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WORKING WITH RESISTANT AND DIFFICULT STUDENTS

Check Yourself

We have noticed an interesting psychological phenomenon over the years. It reminds us of the story about the emperor who had no clothes. Remember that one? He ends up parading down the street wearing not a stitch because no one tells him that his magnificent outfit is just his birthday suit.

Staff are like this sometimes (not you of course—and certainly not us— but some of them out there are like this). Staff get to talk for hours each week to students about rules and policy, often with very little feedback or a need to listen to other viewpoints. The rules are the rules. They have total control of their policy with very little oversight from their supervisors. They are praised for controlling the front desk, keeping meetings short and focused and being able to do so without assistance. They enforce policy and do so with a degree of authority and assurance that is often un-checked. They receive very little direction in how manage students who disagree with policy or rules and can develop their own departmental standards, rules, and social mores. It can be a little like Lord of the Flies when left unchecked.

This freedom can create some truly great departments around campus. It allows them to lead and create based on their ideas and thoughts. It lets them alter direction and change the focus to accommodate a new situations and concerns. It allows for creative and critical thinking. This freedom has the potential to create unique and flexible learning environments for students. However, all this freedom can also create some arrogant, entitled, and rude staff that are well defended against criticism, suggestions for improvements or challenges to their fiefdom (again, not you or us, of course).

Staff may develop serious blind spots in their interactions with students and, by extension, their ability to manage disruption and crisis. These blind spots can be institutionalized when staff are encouraged to control their spaces and handle conflict on their own. There is a not-so-subtle message: “Good staff control their students.” End of story.

This is one of the reasons we want to call some of you out on your behavior because, really, there just aren’t that many opportunities for a staff to hear, “Hey, there is a better way to do that.” We know that has been our path over a combined forty years of working in student affairs. It has been with the skills we learned in our professions as a college counseling center director and a Dean of Students that we have been successful managing students in crisis. For us, it has been a combination of on the job learning as well as taking advantage of professional development opportunities—everything from learning about threat assessment and trauma-informed interviewing techniques to paying close attention to the changing student population.

Perhaps this message will bounce off your well-defended view of yourself as an excellent staff member. We hope not. We’d ask you to lower your guard just a little bit. Just to see how it feels. Perhaps we are preaching to the choir, and you aren’t in need of redirection in your handling of a crisis. You already have these skills and the experience and knowledge to calm students down and redirect negative behavior. If this is so, then we are glad we see eye to eye. Hopefully you can still find something new and useful.

Maybe you are so set in your ways that you aren’t looking for new way of doing things, especially from us or a required reading on behavior management your department head put into your lap.

And maybe—just maybe—this is for you. Maybe you want to be better at handling the conversation with a student who says she is thinking of killing herself.

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Maybe you wonder if there is another way to deal with a student who continues to flaunt the rules and acts in an entitled manner at your front desk. Maybe you want to know what kind of behaviors you should handle yourself and what you need to share with your campus BIT (this goes by many names) or Student Conduct Office.

Maybe you want some help to be more effective at your job. Good. Us too. Let's begin.

A Case of Disruption

Ginny is a first-year college student from an affluent family. She was involved in many extra-curricular activities in high school such as debate club, student government and varsity swimming. She came to college with a double major and has come close to completing a difficult first semester with twenty-four credit hours. She is told by an academic advisor that she cannot register for a course that she feels she needs to take to be on track during her upcoming spring semester. Ginny becomes hysterical at this idea and begins to berate the advisor and insult them for not knowing anything about her major. The advisor again explains the course she wants to take is not offered and Ginny says, "I could do your job better. This is not what was promised by admissions when I picked your school to attend!"

Signs of Imminent Danger

Why is it important to focus on this switch from everyday life to the extraordinary situation in front of you? Identifying this point of transition allows the staff member to more quickly establish the proper mindset to respond quickly and properly to address the behavior presenting in front of them. Staff who are not able to transition from everyday meeting and conversational skills into the skills required to intervene with disruptive or dangerous behavior will not be as effective in achieving the desired outcome.

When training staff across the country, we stress the importance of not "being right, but also punched in the head." These are the times when a staff member says "Well, Dylan…I am sorry you are upset, but it clearly says right here in the policy manual—that you have had since the beginning of the semester—that you cannot apply for financial aid funds after this cutoff date..." While the staff member is certainly correct making these statements to the student, they may be missing the subtle changes in the student's behavior such as clenched fists, shifting back and forth, and glaring eyes that signal an impending attack.

Likewise, a key to preventing disruptive behavior from escalating requires staff to bring their attention and focus to bear on the existing behavioral problem. Too often, behavior management becomes a nuisance and frustration for the staff and key questions are not considered in deference to getting back to the content of the rules or policy enforcement ASAP.

When working with Ginny, a natural reaction for the staff would be to return in kind her insulting behavior or to set a firm limit about her behavior. A successful intervention with Ginny begins with seeing her as overwhelmed and not interacting at her best. When staff recognize this, they can conceptualize the problem in a manner that doesn't lend itself to internalizing her expressed frustrations or taking offense. Then staff are better able to respond based on the tools in their kit, rather than in a reactive manner.

When confronting disruptive behavior, some questions to ponder include:

- "Why is this student acting out right now? What might be some causes of their inappropriate behavior (interrupting, misuse of technology, rude or entitled response)?"
- "What are my goals for an intervention from this student? What is the desired outcome of my

intervention?"

- "What kind of intervention with this student will bring about the desired effect?"
- "Is this a behavior I should address now or something I should address after the student finishes?"

