The purpose of this study was to identify the frequency and seriousness of disruptive student behaviors and the effective strategies used by educators to manage these classroom behaviors. At a mid-sized state university, 228 of 780 faculty members (29.2%) completed a 76-item survey. Results indicated that as faculty members’ participation in classroom management training increased, they reported less frequency in disruptions. Positive correlations were found between the seriousness of disruptive student behavior and faculty gender, status, and interest in additional resources and/or training. Successful classroom management techniques not found in earlier research are identified and explained. Suggestions for efficient training based on the data are offered.

Introduction

Classroom incivility and student behaviors that interfere with teaching and learning are a growing problem in higher education classrooms (Campus Life, 1990; Nilson, 2003; Nilson & Jackson, 2004; Sorcinelli, 1994). In fact, Feldmann (2001) writes that “common courtesy is quite uncommon” (p. 137) in the college classroom. Some educators believe the causes are the “consumer mentality” of students, the “lower esteem” of modern day professors, inaccurate assessments of students’ learning, large enroll-
ment courses, and/or faculty who are ill-prepared to manage a classroom environment (Berger, 2000, pp. 445-446). Nordstrom, Bartels, and Bucy (2009) add narcissism and entitlement to this list of possible causes. A lack of concrete classroom management strategies and resources further exacerbates the problem of classroom incivility for faculty. Instructors often develop their classroom management techniques through trial and error and anecdotal advice passed on from faculty colleagues.

The purpose of this study was to identify the frequency and seriousness of disruptive student behaviors and the effective strategies used by faculty to manage these classroom behaviors.

Background

On May 21, 2008, 30 faculty members at Indiana University of Pennsylvania attended a half-day workshop conducted by one of the researchers (Frey). Participants discussed research on incivility, millennial students, and causes of incivility, considered case studies, and shared what they considered to be effective responses to incivility. Their small- and large-group conversations were punctuated, even dominated, by stories and requests for advice, for example: “In my class, a student did this and I responded this way—what would you have done? How could I have prevented this?” At the end of the morning, many participants were reluctant to stop talking; it was as if a dam had been opened, and stories of concern, fear, and frustration finally had a channel to course down.

The emotional responses of our colleagues led us, the researchers, to delve deeper into this issue. On the surface, our survey questions were simple:

1. How serious is the issue of disruptive students?
2. How frequent is the issue of disruptive students?
3. Which behaviors do faculty find most disruptive?
4. How do they manage these behaviors?

Looking at previous surveys and research, however, demonstrates that classroom incivility and disruption is a very complicated issue.

Literature Review

The issue of classroom incivility or disruptive students permeates higher education. While 20 years ago there was limited information re-
Promoting a Positive Classroom Environment

Regarding classroom incivility, current research on this topic extends from kindergarten through college classrooms, providing at least some evidence of the perceived problem’s wide scope. There are numerous examples of student incivilities in the libraries, dining halls—almost anywhere on campus. In addition, there are stories of faculty-to-faculty incivilities as evidenced in the book *Faculty Incivility: The Rise of the Academic Bully Culture and What to Do About It*, by Twale and DeLuca (2008). For purposes of this study, the focus is classroom incivility or disruptive student behaviors in the classroom. The terms used in the review of literature for this topic included classroom management, classroom disruptions, incivility, civility, and comportment.

