



## **DEALING WITH STUDENTS IN CRISIS**

Guidelines for Responding to Disruptive  
and Distressed Students on Campus



**New York City College of Technology**  
**Department of Student Affairs**  
The City University of New York  
300 Jay Street • Brooklyn, NY 11201

# DEALING WITH STUDENTS IN CRISIS

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Department of Student Affairs  
New York City College of Technology

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## Introduction

The mission of the college explicitly advances a commitment to support the academic goals of a diverse student body. Just as we provide remediation to students who are academically under prepared, we are similarly committed to offering assistance to students who need help to overcome emotional barriers to achieving educational goals.

Faculty members play an important role in teaching students how to become mature learners. An atmosphere that is welcoming and has clearly defined behavioral standards that respect the rights of all students can exert a positive influence on classroom conduct. Disruptive behavior should not be tolerated and distressed students should not be ignored. The purpose of this handbook is to help faculty and staff respond to both types of students who are at risk of failure due to the emotional challenges of being a student.

### Crisis or Emergency?

An emergency is an event that requires immediate attention and prompt action to establish safety. If someone is hurt, or there is an immediate danger, the Office of Public Safety in the Namm Lobby must be contacted immediately at ext. 5550. The Office of Public Safety is open 24 hours a day.

### What is Crisis?

Anxiety and fear are aroused when a person experiences or perceives a threat to

- ▶ self-esteem
- ▶ significant relationships
- ▶ role mastery

When the usual coping strategies do not restore an internal sense of confidence that these feelings can be tolerated and managed, a crisis state ensues. The person's usual coping mechanisms are overwhelmed and the anxiety and fear are destabilizing.

Reactive aggression is one common response that signals that a student has been overwhelmed by feelings of rejection, frustration or shame. This destabilization can be frightening but it can also be an opportunity for growth, especially when it is met by an instructor who recognizes the behavior as a sign of vulnerability. The need to relieve the discomfort increases the motivation to explore alternative resolutions when there is sufficient trust between students and instructors.

## Suggestions for the Classroom

Trust and safety are promoted when classroom standards allow students to form and express relevant ideas in ways that promote free speech and respect the rights of others. It is important to create clear expectations on test policies, group work, late assignments and make-up exams. A classroom culture can be established by specifying behavioral expectations in the course syllabus and reviewing them in the first class meeting.

### Examples of behaviors to consider addressing in your syllabus:

- ▶ Entering or exiting class while learning is in progress
- ▶ Refusal to comply with faculty direction
- ▶ Inappropriate, or disrespectful responses to comments or opinions of others
- ▶ Biased behaviors or comments
- ▶ Use of electronic devices during lectures
- ▶ Upholding classroom standards in on-line forums and electronic communication

### Upholding the classroom guidelines

**A single instance of misconduct** could simply indicate the need to initiate the student into your classroom culture. Intentionally ignoring the behavior while modeling proper conduct might extinguish the problem without the need for further intervention.

**Recurring disruption** should be addressed directly. It might be useful to articulate or reiterate the applicable standard to the entire class.

**Patterns of disruptive behavior**, or any serious violation need individual follow up. Ask the student to remain after class for a conversation or to schedule a meeting.

- ▶ A confidential meeting that avoids public embarrassment will promote cooperation.
- ▶ Be sure that you do not meet alone or in an isolated setting if you have any concern for your personal safety.
- ▶ Clarify your expectations, elicit a commitment to the standards, state consequences for non-adherence (e.g.: filing disciplinary action).
- ▶ If a meeting cannot be arranged, communicate by phone or email before the next class session.

## Suggestions for the Classroom

- ▶ Make a written record detailing the specific behaviors and steps taken to address the situation.
- ▶ If the student does not agree, or does not uphold the agreement, you should initiate disciplinary action. File a report with the Office of Public Safety and write a memo to the Office of Student Affairs. Whenever reasonable, they will make an effort to conciliate the matter. If this is not possible formal disciplinary charges can be made.

### Dealing with Loss of Control in the Classroom

- ▶ It may be possible to remove a student who is about to erupt. If you feel safe, you can ask the student to accompany you to discuss the problem in the department office or other place where help is available.
- ▶ If you do not feel safe during a class meeting, contact the Office of Public Safety at ext. 5550 or send a student there for assistance (Namm Lobby adjacent to the elevators).
- ▶ If violence has occurred or seems imminent, the university peace officer will restrain the student, contact the police, issue a citation to the student and inform the Office of Student Affairs.
- ▶ Use your discretion to determine whether or not to dismiss the class until the next session. File an incident report with the Office of Public Safety. The Office of Student Affairs will receive the report and follow-up.

