

AC 2009-202: TROUBLED, EMOTIONALLY-CHALLENGED, AND DIFFICULT STUDENTS

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Troubled, Emotionally-Challenged, and Difficult Students: Perspectives, Interventions, and Resources in Engineering Technology

Abstract

Recent tragic, news-worthy events of troubled, emotionally-challenged, and difficult students on campus have reinforced to faculty the potential risks, resources, and responsibilities they face in the teaching and learning process. Most faculty engage in the teaching-learning process because they are passionate about their subject matter. Indeed, it is often a shock for new professors to realize that not every student shares their enthusiasm for the discipline. Even more shocking for these faculty, however, are the nature and types of student issues and behaviors they must mitigate in the classroom.

Few faculty are afforded the type of training and development to ensure an effective response to troubled, emotionally-challenged, and difficult students. Some faculty choose to confront the behavior directly, with mixed results. Others pass along the information to department chairs, deans, and other administrators, who may or may not document and make appropriate and timely interventions. Finally, some faculty members simply choose to ignore signs of trouble, in the hopes of avoiding escalation or by developing coping mechanisms designed to serve them well through the end of the semester. Faculty often report a desire to know how to handle situations early, and to be aware of the warning signs, institutional resources, intervention strategies, and appropriate boundaries to handle challenging student circumstances. Thus, the time has never been better to equip faculty with information designed to enhance their effectiveness around these matters.

This paper defines these student characteristics, identifies appropriate warning signs, discusses faculty interventions and obligations, explains legal and institutional options, and recognizes the often competing-and-coexisting tensions faculty members face in wanting to be a helpful educator while necessarily establishing and safeguarding boundaries with students. The following perspectives from one Engineering Technology's schools' experiences on dealing with difficult students will be shared: advisor and administrative assistant viewpoint; faculty member viewpoint; and department chair/administrator viewpoint. Successful strategies, best practices, lessons learned, and pitfalls-to-avoid in shaping and managing the teaching and learning environment in this context will be shared.

Who Are Troubled, Emotionally-Challenged, and Difficult Students and Why Are They Important?

To be fair, a large majority of students at every institution and in all disciplines, including engineering and technology programs, persist to degree completion without incident. They are the students who perform within the prescribed policies and expectations, get along with their peers and professors, and rarely cause trouble. This "silent majority" can sometimes be forgotten when faculty and administrators must deal with issues from students who, while a small minority, consume a tremendous amount of institutional time, energy, and effort. These are often referred to as troubled, emotionally-challenged, and difficult students.

Troubled, emotionally-challenged, and difficult students are individual who, for not meeting minimum performance or behavioral expectations of the institution. In some cases, they may be unengaged with their studies, or may be an improper fit with the program, professor, or institution. Some students are simply “bad apples” for whom no amount of institutionally-sanctioned interventions and opportunities will improve performance or behavior. As will be discussed in the warning signs section below, such students often can be classified by attitudinal, physical, or behavioral demonstrations that are outside the norm of the larger comparison group. The degree to which such issues pose a nuisance or risk to peers, professors, or others will necessitate a range of interventions on the part of the institution^{1,2}.

Students who are troubled, emotionally-challenged, and difficult are important for several reasons. First, the simple reality is that these students are members of the institution and frequently interact with others. For this reason alone, the relationship-jeopardizing behaviors that troubled, emotionally-challenged, and difficult students engage in should give faculty and administrators enough concern to want to deal with these individuals. Perhaps a more pragmatic reason for recognizing the importance of these students is that these individuals are expected to perform at minimally-acceptable levels expected of graduates in professional programs such as engineering and technology. Institutions have an obligation to produce graduates capable of not only contributing to, but also coping in, professional environments in which they are expected to work after graduation.