Data on classroom incivility have been gathered through surveys, interviews, workshop discussions, and anecdotes. For example, over 1,400 surveys were completed by faculty and graduate instructors at Indiana University, and the results were reported in “A Survey on Academic Incivility at Indiana University” (Center for Survey Research, 2000). While this study presented valuable empirical data regarding the types and extent of uncivil behaviors at IU-Bloomington, Carbone (1999) focuses on strategies to prevent and respond to classroom incivility, relying on anecdotes instead of large-scale surveys. All of these approaches offer limitations, and they are compounded by a lack of agreement about what comprises “incivility.” Behaviors ranging from violations of some social conventions—wearing hats in class—all the way to acts of outright physical violence have been lumped under the general category of incivility. Feldman (2001) defines incivility as “any action that interferes with a harmonious and cooperative learning atmosphere” (p. 137). He lists four categories of incivility: annoyances, classroom terrorism, intimidation, and violence. Berger (2000) divides incivility into “passive” (for example, lateness and cell phone use) and “overt or active” categories, the latter including direct challenges or physical threats to the teacher or to other students (p. 448). Furthermore, the wide range of learning contexts studied in the literature—elementary through college classrooms, seminars to huge lecture courses—and the range of strategies teachers use to manage incivility leave professional developers with many questions. What behaviors should they address in a workshop? Why might certain strategies be more effective than others, and under what circumstances?

Sorcinelli (1994) and many later researchers have offered preventative measures and practical advice for dealing with the types of troublesome situations that commonly arise in the classroom. These include drafting statements of policies or course behavioral expectations (Baldwin, 1999; Berger, 2000; Carbone, 1999; Sorcinelli, 1994); acting as a role model for
students (Baldwin, 1999; Carbone, 1999; Nilson, 2003); using what Baker (2005) calls “proximity control” (p. 56), that is, moving around the classroom and moving closer to students who may be problematic (Baker, 2005; Carbone, 1999), reviewing course material to remove boring and unnecessary content and clarifying confusing or complex material (Berger, 2000; Carbone, 1999), providing more visual material and more active learning (Brewer, 2005; Carbone, 1999; Sorcinelli, 1994), and balancing a projected personality of friendly responsiveness and clear control (Berger, 2000; Brewer, 2005; Carbone, 1999; Nilson, 2003).

One reason for these many different strategies is because the whole concept of civility is very slippery. In “Academic Civility Begins in the Classroom,” published by The Professional & Organizational Development Network in Higher Education as part of the 1997-1998 essay series, Roger G. Baldwin (1999) wrote that academic incivility is a complex phenomenon that should be addressed at many places within the academic community. He argued that promoting civility should be a goal of all of higher education. Given the importance of civility to learning and given as well its complexity, helping students understand what is expected of them is difficult. Carbone (1999) suggested that educators review the time and effort needed to promote civility in large classrooms and then think of that as part of what should be taught.

The strategies listed above typically are immediate reactions to undesirable behaviors. What prompts those behaviors, however, is a source of additional discussion. Berger (2000) wrote that despite best efforts or because of inappropriate efforts, incivilities between faculty and students often occur. He stressed that particular beliefs and attitudes contribute to incivility, namely (1) irrational beliefs, (2) inaccurate assessment of students’ knowledge, and (3) less competent and responsive teachers. Like Berger, Barbetta, Norona, and Bicard (2005) placed responsibility for civility on the shoulders of teachers. They argued that many teachers react to disruptions ineffectively because they interpret student behaviors from their own perspective instead of understanding how the behavior functions for students. Other researchers feel incivility arises from generational differences. Keeter and Taylor (2009) wrote that millennials (born between 1981 and 2000) “are the first generation in human history that regard behaviors like tweeting and texting […] as everyday parts of their social lives and their search for understanding.” [Need page.] The Pew Research Center (2010) points out that millennial students are “steeped in digital technology and social media [and] they treat their multi-tasking hand-held gadgets almost like a body part” (“Overview”). Nordstrom et al. (2009) stated [shouldn’t it be past, as we already established?] that
students’ strong connections to their peers through social networking sites and other electronically-mediated contacts result in behaviors that many teachers (older and likely not “native” to technology) find annoying or uncivil but that millennials consider entirely acceptable. Dinkins (2008) wrote that she moved from anger and frustration with her students to “empathy” when she “realized that their overuse of technology and isolationism was a product of their generation—not an indictment of my teaching methods or my discipline” (para. 4).