## Threatening Students

- ▶ If a student behaves inappropriately, but there is no immediate threat of physical violence to anyone, it is important to identify the specific behaviors that feel menacing or troubling. The student may stand too close, speak in a raised voice, mutter incoherently, be discourteous, refuse to comply with reasonable directives, submit work with bizarre or threatening content, make veiled or overt threats to you or others in the class.
- ▶ If you suspect mental illness, inquire if the student is known to Student Support Services and request a consultation with the student's counselor. The counselor can intercede or suggest interventions most likely to be well received and effective.
- ▶ Do not be coerced by aggressive or pushy behavior. Ask the student to change the behavior. Setting a limit (rejecting a demand for good reasons, asking the student to behave appropriately) at the beginning can avoid a more serious situation later.
- ▶ If you do not feel safe setting a limit, this is an indication that you need help. Speak with your department chair to determine what additional support may be helpful (academic authority, disciplinary, counseling, security).
- ▶ Do not meet the student in an isolated place such as behind the closed door of your office. Use a public or semi-public area, a room with an open door adjacent to others. You can request someone else to be present with you, or for public safety to monitor an interaction.

## The Potential for Violence

Violence, defined as physical force exerted for the purpose of violating, damaging, or abusing, is relatively rare on campus, particularly in contrast to the media attention it receives. The U.S. Department of Justice identifies college faculty members as the least likely members of the U.S. workforce to encounter work place violence (1.6 violent incidents per 1000 workers, compared to 12.6 for all workers). Although it is not easy to predict who will become violent, it is possible to track behavior that moves towards violence.

### The following behaviors are of concern:

- ▶ Difficulties coping with significant losses or personal failures
- ▶ Personalizing feedback, inability to accept responsibility, expressing paranoid ideas
- ▶ Feelings of being persecuted or injured by others
- ▶ Rigid need to control, manipulate, cling to defensiveness
- ▶ Inability to make adjustments, self-monitor or reflect
- ▶ Exaggerated emotional or distorted reactions
- ▶ Interrupting, using raised voice, and talking over others
- ▶ Fidgeting and turning away while being spoken to or non-responsiveness
- ▶ Irritability, impulsivity, outbursts or threats
- ▶ Telling others of violent plans, or access to weapons

**Involve Others as Appropriate:** Discussing the challenging behavior can help you remain focused on protecting the learning environment. Your department chairperson can help you decide on further assistance as needed.

## Distressed Students

A student who is tearful, agitated, disoriented, withdrawn, hostile, or enraged may be showing warning signs of being in crisis. A crisis may be related to family, medical, legal, financial or academic stressors. The following are some behavior patterns to be aware of:

- ▶ Excessive absences; indications of poor health
- ▶ Marked decline in performance, inconsistency between classroom and test performance
- ▶ Unusually inhibited or withdrawn behavior; very limited participation in class
- ▶ Writing samples expressing personal troubles
- ▶ Illogical or confused thinking or writing
- ▶ Clearly inappropriate behavior: outbursts, bizarre speech, constant daydreaming, unprovoked crying, excessive giggling, continuous provocative behavior (e.g.: sarcasm, hostile remarks, frequent interruptions).
- ▶ Signs of possible alcohol or drug use:
  - Drowsiness or sleeping in class
  - Vacant or empty stare, glassy eyes, dilated pupils
  - Disoriented response
  - Change in speech patterns
- ▶ Disorganized grooming and/or unusually poor personal hygiene (not obviously an intentional lifestyle).
- ▶ The student confides about difficulties of self support, relationships, self-esteem, past traumas, current obstacles, or future possibilities.
- ▶ Unusually dependent or demanding of time (e.g., requests many conferences without significant content, hangs around after class with no special purpose.

## Suicidal Students

- ▶ All suicide threats or gestures should be taken seriously. If a student is imminently in danger (e.g.: carrying a weapon, or informing you of an immediate plan) contact the Office of Public Safety at ext. 5550 in the Namm Lobby adjacent to the elevators.
- ▶ If no immediate danger is present, the student should be escorted to the Counseling Center (Namm 108, ext. 5030) to speak with a counselor (if this occurs after counseling hours, proceed to the Office of Public Safety).
- ▶ If the student refuses to go to the Counseling Center, immediately file an incident report at the Office of Public Safety (N109), the Office of Students Affairs (G414; ext. 5430), and advise the Counseling Center Director (Namm 108; ext. 5030).

