Behavior Management for the Higher Education Leader

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Abstract

Student behavior in the adult classroom and on college and university campuses is rarely treated in a proactive way (Ragle & Paine, 2009). There is an underlying assumption that students know how to behave in the classroom and co-curricular settings. Student misbehavior is then treated in punitive ways, punishing students, using progressive discipline. This chapter includes discussions on prevention strategies, responses, and legal and ethical considerations of behavior management with the goal of helping academic leaders, faculty members, and others to consider how they can reduce student disruption.

Introduction

Since university and college students are adults, campus leaders and faculty members often assume that students know how to behave in the classroom and campus environments. However, since many students come from diverse backgrounds, without prior exposure to the college environment, some may not have the cultural context for appropriate behaviors in the campus environment. How students talk to authority figures and peers is dependent on their understanding of power and how to convey respect. Students need to be taught the culture of their college and of higher education environments in general. This chapter examines how university leaders can support faculty members and staff in creating a culture that supports positive behavior and minimizes disruptive behavior in the classroom and on campus.

Common examples of disruptive behavior include “tardiness and absenteeism, unpreparedness, inattention, personal disruption, distracting other students, inappropriate student demands, incivility towards the instructor, and academic

dishonesty" (Marchand-Stenhoff, 2009, pp. 109–110). In a large-scale survey of students, the three most disruptive behaviors were "continuing to talk after being asked to stop . . . coming to class under the influence of alcohol or drugs [and] allowing a cell phone to ring" (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2010, p. 16). This chapter will address these types of behaviors. More violent behaviors will be briefly mentioned in a section on behavioral intervention teams.

Bayer and Braxton (2004) asserted that faculty members play the most crucial role in creating an environment of civility in their classroom. They also promoted the use of a code of conduct that binds both the faculty and students to specific civil actions in the classroom. Classroom behavior continues to be important, not just to create an adequate learning environment, but also because classroom disruption in the form of "disrespectful disruption and insolent inattention" can have a statistically significant impact on the persistence of students in higher education (Hirschy & Braxton, 2004, p. 71). Campus leaders who care about retention will strive to maintain the level of decorum that will lead to persistence of the students.

Prevention of Disruptive Behavior

In the Classroom

Appropriate behavior for a specific setting is learned. By being explicit in the communication of expectations, instructors can assist the students to learn the social norms of the classroom and prevent some common disruptive behaviors.

Disruptive behavior is not only a phenomenon in the brick-and-mortar classroom. One study showed that the greatest way to reduce disruptive behavior in the online classroom is to explicitly state behavioral expectations in the syllabus (Galbraith & Jones, 2010). Faculty members may want to consider articulating online etiquette or "netiquette" conventions in their opening statements. For those new to the online discussion forum, reminders of basic etiquette (e.g., using all capital letters is considered yelling, or that one should write in proper English and spell all words out fully, rather

than in text-message code) for a classroom setting may assist students in acclimating to the environment and contributing to a positive learning experience with their behavior.

Research by Nordstrom, Bartels, and Bucy (2009) indicated that the clearest predictor of disruptive behavior in the classroom was a positive attitude toward that behavior. They theorize that reframing the behavior as negative or disruptive can assist the students in refraining from it. This research also supports the idea of outlining explicit expectations of behavior in order to prevent disruptions.

Instructors have many options for setting behavioral expectations. One option is for the instructor to engage in a group expectations activity. In this activity, the instructor asks their students to set a behavioral code for the class. As a member of the class, the instructor is able to influence the behavior code and make sure that the students' non-negotiable behaviors are incorporated in the code. This activity can be done with the whole class brainstorming together, or with every student writing his or her own list, sharing lists with their peers, and together selecting the themes.

Another option is to model behavioral expectations. Instructors should be explicit about their expectations for class. They should clarify which behaviors are unacceptable, and clearly state their policies on typical disruptive behaviors, such as cell phones, laptops, eating, and taking breaks. Faculty members should model the behaviors they want to see. For example, an instructor may want to start class by taking her cell phone out of her bag, and saying, "Let's all remember to turn our phones off" as they make a show of turning theirs off. This modeling will help the students see the behavior and recognize that the instructor is serious about promoting it. Additionally, faculty members should praise good behavior as they see it. For example, it can be helpful to say things like, "Wow, I'm so impressed that we are all ready to start right at two o'clock! Thank you all for being here on time." Students, like most humans, appreciate praise and will respond by being more likely to behave accordingly in the future.

