

# 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, the Dean of Students Office, or a campus professional in Student Health & Counseling Services.
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 to a disruptive student?

1. Remain calm and know who to call for help, if necessary. Find someone to stay with the student while calls to the appropriate resources are made. See the referral phone numbers on the front page of this guide.
2. Remember that it is NOT your responsibility to provide the professional help needed for a severely distressed/disruptive student. You need only to make the necessary call and request assistance.
3. When a student expresses a direct threat to themselves or others, or acts in a bizarre, highly irrational or disruptive way, call Campus Safety at ext. 2310 or dial 911 immediately.

## 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, 2001, ¶ 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 Dean of Students 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 Student Health & Counseling Services 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 Roanoke College 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 them that the Student Health & Counseling Services are free and confidential care.
- 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](http://www.roanoke.edu/rccares).

# RELEVANT COLLEGE POLICIES

## Student Behavior at Roanoke College

Roanoke College is an academic community guided by the principles of honesty, respect, and personal responsibility. Consequently, there is both an Academic Integrity and Student Conduct Code.

### Student Conduct Code Violations

Violations of the Student Conduct Code are categorized 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 & Other State, Local & Federal Jurisdictions.

For a list of specific violations found within each category or to submit a Student Conduct Code complaint, go to [www.roanoke.edu/studentconduct](http://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 that applies to all students and employees of the College. The College encourages prompt reporting of any Sexual Misconduct in order to provide a timely and fair response. All reports of Sexual Misconduct will be investigated.

Any staff, faculty, or other non-student member of the College community who becomes aware of possible sexual misconduct must report the possible misconduct to one of the College's Title IX Coordinators as soon as possible. (Excluded from this requirement are licensed counselors, clergy, and health care professionals.)

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

**Dr. Brian Chisom, Associate Vice President for Student Affairs & Title IX Coordinator**  
(540) 375-2592; [chisom@roanoke.edu](mailto:chisom@roanoke.edu)

**Dr. Jennifer Berenson, Associate Dean of Academic Affairs & Deputy Title IX Coordinator**  
(540) 375-2204; [berenson@roanoke.edu](mailto:berenson@roanoke.edu)

**Kathy Martin, Director of Human Resources & Deputy Title IX Coordinator**  
(540) 375-2262; [kmartin@roanoke.edu](mailto:kmartin@roanoke.edu)

*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](http://www.roanoke.edu/rccares)).*

## Roanoke College Policy on Hazing

Hazing, defined as an act which endangers the mental or physical health or safety of a student, or which destroys or removes public or private property, for the purpose of initiation, admission into, affiliation with, or as a condition for continued membership in, a group or organization. Assisting, directing, or in any way causing others to participate in degrading behavior and/or behavior that causes ridicule, humiliation, or embarrassment of a student also constitutes hazing. The express or implied consent of the victim will not be a defense. Apathy or acquiescence in the presence of hazing are not neutral acts; they are violations.

## Class Attendance at Roanoke College

Regular class attendance is expected in all courses. Individual instructors who have specific attendance requirements will state these on the syllabus distributed at the beginning of each course. Every student is accountable for all work missed because of class absence. Instructors, are under no obligation to make special arrangements for students who are absent. Decisions to excuse an absence for any class meeting rests solely with the instructor.

## Illness Policy

Students who are absent from classes or examinations because of illness should contact their professors. Student Health and Counseling Services will only write excuse notes for illness or injuries that have resulted, or will result, in an absence of three or more days of class. Any shorter term absence will not receive notes. If an instructor requires a note for an absence of fewer than three days, one can be written upon request of the instructor.

## Notification from the Registrar's Office

Students who experience a family or personal emergency may contact the Dean of Students Office or the Registrar's Office and request that professors be notified. The Registrar's Office will communicate with the professors of the courses in which the student is registered. Such communications should not be considered verified excuses, but instead are a courtesy extended to students who have reported an emergency and are unable to contact faculty members prior to their departure. Students are required to provide faculty members with appropriate documentation to support their absence.

*This publication adapted with permission from the University of Central Florida, Faculty 911 Guide.*



### Students in Distress

This informational guide was developed by the Dean of Students Office to aid faculty and staff in assisting students who are experiencing difficulties at Roanoke College.

### Distressed Students

Students who are experiencing emotional and/or psychological problems that are interfering with their ability to learn.

### Disruptive Students

Students whose behavior makes teaching and learning difficult for others within the campus living-learning environment.



### Consultation or Question

Student Health & Counseling ext. 2286  
Dean of Students Office ext. 2592

### Potential Harm to Self/Others

Campus Safety ext. 2310  
Salem Police 911

### Administrative/Conduct Question

Dean of Students Office ext. 2592

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Dean of Students Office ext. 2592

### Academic Question

Center for Learning & Teaching ext. 2247  
Registrar's Office ext. 2211

### Consultation/Emergency Counseling

Student Health & Counseling ext. 2286  
Dean of Students Office ext. 2592

### Emergency 911

Campus Safety ext. 2310  
Care Team ext. 2592  
Center for Learning & Teaching ext. 2247  
Chaplain's Office ext. 2300  
Dean of Students Office ext. 2592  
Residence Life & Housing ext. 2305  
Registrar's Office ext. 2213  
Student Health & Counseling Services ext. 2286

If you are dealing with a student who displays questionable behavior:

- Be aware of the location of the nearest telephone, whether it is within the building or a personal cell phone.
- If you are concerned for your safety or that of others, call Campus Safety or 911 immediately.
- If the student is causing a disruption to the living-learning environment but does not pose a threat:
  - discuss the situation with the student to address the inappropriate behavior.
  - ask the student to leave the room.
- refer the matter to Care Team using the RC Cares online form ([www.roanoke.edu/rccares](http://www.roanoke.edu/rccares)).

**If in doubt, call Campus Safety!**