension

#### Form of defiance:

Chronic lateness

- Probably form of resistance

#### Response

- Strict rules and adverse consequences usually improve attendance and punctuality
- Keep records; mention in syllabus that a certain number of late arrivals counts as an absence, and a certain number of absences contributes to a lowered grade

#### Form of defiance:

Sleeping in class

- Rude and unacceptable

#### Response

- Ask to discuss after class—rule out medical problems like diabetes or narcolepsy
- Warn that they will be asked to leave immediately if caught sleeping again

#### Form of defiance:

Procrastination

- Usually unconscious and unintentional

#### Response

- Discussing may motivate some to overcome pattern
- Mention campus counseling service as resource
- Give periodic unscheduled quizzes
- Compliment and show interest when students submit assignments and keep up with readings

### #4: NARCISSISTIC STYLE

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#### Characteristics

- Arrogant, self-centered, self-entitled, tendency to devalue or denigrate others

#### Response

- Remember that college hired you based on qualifications
- Do not answer personal questions unless doing so provides a relevant and positive contribution
- Self-entitled students do not respect boundaries; safeguard privacy by maintaining your own boundaries

### #5: PARANOID STYLE

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#### Characteristics

- Suspicious, likely to level unfounded accusations and feel picked upon
- Blames own limitations and failures on others
- Emboldened when instructors are cowed into submission by their demands

#### Response

- If dissatisfied, they should find another instructor or immediately stop harassing you

## #6: LITIGIOUS STYLE

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### Characteristics

- Prepared to file a lawsuit at the drop of a hat

### Response

- Follow due process procedures
  - issue warnings, verbally and in writing
  - cite Code of Student Conduct and possible consequences
- Allow them to contest allegations in a hearing

## #7: COMPULSIVE STYLE

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### Characteristics

- Preoccupied with orderliness and perfectionism
- Exerts emotional energy to control others
- Constantly checks for instructors' imperfections
- Inflexible about rules and moral principles; can be critical and intolerant

### Response

- Feel free to remain imperfect
- Remind them you are a qualified instructor and expect to be treated with respect and dignity



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