FAQ When Dealing With Distressed And Disruptive Students

What are some signs that a student may be in distress?

A student in distress may not be disruptive to others, but may exhibit behaviors which indicate something is wrong, show signs of emotional distress and indicate that assistance is needed. They may also be reluctant or unable to acknowledge a need for personal help. Behaviors may include:

1. Serious grade problems or a change from consistently passing grades to unaccountably poor performance.
2. Excessive absences, especially if the student has previously demonstrated consistent attendance.
3. Unusual or markedly changed patterns of interaction, i.e., avoidance of participation, excessive anxiety when called upon, domination of discussions, etc.
4. Other characteristics that suggest the student is having trouble managing stress successfully, e.g., a depressed, lethargic mood; very rapid speech; swollen, red eyes; marked change in personal dress and hygiene; or falling asleep during class.
5. Repeated requests for special consideration, such as deadline extensions, especially if the student appears uncomfortable or highly emotional while disclosing the circumstances prompting the request.
6. New or repeated behavior which pushes the limits of decorum and which interferes with effective management of the immediate living-learning environment.
7. Unusual or exaggerated emotional responses which are obviously inappropriate to the situation.

How should I respond to a student in distress?

For students that are mildly or moderately distressed you can choose to handle them in the following ways:

1. Deal directly with the behavior/problem according to classroom protocol.
2. Address the situation on a more personal level.
3. Consult with a colleague, academic department head, Dean of Students Office, Chaplain’s Office, or a campus professional at the Counseling Center.
4. Refer the student to one of the Roanoke College resources. See the referral phone numbers on the front page of this guide.

How should I respond when a student is disrupting my class?

Faculty members have broad authority to manage their classrooms and establish reasonable guidelines for class discussions that ensure everyone has an opportunity to participate in an orderly manner. If you believe a student’s behavior is inappropriate, consider a general word of caution rather than singling a student out or embarrassing the student. “If the behavior in question is irritating, but not disruptive, try speaking with the student after class. Most students are unaware of distracting habits or mannerisms, and have no intent to be offensive or disruptive. There may be rare circumstances where it is necessary to speak to a student during class about his or her behavior. Correct the student in a manner indicating that further discussion can occur after class.” (Pavela, 2003, § 5).

If a student’s behavior reaches the point that it interferes with your ability to conduct the class or the ability of other students to benefit from the class, the student should be asked to leave the room for the remainder of the class period. The student should be provided with a reason for this action and an opportunity to discuss the matter with you as soon as is practical. In such situations, consultation and referral to the Student Life office may be appropriate.

This item adapted from ASJA Law & Policy Report, No. 26, ASJA & Gary Pavela, 2001.

What are warning signs of disruptive student behavior?

A disruptive student exhibits behaviors that signify an obvious crisis and that necessitate emergency care. These problems are the easiest to identify. Examples include:

1. Highly disruptive behavior (e.g., hostility, aggression, or violence).
2. Inability to communicate clearly (garbled, slurred speech; unconnected, disjointed, or rambling thoughts).
3. Loss of contact with reality (seeing or hearing things which others cannot see or hear, beliefs or actions greatly at odds with reality or probability).
4. Stalking behaviors.
5. Inappropriate communications (including threatening letters, e-mail messages, and harassment).
6. Overtly suicidal thoughts (including referring to suicide as a current option or in a written assignment).
7. Threats to harm self and/or others.

How To Make A Referral

While many students go to the Counseling Center on their own, your exposure to students increases the likelihood you will identify signs or behaviors of distress in a student. What can you do?

• Recommend campus services to the student. See the RC resources on the front page of this guide.
• Determine the student’s willingness to go to a helping resource. Reassure the student that it is an act of strength to ask for help.
• Dispute the myth that only “weak or crazy” people go for counseling or use other services for personal help.
• Remind the student that Counseling Center services are free and confidential.
• Offer to help make the initial contact with the helping resource for them.
• Report concerns to Care Team using the online form www.roanoke.edu/rccares.
Student Conduct Code Violations

The College student relationship is based on a contractual agreement that the student enters into voluntarily. By enrolling in the College, the student agrees to abide by the policies of the College. An individual, considered to be enrolled at the College, is either a first-year student or any continuing or graduate student, who is registered or matriculated at the College, who is subject to the Student Conduct Code as acting while on campus at the College, including breaks. Violations of the Student Conduct Code are cataloged as follows:

1. Offenses Against Persons
2. Offenses Against Property
3. Offenses Against the Community
4. Offenses Against the Student Conduct System
5. Other Offenses
6. Offenses Against the Commonwealth of Virginia and Other State, Local, or Federal Jurisdictions.

For the list of specific violations found within each category to submit a Student Conduct Code complaint, go to www.roanoke.edu/studentconduct.

Sexual Misconduct

Consistent with its commitment to providing an educational environment free of sex discrimination, Roanoke College has established a Sexual Misconduct Policy and Procedures that apply to all students and employees of the College. The College encourages prompt reporting of any Sexual Misconduct in order to provide timely and fair responses. All reports of Sexual Misconduct will be investigated.

Any staff, faculty, or other non-student member of the College community and RA who become aware of possible sexual misconduct must report the possible misconduct to one of the College’s Title IX Coordinators as soon as possible. Violations from the environment are reported to Professors, Directors, Deans, and health care professionals.

Cases of sexual misconduct should be reported to one of the Title IX Coordinators:

- Cathy Dickerson, Director of Human Resources & Title IX Coordinator (540) 375-2256; cdickerson@roanoke.edu
- Dr. Jerrienne Berness, Associate Dean of Academic Affairs & Deputy Title IX Coordinator for Faculty Sexual Misconduct (540) 375-2210; bernessj@roanoke.edu
- Dr. Brian Chiveser, Assistant Dean of Students & Deputy Title IX Coordinator for Student Sexual Misconduct (540) 375-2256; chiveser@roanoke.edu

Any complaint involving alleged sexual misconduct can be submitted in writing to any one of the Title IX Coordinators listed above or by using the RC Cares online form (www.roanoke.edu/rccares).

Illegitimacy and Sexual Assault

Illegitimacy is legally recognized as the existence of a child born to a woman without the consent of a married man. A woman who becomes pregnant without the legal consent of a married man is said to have been raped. Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual activity by a person on another person without consent. Each year, women are raped. This number is a significant underestimation of the actual number of rapes that occur. Sexual assault is a serious crime, and the college community encourages prompt reporting of any sexual assault.

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Anonymous reports of alleged sexual misconduct can be submitted in writing to any of the Title IX Coordinators listed above or by using the RC Cares online form (www.roanoke.edu/rccares).