## Guidelines for Helpers

The faculty member is usually the first member of the college community to notice a troubled student. It is challenging to help someone who is under significant stress and not coping well.

When dealing with someone in crisis, it is important to be sensitive to how the interaction is going.

### Ask yourself:

Do you understand what the problem is?

Can you meet the person's expectations in this encounter?

Do you feel safe?

Be alert to cues that you may need a professional consultation from the Counseling Center, or, in an emergency, immediate assistance from the Office of Public Safety.

- ▶ Be aware of your own tolerance limits
- ▶ Fear can be contagious, monitor your ability to stay calm
- ▶ Crying generally indicates the person is upset, but not necessarily in crisis
- ▶ Anxious, tense, fearful students are responsive to reduced stimulation. Helpful to move to a quiet space, remain calm, understanding and reassuring
- ▶ Be respectful, but do not pretend to understand a student with confused thoughts who is out of touch with reality. Do not agree or disagree with delusions or hallucinations.
- ▶ When dealing with a student who is agitated or frustrated with you, be mindful that you are seen as the person with power. Express empathy, and paraphrase what has been said to be clear that you understand.
- ▶ Remain calm and keep a safe distance from someone who is angry, hostile or demanding. Talking quietly and calmly yourself is more effective than telling the student to "calm down."
- ▶ Inquire whether the student has a relationship with any of the counseling professionals in the college and suggest utilizing the available services.
- ▶ Always seek counseling consultation when a student expresses suicidal thoughts.

## Recommending Counseling in Support of Academic Goals

It is not necessary to wait for a crisis to refer a student to counseling. A student whose behavior in class, peer relationships, or relationship to authority is interfering with success can benefit from a referral to counseling. Counselors have the professional training to understand emotional communication. They can help students understand the nature of various problems and conflicts, clarify how the problems affect behavior and academic success, explore alternatives and make referrals for on-going assistance.

Faculty and staff work with a large and diverse student body and it would be impossible to understand and respond to all of the needs and frustrations presented. Additionally, the faculty member is limited by the reality of the student teacher relationship, which includes enforcing standards and does not automatically include the privilege of confidentiality. Therefore, an important role of the faculty member is to recognize that a student is in trouble, to help the student recognize that the problem is an obstacle to academic productivity, and to make a referral to the Counseling Services Center.

**Step One:** Request meeting with the student privately after class (or determine a mutually agreeable time).

**Step Two:** Give your reason for seeing the student (e.g.: "I'm concerned about your progress in this class.")

Indicate what you have observed that makes you concerned without interpretation. For example, "I notice that you do not work with your group members on assigned projects," or, "you often complain about the assignments and do not submit them on time."

**Step Three:** Allow the student to talk and help the student elaborate. Ask the student if s(he) is aware of the behavior and how they understand it. Remain calm, listen respectfully without judgment or advice giving, paraphrase to indicate understanding, and do not pretend to understand what you do not understand.

**Step Four:** Recommend professional counseling. Validate that difficult circumstances or feelings interfere with performance or concentration. Inquire if the student has seen a counselor in the counseling center, Student Support Services or SEEK office. If yes, ask to discuss the problem together. If not, suggest that meeting with a counselor can help a student get on track. Talking to a counselor can relieve some of the worry. Additionally, counselors can help negotiate academic accommodations if needed, and make referrals for various services or resources. **Emphasize that services are free and confidential.**

## Students Who Decline a Counseling Referral

Counseling is offered to students as a voluntary support service. It is inappropriate and ineffective to use counseling for disciplinary or enforcement purposes. However, any student whose behavior causes serious concern or otherwise interferes with the functioning of the college should be brought to the attention of the Office of Student Affairs (G414; ext. 5430).

Steps to take when dealing with students unwilling to accept counseling referral:

- ▶ Submit documentation on the student's behavior to the Office of Student Affairs. This office decides whether it is appropriate to send a "concerned behavior letter" to the student requesting that s/he see a crisis intervention specialist or wait until there is additional documentation.
- ▶ If the student continues to decline services and the behavior is still of concern, the Office of Student Affairs has the following options:
  - Recommend that the instructor have a counseling consultation to obtain support in his/her efforts to maintain a positive learning environment
  - Conciliate the matter
  - Offer a voluntary medical withdrawal
  - Arrange for psychiatric evaluation to determine if there is cause for mandating a medical withdrawal
  - File formal charges against the student to be heard at a Faculty Student Disciplinary Hearing
  - Temporarily suspend the student pending the outcome of a Faculty-Student Disciplinary Hearing