Given the diverse aims of educational programs, it is not surprising that incivility is now being studied by academic discipline. For example, incivility in nursing education, according to Clark and Springer (2007), was defined as rude or disruptive behaviors that may result in psychological or physiological distress for the people involved. If left unaddressed, these behaviors may progress into threatening situations. Thirty-two (88.9%) of nursing faculty and 324 (69.4%) of nursing students at one university completed a survey to gather their perceptions of student and faculty behaviors that may be considered uncivil. Student behaviors most frequently reported as uncivil by faculty included making disapproving groans, making sarcastic remarks or gestures, not paying attention in class, dominating class discussions, using cell phones during class, and cheating on examinations. The majority of faculty reported that uncivil student behaviors occurred just rarely or sometimes. Students perceived incivility as a moderate problem in the nursing academic environment. A recent questionnaire administered through a national association for business faculty (Shepherd, Shepherd, & True, 2008) produced similar results for what was considered uncivil behavior: talking to other students during a lecture, coming to class late or unprepared, and being disrespectful and rude to the professor. Examples of faculty behaviors considered uncivil by students included canceling class without warning, being unprepared for class, not allowing open discussion, being disinterested or cold, belittling or taunting students, delivering fast-paced lectures, and not being available outside of class (Clark & Springer, 2007).

Much of the literature that we reviewed included personal stories, observations, and advice from experienced faculty. There seemed to be a lack of concrete, proven strategies that instructors find effective in managing disruptive classroom behaviors; therefore, we developed a survey to determine the strategies that educators found most effective. The goal of our research was to link disruptive behaviors to preventative or responsive strategies, one of the missing elements in many previous studies of classroom incivility. Others must recognize this link as crucial as well: A
recent e-mail soliciting attendance at a for-profit workshop received by one of the researchers claimed that “The need for proven, targeted advice in dealing with inappropriate behavior has never been greater.”

Methodology

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the most frequent, serious, and disruptive behaviors in the college classroom and the most effective strategies faculty use to manage these behaviors. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How serious is the issue of disruptive students?
2. How frequent is the issue of disruptive students?
3. Which behaviors do faculty find most disruptive?
4. How do faculty manage these behaviors?

Institution and Participants

Indiana University of Pennsylvania comprises four campuses and has an enrollment of over 14,000 students in undergraduate, graduate, and distance education programs. It is accredited by the Middle States Association Commission on Higher Education. There are approximately 780 faculty members. The Center for Teaching Excellence provides faculty with training and support to enhance their classroom teaching skills. The university website states that the student-to-faculty ratio is 18-to-1; however, there are still large introductory classes numbering approximately 100 students.

Survey Instrument

The primary means of data collection for this study was a 76-item web-based survey, “Promoting a Positive Classroom Environment,” which was electronically distributed to the 780 faculty. The survey was based on a review of literature on classroom incivility and classroom management, faculty interviews, and the authors’ collective professional experience. Prior to distribution, the survey was reviewed by approximately 35 faculty members, instructional designers, graduate teaching assistants, and administrators who gave constructive feedback to improve
the clarity, organization, and practical application of strategies used to manage classroom behaviors. For example, reviewer feedback suggested correlating the classroom management strategies with the exact course level (graduate vs. undergraduate) and status of course (requirement vs. elective). The 76 items were organized into the following four sections: (1) demographic background of the faculty member, (2) student classroom behaviors, (3) frequency and severity of student behaviors, and (4) classroom management strategies. Demographic information requested included years of teaching experience, faculty status (adjunct, assistant, associate, or full professor), employment status, gender, and race and ethnicity. The survey ended with several open-ended questions, including preventative or responsive measures that faculty respondents use in their classrooms and their interest in receiving more classroom civility training or resources (the actual survey is available at http://www.iup.edu/page.aspx?id=84328).

