

## ANTICIPATING PROBLEMS

For the most part, our students are wonderful young people and our experience with them is -- if we do a good job -- positive and rewarding. Everyone, however, has occasional problems, and a few issues can eat up enormous amounts of time and energy. Here are some hints for damage control.

### General principles:

- Maintain good documentation of things such as attendance, work submitted, copies of communications with students.
- Make your expectations clear and follow your own policies.
- Create a paper trail on potential problems. If you see a problem coming, inform your chair of the situation, so your position, concerns, and actions are on the record.
- Remain calm and professional, even in the face of provocation.
- Inform yourself on academic **legal issues**.
- Maintain proper boundaries with students, avoid contacts and activities more appropriate for friends than for student and teacher.

### Potential Problem Areas:

- **Arguments about grades.** Students will complain about their grades. On the one hand, they will tell you deserve a certain grade because they did whatever they did. Or you will hear that if they don't get a certain grade they will lose their scholarship, etc. There are a couple of things you can do to limit these problems. The first is to have clear criteria for grades. This is where having rubrics can help, since you may use them to explain to students why they got the grade they got. Secondly, you need a **good policy for dealing with grade challenges** (TΦ101 likes this one because it forces the student to write something before talking to you about grades). Thirdly, you need to find a way to make the discussion about grades objective rather than personal. For example, the student will say, "I was disappointed with my grade, I thought I did better." Your reply might be: "I was disappointed as well, since I also thought you would do better. Let's talk about what went wrong for you, so we can help you do better in the future." The goal is to indicate that you and the student are both on the same side, which is wanting the student to do better.
- **Problems with lateness, decorum, etc.** Discipline problems in college classes are not new (Augustine left Carthage because of rowdy students), but some instructors are reporting that the problems are getting worse. Athletes, for example, can be a problem, but their coaches (who don't want them getting low grades) can often straighten them out. Although many of us are anarchists by nature, it may be necessary to set and keep stricter standards. Depending on your institution's culture, you may want to build these into your **syllabus**. Neil Williams has developed some principles for what he calls "The **Rules of Engagement**" covering things such as wearing baseball hats in class.
- **Disrespectful students who are disruptive in class.** TΦ101 has seen quite a few of these cases. The worst cases had some of these characteristics: the faculty member was youthful in appearance; female; petite; and inexperienced or a graduate assistant. The student was older (junior or senior); male; tall; and taking a course outside of major area as a requirement. Why students take it into their head to be rude to someone in authority over them is a mystery, but they do it. TΦ101 has heard that Darby Lewis, author of *A Portrait of the Student as a Young Wolf: Motivating Undergraduates*, talks about this in some of her presentations, where she says that it can all be understood in terms of who is alpha dog in the pack. At any rate, you have a right to working conditions where you are not being harassed, and you don't have to put up with this kind of behavior. Sometimes the Student Life division can help; most schools have a code of student conduct that prevents inappropriate behavior and, if necessary, the student can be removed from your class. While you may not be used to dealing with these situations, the Judicial Affairs officer in your Student Life division deals with much more serious cases on a daily basis. Your disrespectful student is probably no stranger to this office, and will not want to see them again.
- **Students on downward spiral.** Occasionally you will see students, especially first year students, who stop doing assignments and coming to class. Often it is a spiral that starts with too many distractions, and then moves to a place where students are so far behind that they are afraid to come to class. If possible, call the student in for a meeting and try to refer the student to appropriate resources: e.g., seeing an assistant dean; study skills counseling; dropping some courses to lighten load; talking to faculty members; getting tutoring.

- **Weird and strange behavior.** Remember Virginia Tech. If students live by themselves off campus, their faculty members are the only ones who see them on a regular basis. If you think the student is in trouble, call appropriate officials at your school.
- **Students with personal problems.** Often students will talk to you about personal problems. Always keep a box of tissues in your office, you'll probably need it. The fact that the student trusts you enough to talk to you is a positive sign. You aren't supposed to be a therapist, but you should listen sympathetically, and, if necessary, refer the student for help. Last time you checked, you were neither a priest nor a lawyer, so you also need to understand how to handle **confidentiality**. Usually the school's counseling center will be happy to talk to you about the student.

Resources:

For a discussion of the different types of problem students whom one is like to meet, see Wilbert J. McKeachie, *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. 10th ed. New York: Houghtin Mifflin, 1999. 235 ff.

Angela Provitera McGlynn has a chapter length discussion on dealing with disruptive students and disruptive behavior, with lots of tips for how to handle various problems. *Teaching Today's College Students*, Madison: Atwood Publishing (2007).

For a set of policies on classroom behavior and decorum see Williams, Neil F., "**The Rules of Engagement** : Socializing College Students for the New Century," *The National Teaching & Learning Forum Newsletter*. 17:1. December 2007.

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