Yet another way to set behavioral expectations is through good teaching practices. When students are engaged and feel supported in class, they feel a desire to participate

and be positive. Good teaching practices include (a) ensuring that all teacher-led activities are engaging; (b) using a variety of teaching techniques to reach all types of learners; (c) providing a "map" for students to know where the class is going and to anticipate the day; (d) providing opportunities for students to interact with one another; and (e) ensuring that those opportunities are structured and appropriate.

And finally, instructors can set behavioral expectations by providing structure and accountability. For example, when assigning a group activity, faculty members can give each student a specific role in the group and give the group a specific product to produce during their time working together. Then, the instructor can circulate throughout the room, providing assistance and redirecting the students if they are off task. Providing this simple structure and accountability can increase time on task and reduce disruptions by the students.

On Campus

Preventing disruptive behavior outside the classroom requires similar skills and abilities to preventing it in the classroom. The difference is that for behavior outside of the classroom, all college or university employees are responsible for being explicit about expectations, modeling desired behavior, and praising good behavior. Because of the broad base of staff required to effectively create a culture of positive behavior on campus, leadership is crucial. Campus leaders need to enroll their staff in ensuring that the desired behaviors are the ones that are supported and modeled. Leaders must ensure that members of both the staff and faculty understand that they each are responsible for confronting students if they see disruptive or emergent behavior. Campus leaders should both explicitly state and model the behaviors they want in the staff and the students (Bayer & Braxton, 2004).

Campus leaders should also ensure that the physical spaces on campus are set up in ways that encourage positive behavior. This means keeping spaces neat and orderly, monitoring the noise in various spaces, putting in sound-reducing features when appropriate, and ensuring that broken furniture or equipment is removed or repaired.

Creating a campus where students feel that the administration cares about them and about the environment can help support positive behavior on campus.

Responses to Disruptive Behavior

In the Classroom

Although prevention is the goal, it is also important for instructors to have a plan of action for how to respond to disruptive behavior when it happens. The first goal should always be for instructors to take care of themselves. Instructors cannot deal with disruptive behavior in appropriate and constructive ways if they are too flustered or angry to moderate themselves. Instructors should not confront a student or stay in a situation that they feel is dangerous. Therefore, they should remove themselves from situations if their presence is making matters worse. Instructors should know when to ask for help, either in the immediate situation of dealing with the disruptive behavior or processing a stressful situation after it happens.

Second, faculty members should remember that, in the classroom, they are in charge. They are responsible not only for the content of their classes but also for the learning environment that they cultivate. They should create and enforce a positive learning environment. It is up to the instructor to redirect students who are behaving in inappropriate ways, and even ask students to leave class if necessary. Faculty members should discern when they need to be direct. Sometimes, a simple “please stop” or “take that outside” can be enough to extinguish a behavior. Not confronting the behavior sends the message to the rest of the class that the behavior is acceptable. Faculty members should remember that it is okay, and even encouraged, to be direct.

Finally, when instructors need to confront a student, they may want to consider couching their confrontation in concern. For example, rather than saying, “You may not fall asleep in my class, get out!” the faculty member may have better success by saying to a student, “I’m concerned about your falling asleep in class because I’m afraid you may be missing important content. Are you OK?” Framing the confrontation in an “I’m

concerned about your [behavior] because of the [impact]. Are you OK" gives the faculty member the ability to both confront the behavior and de-escalate the situation. The more specific one can be about the behavior, the easier it will be for the student to understand the problem.

On Campus

The response to disruptive behavior outside the classroom is similar to that inside the classroom. Campus leaders, faculty, and staff need to take care of themselves, remember who is in charge, and know when to be direct. The caring confrontation can go a long way in these situations as well. Campus leaders can support employees learning these conflict management skills. They can support a climate on campus that helps staff members support each other in confrontational situations. For example, some campuses have a pass phrase that if said casually means, "I need help." The employees can work that pass phrase into a conversation to ask their peers for help, without having to say, directly and in front of the student, "I'm in over my head."