Procedure

Prior to administering the survey, we obtained Institutional Review Board approval from the university. During the spring 2009 term, the survey was sent to 780 faculty members (395 male and 385 female) via university e-mail. The survey was administered through the electronic survey program StudentVoice toward the latter part of the spring semester. Faculty recipients were given six weeks (to the end of the semester) to respond to the survey. During that time, 228 faculty (29.2%) completed the online survey. Fifteen additional faculty members started the survey but did not finish it. Their responses were not included in the survey analysis and results.

Results

Among the survey respondents, 65% were female and 35% were male. Ninety-four percent were employed by the university on a full-time basis, and 89% reported their race and ethnicity as white. When asked about the faculty status, 15% reported they were instructors, 28% assistant professors, 31% were associate professors, and 26% were professors. In general, the respondents were an experienced group of faculty members: Eighteen percent indicated they had 1 to 7 years of teaching experience, 26% had 8 to 15 years, and 56% had 16 or more years.

When asked to identify the course(s) in which disruptive behaviors were most common, 96% of faculty identified undergraduate courses,
and 4% of faculty indicated the problematic courses were graduate level. Eighty percent of the courses identified were required in the curriculum, while 20% were electives. Of the faculty who responded about the level of students who are most disruptive, 45% of the respondents designated freshmen/sophomores as being most disruptive, 15% designated junior/seniors, and 39% felt there was no difference in the level of students who disrupted their courses.

Research Question 1: How Serious Is the Issue of Disruptive Students?

Overall, 4% of faculty respondents reported the problem of disruptive behavior or classroom incivility as being extremely serious, 16% reported the problem as moderately serious, 36% felt it was slightly serious, and 45% reported it was not serious. Table 1 lists the classroom behaviors that faculty designated as most disruptive along with the level of seriousness, with 1 representing low seriousness and 4 representing high seriousness.

Research Question 2: How Frequent Is the Issue of Disruptive Students?

The frequency of classroom disruptions was measured in times per week or semester. In general, 13% of faculty reported a frequency of once a week or more, 34% reported several times per semester, 34% reported once per semester or less, and the remaining 19% reported that disruptions do not occur in their classrooms. Table 1 lists the classroom behaviors that faculty indicated as most serious and the level of frequency, with 1 representing a low frequency of occurrences and 4 representing a high frequency. Table 2 lists other disruptive behaviors that were identified with high levels of seriousness and typically low levels of frequency.

There was an extremely strong negative relationship between the ranking of the seriousness of behaviors and the ranking of frequency. Spearman’s rho is a measure used to determine the relationship between two variables calculated after the variables are rank ordered. The Spearman’s rho of -.947 indicates this is a significant negative relationship. In other words, as the frequency of behaviors increased, respondents reported the seriousness of the behaviors decreased. Table 3 reflects the Spearman’s rho analysis of the seriousness of behaviors and the ranking of frequency.
Research Questions 3 & 4:
Which Behaviors Do Faculty Find Most Disruptive, and How Do They Manage These Behaviors?

The survey attempted to align specific behaviors with specific strategies that faculty found effective in preventing or curbing the disruptive behavior. Faculty identified the strategies noted in Table 4 as being most effective for dealing with classroom management issues. In open-ended questions, respondents had the opportunity to add narrative comments to clarify their concerns and explain their use of strategies.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Pearson chi squared calculation, which is widely used for qualitative data, to test the independence of two categorical variables (for example, faculty status and frequency of disruptions). In our study, the chi-squared tests yielded five significant relationships that fell into two categories: (1) significant relationships related to the seriousness
The following significant relationships related to the seriousness of disruptive classroom behaviors:

1. A positive correlation existed between female faculty
respondents and the seriousness of disruptive behaviors.

2. A negative correlation existed between a faculty member’s status and the seriousness of disruptive behaviors.

3. A positive correlation existed between the seriousness
of disruptive behaviors and faculty members’ interest in additional resources and/or training about classroom management.

See Table 5 for chi-squared results related to variables related to the seriousness of disruptive behaviors.