## Available Support

### Office of Student Affairs (G414; ext. 5430)

When student behavior causes serious concern, or otherwise interferes with the functioning of the class, the Office of Student Affairs can be contacted to access:

- ▶ supportive outreach
- ▶ monitoring for safety
- ▶ accommodations as needed
- ▶ disciplinary action

### The Counseling Services Center (N108; ext. 5030)

#### Faculty Consultation

When an instructor is overburdened by worries about a fragile student, or when the deleterious effects that a problematic student has on the functioning of the class frustrates the instructor, a counseling consultation can be helpful. A counseling staff member acts as a partner to the instructor in developing strategies to manage the emotional climate in the classroom.

Counselors have the professional training to understand emotional communications behind difficult or acting out behaviors. Although utilizing this service requires that the instructor allocate time beyond the classroom, it is often less demanding than struggling alone to counteract the negative effects on the class. Both the Departments of Academic and Student Affairs encourage instructor utilization of counseling consultation. The instructor may directly initiate a consultation or a classroom observation from the Crisis Intervention Specialist.

#### Student Counseling

Counseling cannot be mandated but students are encouraged to accept the outreach when the referral is made by a caring instructor. Counseling services to students are subject to confidentiality laws unless explicitly waived in writing.

## Behavioral Intervention Team

### The Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT)

At times student behavior may cause concern, but does not violate any code of conduct. If you don't have an established relationship with the student it can be uncomfortable to inquire further, yet unsettling to deal with the experience alone. The Behavioral Intervention Team was established to follow up when something doesn't feel right, but you don't know enough about the student or the behavior to take an action on your own.

BIT is not a disciplinary committee. The purpose of the BIT is to prevent problems before they occur through early detection, support and intervention. The team investigates and monitors the problematic behavior. Protective action can be initiated if the student presents a risk to self or others. Referral and support may be offered to the staff as well as the student, as needed.

Faculty and staff throughout the college are encouraged to refer the names of students who seem to be in need of further evaluation. The referral does not become a part of the student's academic record. You can request feedback following your report, or you may choose to report anonymously. The team is comprised of members of all parts of the college community.

To refer a student, please contact any of the following BIT members:

**Faithe Gomez**, Office of Student Affairs:  
fgomez@citytech.cuny.edu, (718) 260-5430

**Cindy Bink**, Counseling Services Center:  
cbink@citytech.cuny.edu, (718) 260-5030

**Linda Buist**, Student Support Services:  
lbuist@citytech.cuny.edu, (718) 260-5143

**Henry Deteskey**, Public Safety:  
hdeteskey@citytech.cuny.edu, (718) 260-5550

**Justine Pawlukewicz**, Human Services:  
jpawlukewicz@citytech.cuny.edu, (718) 260-5135

**Shemira Busby**, Continuing Education:  
sbusby@citytech.cuny.edu (718) 552-1130

**Wellness Center Director:**  
(718) 260-5910

## Important Contacts

### To Report an Emergency:

Office of Public Safety  
Namm Lobby (adjacent to elevators)  
(718) 260-5550

**OPEN 24 HOURS A DAY**

### To Make a Counseling Referral:

Counseling Services Center, Namm 108; (718) 260-5030  
Cynthia Bink, LMHC, Director  
Crisis Intervention Specialists:  
Paul Schwartz, LCSW  
Deborah Waksbaum, LCSW

### To Initiate Student Disciplinary Action:

File an Incident Report with the Office of Public Safety  
Office of Public Safety  
Namm Lobby (adjacent to elevators)  
(718) 260-5550

### To Negotiate Accommodations for Students with Disabilities:

Student Support Services  
Linda Buist, Manager, Atrium 237, (718) 260-5143

### To Share your Concerns:

Contact any of the following Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT) members:

**Faithe Gomez**, Office of Student Affairs:  
fgomez@citytech.cuny.edu, (718) 260-5430

**Cindy Bink**, Counseling Services Center:  
cbink@citytech.cuny.edu, (718) 260-5030

**Linda Buist**, Student Support Services:  
lbuist@citytech.cuny.edu, (718) 260-5143

**Henry Deteskey**, Public Safety:  
hdeteskey@citytech.cuny.edu, (718) 260-5550

**Justine Pawlukewicz**, Human Services:  
jpawlukewicz@citytech.cuny.edu, (718) 260-5135

**Shemira Busby**, Continuing Education:  
sbusby@citytech.cuny.edu (718) 552-1130

**Wellness Center Director:**  
(718) 260-5910