Most engineering and technology educators, like their colleagues in other disciplines, enter the teaching profession with an aim of advancing knowledge through teaching, research, and service. Faculty typically engage in the teaching-learning process because they are passionate about their subject matter. New professors may be disappointed or shocked to realize that not every student shares their enthusiasm for the discipline. These faculty—and their senior colleague counterparts—also have to handle an various types of student issues and behaviors that must be mitigated in the classroom, ones that are increasingly changing and challenging. All of this, of course occurs in the often competing-and-coexisting tensions faculty members face in wanting to be a helpful educator while necessarily establishing and safeguarding boundaries with students^{3,4}.

In spite of an abundance of effort and resource allocation in the past two decades toward enhancing faculty development for improved teaching effectiveness, many faculty still report being ill-equipped, under-prepared, and poorly-trained to handle troubled, emotionally-challenged, or difficult students. The teaching arena is often very personal for faculty, and a lack of ability to mitigate student circumstances at early stages of conflict may be viewed by others as a commentary on the faculty member’s ability.

Regrettably, there have been cases where faculty members have reported issues or challenges they have with students to those higher in the chain-of-command (chairs; deans; campus administration), only to have complaints minimized, dismissed, or outright ignored. There are several interventions, obligations, and approaches to handling such students, and these will be addressed after a discussion of some of the warning signs faculty can use to gauge how much a threat, if any, a particular student poses to them.

Warning Signs of Troubled, Emotionally-Challenged, or Difficult Students

Human behavior never occurs in a vacuum. Instead, behavior is a function of the person and their interaction with their broader environment. Individuals use their own values, attitudes, needs, personality, past experiences, present circumstances, and station in life, among other characteristics, in determining how to respond to stressors. When aggressive behavior escalates into the type of horrific incidents describe above, there have usually been warning signs—albeit identified *ex post facto*—that could have provided intervention opportunities had resources potentially been made available.

Thus, the following attitudinal, physical, and behavioral conditions might be viewed as warning signs for faculty, administrators, and others. The presence of one or more of these should, in and of itself, not be cause for immediate alarm. Rather, as will be discussed, the nature, frequency, and severity of the presence of one or multiple conditions should signal a potential intervention opportunity^{1,2}.

Attitudinal conditions refer to the ability of a student to cope with life's stressors appropriately and in a reasonable, adult-like manner. Examples of attitudinal warning signs include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Blaming others for everything and the inability to accept personal responsibility for their own behavior
- Being overly critical of “everything”
- Strong negative reaction to a grade
- Demanding overly detailed justifications for grades received
- Demeaning the instructor or other students or name-calling in front of class or others
- Being unhappy if they are not receiving an answer to their question or having an issue resolved in their favor
- Questioning authority in front of the class and in a belligerent way
- Being legitimately-yet-harshly frustrated by having been sent from place to place on campus in answer to a question (e.g. the perception of getting the “run around”)

Physical conditions refer to the explicit changes in the overall appearance and demeanor of a student. Examples of physical warning signs include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Apparent signs of drug or alcohol abuse
- Changes in health or hygiene: a student suddenly disregards personal health or grooming
- Sleeping in class
- Inability to stay-on-task or trouble keeping up with assignments
- Unshakeable depression, often having low energy, little enthusiasm; making despairing remarks
- Threatening, intimidating, or harassing actions
- Engaging in excessive phone calls, yelling, crying, or personal difficulties
- Complaining loudly about the class or instructor to the rest of the class
- Talking too fast and acting impatiently

- Violation of safety or security procedures, including a sudden increase in accidents

Behavioral conditions represent any unusual behavior for the individual that is markedly different from the past. Examples of behavioral warning signs include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Excessive tardiness or absences, especially if a new behavior
- Reduced productivity, especially of a previously efficient and productive student
- Significant changes in classroom, study, or work habits, including alternating high and low productivity or quality
- Strained relationships with peers, including disruptive or isolating behavior different from the past
- Inability to concentrate when that was not a problem before
- Boundary-less behaviors; overly-communicative
- Unusual fascination with weapons or stories of violence in the media
- Continually has “things” come up continually that keep him or her from accomplishing the course goals
- Seeking to circumvent established chain-of-command by demanding to talk to the Chair or Dean without first addressing the issue with an instructor
- Bringing someone else into the office with them to help discuss the issue (an advocate, parent, friend, etc.)