The following significant relationships related to formal classroom management training:

1. A negative correlation existed between the amount of faculty member training in classroom management and the frequency of disruptive behaviors.

2. A positive correlation existed between the amount of faculty member training and his or her interest in additional resources.

See Table 6 for chi-squared results related to formal classroom management training.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom Management Strategies</th>
<th>Faculty Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speaking privately to student offenders</td>
<td>68.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressing the entire class</td>
<td>51.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pausing lecture until disruption clears</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking publicly to student offenders</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asserting yourself</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignoring the problem</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising voice above disruptive incident</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sending e-mail to offender(s)</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing the syllabus or course requirements</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables Related to Seriousness of Disruptive Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slightly Serious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58 (44.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 (45.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (22.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asst. Prof.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 (32.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assoc. Prof.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 (50.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 (59.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Positive correlation between female faculty respondents and seriousness of disruptive behavior.

Negative correlation between faculty member’s status and seriousness of disruptive classroom behavior.

Positive correlation between seriousness of disruptive behavior and interest in additional resources about classroom management.
Table 6
Variables Related to Formal Classroom Management Training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount of Training</th>
<th>Once/semester or less</th>
<th>Several times/semester</th>
<th>Once/week or more</th>
<th>Chi Square</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>37 (43.5%)</td>
<td>35 (46.2%)</td>
<td>13 (15.3%)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>18.397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3 hrs.</td>
<td>17 (42.5%)</td>
<td>15 (37.5%)</td>
<td>8 (20.0%)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6 hrs.</td>
<td>11 (53.4%)</td>
<td>6 (28.6%)</td>
<td>4 (19.0%)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 &gt; hrs.</td>
<td>40 (75.5%)</td>
<td>12 (22.6%)</td>
<td>1 (1.9%)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Negative correlation between amount of training and frequency of disruptive behaviors.

Positive correlation between amount of training and interest in additional resources.
Classroom Management Strategies

In the last section of the survey, faculty respondents identified their three most problematic classroom disruptions and strategies they used to address these student behaviors. Sixty-eight percent of respondents reported that they dealt with the three behaviors they noted as disruptive by speaking privately to the student offenders, 51% addressed the entire class, 42% paused their lecture until the disruption ceased, 39% spoke publicly to the student offender(s), 14% said they asserted themselves, and 7% sent an e-mail. These responses indicate that approximately 75% of respondents chose (at least initially) to deal with the problem privately. Such an approach avoids an immediate and public escalation of the problem and leaves other options open if needed. On the other hand, publicly addressing the entire class, even if only a few students are behaving disruptively, diffuses the rebuke but also acts as a warning to others; it combines reactive and proactive strategies.

Earlier studies on classroom incivility focused on identifying either uncivil behavior or classroom management errors. Some studies offered common approaches to managing classroom incivility, such as changing the syllabus to reflect behavioral expectations, modeling the type of behavior the instructor wished to see in his or her students, or moving around the room while lecturing. It can be deduced from these studies that today’s students are very different than students of even a decade ago. According to Newburn (2007), millennials are used to receiving clear structure from adults, and, in fact, they expect it. Brower (2006) explains that because these students have been raised by hovering parents who have sheltered them, millennials believe they are special. This confidence transfers to the classroom, where these students will often strongly contest weak or less-than-perfect grades. Rivera and Huertas (2006) suggest that because many millennials are so tech savvy, and in their world everything is “on demand,” they have zero tolerance for delays.

Our survey results help determine whether the teacher strategies commonly suggested from up to 15 years ago are still effective. Table 4 lists specific strategies for handling disruptive behaviors in rank order as recommended by the survey respondents. Narrative responses also included a few strategies not explained or even found in previous studies—the “other” category. The reported strategies are grouped into the 13 clusters below.
1. Outline Policies and Rationale Clearly.