Know the Signs of Danger

Prior to a student escalating to a physical attack, there are often several signs, or tells, they share with the target. Knowing these signs gives a staff member some important added knowledge in assessing the likelihood of them escalating into a physical attack. These include a clenched fist, a student moving in and out of your personal space, verbal declarations of an intention to act violently, and the target glancing around the office for something to throw or use as a weapon. People don't simply explode in violence, they escalate over time as their adrenaline floods their system and they become trapped, afraid, angry or rageful. Attending to some of these escalation behaviors can give staff the chance to better respond.

Keep Yourself Safe

There is this myth that we are expected to do everything for our students with little regard for our needs. While this may be true in some customer service scenarios, the exception to this rule is when we feel unsafe with the student. This could be a feeling in our gut or a more direct response to behaviors or direct threats issued by the student. In these situations, it is recommended to consider a safe escape path or removing yourself from the interaction. While we want to keep others safe around us and have a responsibility to intervene when we come across disruptive or dangerous behaviors, our own personal safety is paramount.

Know Your Backup

Have an awareness of what resources are around you in terms of calling for help. A staff member alone in an after-hours office should approach a potentially violent student scenario differently from a staff surrounded by assistance and across the street from the campus police department. Some schools are lucky and have invested well in technology and panic alarms that are fixed in certain locations (think under a bank teller's desk) in the event of a crisis. These are common in financial aid, conduct, counseling, and the registrar's office, anywhere that would be considered a "hot spot" on a given campus. In the event your school hasn't invested in this, other options could involve using a wireless doorbell situated at the front desk connected to someone in the back office who could manually call campus safety. Other creative options involve web-based panic alarms that can trigger a police response from a computer terminal or smartphone. Another option is coming up with a code shared with another worker such as "get me a coffee with extra cream" that is a covert signal to call for help. In terms of practicality, make sure your code word isn't overly transparent like "Bring me the red folder" or "Can you get Dr. Strong on the phone?" An upset student may see through this and become more enraged at the subterfuge.

Be Prepared

Don't wait until a crisis occurs to think about what you would do. Planning on how to respond to a crisis during the crisis is a bad idea. Think about working in tabletop exercises or example scenarios during staff meetings and orientation events at the start of the year. Think about possible exits around the office or department. Know how to contact campus police and the difference between calling them on a direct line versus calling 911 (sometimes 911 routes to an off campus response that can take longer).

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Understand Their Perspective

Another approach to keep calm when facing a disruptive or dangerous student is normalizing their behavior. Imagine the student's behavior within the context of their background or experience. While it is reasonable to expect graduate students to have figured out the basics of balancing family, career, parking and an off-campus internship, first year community college students may have a bit of a learning curve when it comes to acclimating to the college environment. Perhaps the student in question has just received some upsetting news and their behavior would be more reasonable if you fully understood the context of it occurring. This technique does not excuse the student from responsibility for their poor behavior. It is designed to help the staff understand how to help defuse an emotional reaction in the student. It is also helpful to understand some of the larger societal, cultural, generational, and environmental stressors that may be at play here.

Self-Care

Below we have shared a list of possible strategies that you can use to better prepare yourself for engaging with compassion in difficult situations as well as for taking care of yourself along the way. Explore this list as well as other ideas and begin committing to healthier patterns of work for yourself and your coworkers.

- Use regular debriefing strategies with those in your work team. Ask questions such as what happened, why did it affect you, and how did you take care of yourself following it.
- Identify "hot button" cases for you and consider options for minimizing your interactions with these types of cases. Example: If you are a sexual assault survivor, it is OK to ask for help or support when dealing with other victims of violence. If a student comes in and reminds you a great deal of a previous difficult situation, can you ask another staff member to step in for you or sit in with you.
- Incorporate periodic moments of relaxation and personal time throughout your day.
- Make a clear transition from professional/work to personal/home. Find ways to disconnect from electronic devices and communications related to work. Be careful about doing work in personal spaces in your home such as the bedroom.
- Monitor and improve other aspects of your health and wellness such as diet and exercise.
- Ask for help from your supervisor. Discuss workloads, reward systems, role clarification and the support available professionally.

Adapted from Van Brunt, B. & Murphy, A. (2017). A Staff Guide to Addressing Disruptive and Dangerous Behavior on Campus. Routledge Press. (p. 44-56;101)

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Putting It Into Practice

Motivational Interviewing

- **Express empathy.** Respect their point of view, freedom of choice, and ability to determine their own self-direction.
- **Develop discrepancy.** Explore the consequences of their actions and how they will not lead to the desired outcome.
- **Avoid argumentation.** Instead, explore more deeply what they are saying and reduce their defensiveness with open-ended questions.
- **Roll with resistance.** Avoid direct confrontation and stay focused on goals and outcomes, supporting their developmental growth and personal responsibility.
- **Support self-efficacy.** Praise them when they take positive steps and acknowledge that a positive outcome is possible.

Transtheoretical Change Theory

- **Pre-contemplation.** They aren't aware of the problem or ready for change. Raise doubt; increase their perception of risk and the problems with their current behavior.
- **Contemplation.** They are thinking about change, but haven't taken steps. Help them see the risks of not changing and strengthen their self-efficacy for making changes.
- **Preparation for action.** They are ready to make a plan to bring about change. Work with them to find the best course of change.
- **Action.** They are putting their plans into action to bring about change. Provide encouragement and resources to make change.
- **Maintenance and relapse prevention.** They maintain positive steps and adjust elements that aren't working. Teach them relapse prevention skills.