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How Front-Office Staff Can Manage Difficult Student Behavior

Brian Van Brunt and Laura Bennett

Consider the following scenarios:

- Jack stands impatiently waiting to be served while clicking away on his smartphone and listening to music. Other students are waiting behind him and a staff member at the desk loudly exclaims, "Excuse me, young man! Your rudeness is holding up everyone in line. Get off your phone."
- Val rushes into your department and loudly slams a bunch of papers down on the counter. She shouts at the student worker at the counter, "What does this letter mean? I was told my financial aid check would be in the bank today. And now it says I won't have it for two weeks!" Val shoves the papers onto the floor and glares at the student worker.

Disruptive, rude, entitled, annoying, and even dangerous behaviors are major concerns for frontline staff at colleges and universities all over the country. Whether at a community college, a private liberal arts college, or a large university, students exhibit concerning behaviors all the time.

It's tempting to respond in kind to argumentative, frustrating, and threatening behavior. The problem, of course, is that this response typically escalates the situation, leading to a negative outcome for the student, the staff member, and anyone who happens to be nearby.

So how should frontline staff (including those working in the registrar's office, the financial aid office, the housing and residential life office, the counseling and health center, the athletics office, and the academic affairs office) address unacceptable behavior? Some suggestions are offered below.

Address behavior while maintaining relationships.

Front-office staff members are expected to provide good customer service, yet they face frustrating situations. As a result, they need to assess and respond to inappropriate behaviors while still working with students toward problem resolutions.

Most behaviors are not dangerous, but sometimes the staff member needs to get to know the student in order to assess that and to determine how to best work with the student. Once the staff member has established rapport and trust with the student, it becomes a lot easier to assess and resolve the situation.

Know yourself and your emotions.

Before staff members respond to annoying, disruptive, or dangerous behavior, they should understand themselves.

Staff are encouraged to develop an awareness of their triggers and emotional reactions to better control and manage their reactions by understanding

- how they can keep these triggers in check when they feel themselves

responding emotionally to a student and a situation

- the strengths they bring to the situation
- how they can use humor, calmness or a caring demeanor to de-escalate the situation

Develop the proper mind-set.

Once staff members have an awareness of their strengths and their emotional reactions to situations, they can take the next step—responding with equanimity, or a sense of calm and balance, in the face of crisis, chaos, and challenge. If staff members face a student with equanimity, they may be surprised at how this changes the outcome of the interaction.

Of course, it would be nice if simply saying this made it so. Unfortunately, it may take a little more effort to reach this level of self-actualization and inner

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peace. One approach that might help with this is the process of cycle breathing. Cycle breathing involves breathing in slowly to the count of four, holding the breath to the count of two, breathing out slowly to the count of four, and holding the breath to the count of two. This process helps lower the heart rate and blood pressure and allows a person to regain focus and control over rising frustrations and emotions.

Responding to a crisis situation in a calm, cool, and collected manner gives a staff member full access to a wide range of options, such as asking the student clarifying questions, redirecting a student's anger with persuasion techniques, facilitating a solution-focused referral, or partnering and brainstorming with the student to help solve the problem.

In contrast, allowing a student to "push your buttons" limits the ability to respond with a full set of techniques. In other words, you become reactive rather than responsive.

Diffuse the dangerous.

Although it is rare, some situations front-office staff encounter reach beyond mere disruption and quickly become dangerous. Managing a dangerous situation requires the same understanding of emotions and mind-set combined with some additional de-escalation techniques and awareness of backup resources.

If a student becomes aggressive and threatening, it is important to have a system in place to bring additional support to the location. Some colleges and universities make use of a "panic button" system or develop a code word or action that would signal other office staff to call for help. These could include front-office staff asking for "the orange file on FAFSA appeals" or handing another staff member a particular pencil or pen. All these systems require a prevention approach and discussion before a crisis occurs.

When trying to manage a dangerous

and escalating student, the simplest and most effective action is to avoid saying or doing anything that will make the situation worse. Managing the acute crisis and calming the student down become the central priorities, not the fact that the student has not completed paperwork on time or has not gone through the proper procedures.

Explaining the rules, policies, and procedures, or lecturing the student about what he or she did wrong, will do nothing but make the situation worse. It's best to manage the acute crisis first and meet with the student later to discuss his or her behavior with the support of others (such as campus safety, a dean, a conduct officer, or a counselor).

Don't forget follow-up.

Just as stretching after a workout can increase the effects of your efforts and minimize injury later, the correct follow-up ensures that situations won't repeat or escalate in the future. Whether follow-up includes documenting adequately, giving information to the student, or reporting information to the appropriate campus body, it is critical to the long-term management of the issue.

Using campus resources such as your behavioral intervention team, internal office record-keeping procedures, student conduct referrals, or even just an email to the student containing information and resources can help address the current situation and/or prevent additional issues.

Brian Van Brunt, Ed.D., is the director of counseling and testing at Western Kentucky University and past president of the American College Counseling Association. Laura Bennett, M.Ed., is a student conduct officer at Harper College. They will lead the online seminar "Front-Office Staff: Responding to Rude or Aggressive Students" on May 9. More information is available at www.magnapubs.com/catalog/front-office-staff-responding-to-rude-or-aggressive-students/.