Interventions, Obligations, and Approaches to Troubled, Emotionally-Challenged, and Difficult Students

When confronted with the presence of attitudinal, physical, and/or behavioral conditions in a student, faculty and administrators must determine the extent or severity of the situation, and provide interventions accordingly. One framework for such decision-making is establishing whether the condition represents an isolated incident, a pattern-of-behavior, or a systemic problem.

An isolated incident is typically a one-time occurrence, and may be either a mistake or intentional. An example of an isolated incident would be a student on a rare occasion arriving to class late. A Pattern-of-behavior is defined as repeated offences, usually with increasingly negative impacts on the student or others. An example of a pattern-of-behavior would be a student’s inability to get along with classmates on project work teams in several classes. Finally, a systemic problem is manifested in sustained difficulties over time, usually with no clear-cut resolution in sight. An example of a systemic problem would be a student filing a grade appeal grievance for every class he or she takes that did not result in an A grade, even though the student’s performance varies and there is sufficient, objective evidence to justify lower grades in the various classes⁵.

There are legal and institutional options that students, faculty, administrators, and others should be aware of. One is the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which provides legal protections and guidance on handling matters that pertain, among other things, to troubled, emotionally-challenged, and difficult students. For the purposes of this paper, the significance of

FERPA is that individuals within the institution, and for legitimate professional purposes, may share with each other factual information about students—including their performance in class, and any attitudinal, physical, or behavioral conditions displayed by the student. Faculty often report ambiguity around their interpretation and implementation of FERPA. There are also institution-specific policies in place.

Beyond legal and policy perspectives, however, interventions, obligations, and approaches to dealing with troubled, emotionally-challenged, or difficult students will necessarily vary, based on the situation and institutional context. There are, however, some overarching actions that faculty and administrators should consider taking. These include recognizing that students appreciate professors who are concerned about their holistic well-being; identifying students who may require intervention; operating with fairness, discretion, and discernment when handling sensitive student matters; and developing coordinated, appropriate interventions that follow a progressive-discipline framework. Each of these will be briefly discussed below.

First and foremost, students tend to appreciate professors who are concerned about their holistic well-being. Faculty must realize that students have stressful lives beyond the classroom. How a professor responds to the balancing act that students face in dealing with their lives sends a signal about the faculty member's commitment to individual, holistic well being. This does not mean that faculty members should “dumb down” or go overboard in accommodating unusual student demands. Rather, faculty should help students identify resources students can access when they feel stressed or become overwhelmed and provide reasonable assistance within the boundaries of student-faculty relationships.

Next, identifying students who may require intervention is necessary. Some students may, therefore, require an institutional intervention, such as referral to counseling. Student-initiated disclosure of special needs or circumstances occurs when individuals alert their professors of their need for assistance. Advisors, professors, or others who are actively involved in interacting with students on a regular basis may likely be aware of the impending special need or circumstance, and thus are better prepared to respond.

The admittedly personal nature of accommodations and interventions related students with special needs or circumstances requires a degree of fairness, discernment and discretion on the part of faculty and administrators. Fairness implies that faculty and administrators use their judgment to make decisions that are in the best interests of the institution, while weighing that against the unique and situational aspects of each special need or circumstance facing a student. Different people have different issues that require different approaches. While desirous to exercise consistency in making these types of decisions, the reality is that no two students or special needs or circumstances will be the same.

Necessarily related to fairness, of course, is the ability for administrators to exercise discretion in handling sensitive employee matters. Issues related to mental health, wellness, and personal challenges should be treated as confidential, and information should only be shared with others in the institution in accordance with legal and institutional policies. Faculty and administrators are encouraged to consult with their student and academic affairs colleagues, and, in some cases, legal counsel, for guidance on how to handle certain high-stakes conditions.