Faculty reported that, in one way or another, they make sure students have read and are familiar with class policies. Discussion boards, quizzes, written responses, class discussion, or even web pages are all possible ways to communicate policies. A directly related strategy is using a classroom behavior contract as a way of addressing civility early on. Discussion of the contract will demonstrate to students how many ways “civility” can be defined or perceived, and it will make everyone more aware of the extent of impact that incivility can have.

2. Go Beyond Modeling the Desired Behaviors.

It is not enough for faculty to behave the way they would like their students to behave, although it is a start. One respondent said s/he takes out her/his cell phone, turns it off, and places it on the desk to demonstrate that it is not needed. Another pointed out that one goal of the course is to professionalize students, and thus, s/he behaves professionally himself/herself at all times. Several respondents said that since they want students to speak politely to one another, they are careful to be polite themselves. Strategies cited for instructor modeling included pointing out examples of how a disagreement with someone’s statement was dealt with civilly. Inviting faculty with opposing views to discuss material in the classroom and letting students see how faculty handle disagreement also provides effective modeling. But some faculty went further to be sure students understood they were modeling behavior; discussing it pointedly: “Notice that I’m turning off my phone. There’s a reason.”

3. Use Humor.

Several respondents indicated that faculty need to “keep it light,” especially in classes that deal with controversial topics. Making jokes or using self-effacing humor can keep the lid on potentially escalating inappropriate behaviors. The respondents noted, however, that sarcasm is not a kind of humor that usually works well, although encouraging and practicing critical thinking without ridicule supports civility.

4. Encourage Discussion.

Faculty reported that they often allow student involvement, when appropriate, in creating policies, in structuring tests, and in encouraging questions. This may mean setting aside a time for questions and sticking
to it, asking students questions where their answers will be built upon or taken seriously, and offering options for testing.

5. Think About How “Teacher-Scholar” Overlaps.

Teacher-scholars not only know their disciplinary material, they know how to structure teaching and learning to engage students with alignment among goals, content, and assessments, demonstrating organization and competence. Respondents suggested that not knowing one’s course content is disrespectful to students. Also, making sure assignments are all absolutely necessary to achieve the course goals demonstrates respect for students’ time. Managing due dates so that feedback can be offered appropriately also sets a course tone. Respondents’ comments demonstrated that practicing transparency in teaching helps to demystify the work of structuring a course and delivering material for students, to whom the job of “professor” beyond the classroom is usually invisible.


Faculty reported that providing a means for giving and receiving feedback is important to maintaining civility. Feedback can be anonymous, it can be open to all comments, or it can be focused, with questions generated by both students and faculty, for example: “Why do you always wait until the last possible second to give us our homework assignment?” or “Do you find it annoying or greatly distracting when...?”

7. When Appropriate, Grade Students for “Professional Conduct.”

Professional conduct is particularly appropriate when courses feed directly into internships or secondary admission programs and employ faculty whose experience “in the field” or “in industry” are very much a part of the program. An appeal to students’ sense of responsibility connects to both the sense of community that faculty try to create as well as to student goals. Traditional-aged students often see college as the entrance to adulthood and a chance to prove themselves in new contexts or “territory.” Some respondents indicated that they “encourage [students] to act as responsible adults.” In some ways, telling students that a course goal is to “professionalize” them also appeals to their long-term goals.
8. Use Praise Frequently—
and Punishment Sparingly—as a Teaching Tool.

Respondents said they praise students for showing up on time, for staying until class is over, and for speaking up when it is time for discussion, particularly if those students have not participated before. By pointing out and praising early on these desirable behaviors, a positive classroom culture is established immediately. Conversely, faculty reported retracting points earned in classes for inappropriate behaviors, for instance, in classes where clickers are used to take attendance and they discovered one student having two clickers—his or her own and that of another who was absent. They reported subtracting points if students did not participate in discussion, and they indicated they told students that incivility would be linked to “poor academic performance.”