Legal and Ethical Considerations

One important consideration in responding to disruptive behavior on campus is ensuring that students have due process. Due process means that legal proceedings are fair and that the alleged perpetrator of a disruption gets timely notice of the process and their right to be heard. Campus policies need to be followed and equally applied to all students. There should be opportunity for appeal if the student feels that the punishment is disproportionate to the disruption. In that event, students need to have fair notice of their hearing or review, and they need to have an opportunity for their side of the case to be reviewed (Dismissing Students, 2010). Students are also entitled to legal counsel if they could be facing criminal charges, in addition to the campus charges.

In addition to creating a fair and legal process for review of disruptive behavior, campus employees should always act in ethical ways when responding to student behavior. They

should be discrete in the handling of confrontation, and should avoid threats of reprisal or punishment for students who want an appeal or representation for their hearings.

Teaching Behavior Management to Adult Educators

Current and future campus leaders should be trained on both preventing and responding to disruptive behavior on campus. Although behavior management is explicitly taught in K–12 education programs, there is little discussion of it outside of lessons on the judicial process in higher education or adult learning programs. Yet, disruptive behavior continues to be an issue on college and university campuses (Bayer & Braxton, 2004).

In recent years, many campuses have started behavioral intervention teams (BITs). These teams are charged with assessing and responding to tips or recommendations from faculty and staff who witness behavior they think is concerning. The teams often consist of campus security officers, academic and student services, deans, and representatives from risk management, human resources, and the counseling center. Many of these teams were formed in a post–Virginia Tech shooting era, where there is fear of the low-likelihood, high-risk occurrences, like a campus shooting.

BIT members can choose to respond to a situation with a continuum of responses, from monitoring the situation to a voluntary or involuntary leave for the student (HEMHA, n.d.). At many institutions, the BIT focuses on the prevention of a violent response by students. One factor that the HEMHA (n.d.) white paper on BIT revealed is that prevention of violence goes largely unnoticed, while a violent act that is carried out attracts attention. For a BIT to be effective, it must be organized to follow protocol and procedure in a systematic way. The team must have adequate training and guidance on what to do in specific scenarios.

Sokolow and Lewis (2009) indicated that “modern behavior intervention teams see their role as nominally to address threat, and primarily to support and provide resources to students” (p. 5). A campus that is well resourced (either on campus, or in the local community) for supporting all types of students’ mental health needs, and for

identifying and confronting students who need support, can take steps to avoid a catastrophic situation on campus. These teams, when functioning in a preventative mode, rather than a punitive one, can be a complement to the more punitive functionality of the typical campus judicial systems.

Because BITs have become more common and continue to increase after each high-profile violent act on campuses, future campus leaders need to be taught how to create or participate in these types of teams. Both prevention and response should be incorporated into classroom training. Courses like Legal Issues in Higher Education teach appropriate responses and legal details (such as due process) for responding, but there is little done in typical programs to teach prevention.

Bayer and Braxton (2004) promoted the notion of a campus committee on teaching integrity. The idea behind such a committee is to ensure that instructors are using the best practices in their classrooms and are not contributing to the disruptive behavior through process or procedure. Leaders on campuses can be integral in creating these committees and working with faculty to ensure that the committees have a positive effect.

Because university teaching is often done in an environment without outside observers, it is easy for faculty to slide in their own behavior. Faculty members need to be held to a code of conduct, and should be responsible for ensuring that they are not disruptive in the classroom. Students should be made aware of the code of conduct for teaching, and should have mechanisms for holding their instructors to that code. Braxton and Bayer (2004) published a ten-item code of conduct for faculty that includes elements like communicating details of the class content to the students, being fair and present in advising, and refraining from inappropriate relationships with the students. Such a code would make the behavioral expectations for faculty explicit and potentially cut back on disruptive behavior in class.

Training programs for faculty, whether through formal coursework or informal workshops, should assist in teaching excellent classroom management skills, including best practices in classroom instruction so that faculty can prevent disruptive behavior.

Conclusion

The prevention and response to disruptive behavior on campus is the collective responsibility of campus leaders, faculty, and staff. Proper training in classroom management and teaching techniques can assist faculty in maintaining proper decorum in their classes. Campus leaders need to model desired behaviors and communicate expectations effectively. BITs and committees that support teaching integrity can further promote a positive campus environment.

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