For interventions to be effective, faculty and administrators should discuss with students the nature of why and how their condition—attitudinal, physical, or behavioral—is manifesting itself. This should entail seeking from students a reason for their actions, outline expectations for minimum standards of performance, create metrics/rubrics/expectations of how subsequent conditions should occur, and develop timetables for success. Inherent in this process is the willingness of the student to want to improve his or her condition, and the willingness and ability of a faculty member to “stay the course” in working with a student. In all instances, however, interventions should adhere to a progressive-discipline framework, in order to signal to students the seriousness-of-purpose, and to provide the institution a legally-defensible framework against decisions. Progressive discipline is a series of increasingly serious oral and written warnings in order to provide the student a reasonable chance to correct his or her condition. Thus, faculty and administrators are encouraged to use a consistent, documentable approach with students.

Perspectives on Handling Troubled, Emotionally-Challenged, or Difficult Students

The following perspectives from one Engineering Technology’s schools’ experiences on dealing with difficult students have encapsulated as they relate to troubled, emotionally-challenged, and difficult students: advisor and administrative assistant perspective; faculty perspective; chair/administrator perspective. Each offers practical advice on handling these student conditions.

Advisor and administrative assistants indicate that treating students with dignity and respect go a long way toward helping diffuse potentially difficult situations. Actions they take include trying to get all of the facts, including student name and ID number, in order to resolve questions or problems early and often. Another successful strategy is to try to give the student an answer to their question and not make them go somewhere else for an answer. This may mean making a few calls, etc. to find the answer if it is not immediately known. The main pitfall to avoid is not giving them some answer to their question, trying to respond to student issues within 24 hours, if possible. If the student begins raising their voice, or just seems to be getting angry, or asking the same question over and over again then the situation may be escalating. In that event, advisors or administrative assistants tend to involve others (faculty, administrators). Finally, advisors and administrative assistants stress being patient with students and trying not to make rash judgments. Keeping a list of readily available resources from across the campus can greatly assist, too.

From the faculty member’s perspective, these are specific suggests for dealing with students:

- Be careful and cautious
- Keep meticulous records as soon as you suspect something is wrong
- Talk to your supervisor and keep others informed
- Don’t put student down in front of class or others (shouldn’t do to anyone, of course)
- Don’t kid or tease with the student
- Have others with you if you must confront the student
- Do your research – find out what resources are available to you and to troubled students
- In certain circumstances, recommend student seek outside help (counseling)

- Don't be intimidated, but don't be foolish either
- With 'difficult' student, talk to outside of class and find out what the problem is. Can be stern, share behaviors you will and won't accept in class, and give consequences if disruptive behavior continues
- Have phone #s (police, etc.) at your fingertips

Faculty members tend to indicate that there is a “gut” reaction in dealing with troubled, emotionally-challenged, and difficult students. They indicate that it is better to move too quickly than not quickly enough, and that when threats are implicit or explicit, it is time to act. When faculty start sharing specific incidents with other people, it is often the signal to start the progressive discipline/documentation trail. Faculty consult or refer the situation to their chair or dean's office, and may also elicit assistance from colleagues who have experienced similar things. The use of faculty and student advocate offices is also encouraged.

Department chairs and administrators recommend that matters involving troubled, emotionally-challenged, and difficult students need to be handled carefully and privately at all times. This begins by having administrator contact information in all the course syllabi offered by the department in regards to the Office of the Dean of Students, the Student Advocate's office, and the office for Counseling and Psychological Services.

When the situation escalates beyond the norm, chairs and administrators recommend immediately contacting the appropriate office on the campus that can best deal with the problem. Most chairs and administrators agree that there are departments on the campus that have intervention strategies that are far superior at handling problems that suddenly escalates beyond what is able to be provided at the department-level. Chairs, administrators, and course instructors do not always have the knowledge, skills, or resources necessary to handle difficult situations. Thus, always be prepared to reach out to the other services on the campus for help early in the problem if necessary.

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