9. Make Yourself Accessible.

Faculty recommended keeping their posted office hours, arriving early to class ready to go so that students can approach them and ask questions, and asking students about their week, majors, last class, and other comfortable topics. They also suggested learning students’ names if possible, maintaining eye contact with the whole room, and finding out what students like. As a result, faculty believed they are more likely to “be a person” to their students. Becoming accessible as described above leads faculty to share information about themselves, their passion for their work or discipline, and their own goals, activities, and interests.

10. Claim Space.

Respondents did not chain themselves to the desk at the front of the room. Particularly in a physical classroom, control of space and material objects was a strategy used to maintain the attention of students. Additionally, moving around the classroom while teaching removed potential barriers between the instructor and students. Respondents reported that they will answer a student’s ringing cell phone themselves, ask students temporarily to place electronic devices on the desk to be returned at the end of class, stand and lecture by a sleeping person, roam the classroom while speaking, and in many other ways move about the room to draw students’ attention where needed.

Another strategy that several respondents noted involved using the gaze, the “teacher look.” This is linked narratively in their comments to pausing a lecture so that the simultaneous absence of a voice and the action of a stare reinforce the message.

12. Make Private Contact.

In their narrative comments many respondents offered making private contact with a disruptive student as a disciplinary strategy, particularly as a first rebuke. Several respondents indicated that when approached in this way, students routinely respond well in terms of subsequent behavior and often are surprised to find that their classroom behavior had been perceived as inappropriate.


A final group of strategies was very pragmatic. Respondents said they gave quizzes at the beginning of class and did not allow late students to make them up; they might alternatively schedule required tasks at the end of class or vary when the task would take place to make sure students arrived on time and stayed for the whole class. Instructors providing contracts for student behavior and commenting explicitly on their own behavior modeling were offered as ways to address millennial students’ need for clear and overt structure. They further indicated that constant movement, encouraging contact in and out of class, and personalizing the course materials address millennials’ preference for the use of technology, multi-tasking behavior, and their sense of being “special” and “unique.”

Discussion

Frequency and Seriousness of Incivilities

The responses of the IUP faculty to this survey call into question many of the claims of widespread violence and incivility in the literature reviewed above and, certainly, the wisdom of beginning any discussion of incivility with anecdotes about classroom murder (Hernandez & Fister, 2001) and “nightmare” classes (Minnesota, n.d.). IUP is a fairly “typical” state university, with a broad range of students from urban, suburban, and rural areas who bring with them a correspondingly wide range of
academic preparedness and level of maturity. Yet threats, physical and verbal attacks, and inappropriate e-mails rarely were reported to occur in the classes of our respondents. When respondents were asked to tell us what behaviors occurred in their “most disruptive” course, they stated that the most commonly reported behaviors were talking to other students at inappropriate times (45%) and text messaging (40%).

When asked to identify additional serious civility infractions in an open-ended survey question, some respondents again included a few of those previously offered, but others included absenteeism, leaving and returning during class, pleading for a better grade in person or by e-mail, refusing to participate, and coming to class without basic supplies.

The faculty clearly perceive physical and verbal assaults as well as threats to either students or faculty as very serious actions. However, they also perceive non-physical actions as being serious to very serious infractions of classroom civility. Table 7 provides a breakdown of faculty perceptions related to these threats and assaults. The data indicate that most of the “very serious” offenses have a very low frequency of occurrence, while many offenses seen as being in the middle to lower ranges of seriousness occur frequently. Such findings have important implications for planning training for faculty.

Other aspects of our findings relative to the seriousness of classroom disruptions, while significant, are not entirely clear-cut. Faculty reported that as their rank increased, they found that many of the disruptions were less serious. Instructors and assistant professors were significantly more likely to report slightly serious disruptions than were associate professors and professors. The most serious disruptions, however, were reported by assistant and associate professors, with instructors and professors reporting far fewer such incidents.

It is important to remember that each respondent provided his or her perception of the level of seriousness of classroom disruptions—there was no common “standard” by which seriousness was measured. The instructors’ relationship to their students, the course material, the course goals, and larger concerns very likely influenced their perceptions. For example, a probationary assistant professor who is concerned about tenure may feel that disruptions are, as a whole, more serious than does a professor or an adjunct who does not share those concerns. An associate professor who is secure in his or her tenured position but considering promotion also may be more sensitive to disruptions. In addition, if a course goal is to professionalize students—for example, to create “junior journalists” or “emerging scholars”—the instructor of that class may feel disruptions are more serious than he or she would in a class seen as a “stand alone.”
It is possible that an associate professor who designs a new course—taking risks he or she would not under other circumstances—will resent disruptions or take them more personally than in a course in which the content or structure or both are “inherited.” While the data relative to this question can certainly be better understood by more follow-up by the researchers, it is very clear that faculty are more likely to seek out resources if they believe they experience more serious disruptions in their courses (see Table 6).

The gender of the instructor also played a role in the perceived serious-
ness of disruptions. While both males and females were roughly equal in their reporting of less serious incivility, males were more likely to report more slightly serious incivility, while females were, by a wide margin, likely to report more serious incivility. It may be that larger social gender constructs play an important role in student-teacher relationships. Perhaps students perceive female faculty members as less powerful or more vulnerable and, thus, are less inclined to “follow orders.” It may be that some construct of females as nurturing conflicts with a construct of faculty as disciplinarians, and both faculty and students have difficulty negotiating these conflicts. It may also be that student behaviors that male instructors do not find serious are perceived as serious by female instructors. The high percentage of serious incivility reported by female faculty indicate a significant concern on their part. Again, this is an area in need of more research.

**Importance of the Findings**

Classroom disruptions and the strategies for dealing with them similar to those reported here have been offered previously. These strategies, however, are linked in important ways to data, not merely to “common sense” advice or “teacher lore.” Furthermore, many of these strategies can be directly connected to millennial students’ expectations and needs. Additionally, the imbalance between the frequency and seriousness of behaviors indicates the need to rethink how professional developers approach training faculty to prevent and respond to classroom disruption. Training may include faculty orientation programs, professional development seminars or workshops, peer mentoring programs, or Web resources or Webinars.

**Future Research**

There appear to be benefits to faculty training in classroom management, but the amount of training and the exact types of training that are most beneficial to faculty are unclear. To compare and contrast the faculty data collected in this survey, it would be valuable to collect student perceptions of disruptive classroom behaviors and how to manage the disruptions. Questions should certainly provide more data about the relationship between gender, status, race/ethnicity, and civility. Faculty and student focus groups may also provide a level of detailed qualitative data that should be helpful to instructors. Furthermore, studies are needed to explore the relationship between disruptive student behaviors and class size.
Recommendations

Clear correlations between gender and perceived seriousness of the disruption as well as between incivility and both faculty status and level of training lead to recommendations for approaching professional development in managing classroom behavior. After seven or more hours of training on classroom incivility, faculty felt much more confident in their ability to prevent such incidents (see Table 6). Additionally, the data indicate that special attention should be paid to encouraging newer, less-experienced female faculty to participate in such training. The high percentage of females responding to the survey (twice the number of males) is an indication of their concern and sense of vulnerability. Pairing senior faculty with newer ones would help beginning faculty gain perspective on classroom behavior, as senior faculty reported fewer incidents of serious misbehavior. This may be because senior faculty are more likely to teach upper-level classes; however, it may also be inferred that they are better able to spot a potentially problematic situation and deal with it swiftly. Additionally, considering gender in assigning such mentoring pairs would seem to be productive. Furthermore, it can be concluded that providing training to faculty early and repeatedly, beginning with orientation and throughout their first year, is very important. This can include training on ineffective classroom management strategies so that they know what to avoid.

Finally, given the very small number of violent incidents of incivility reported, valuable time should be concentrated on what occurs most frequently: behavior that might be better characterized as “impolite” or “unprofessional.” Addressing the disparity between media presentations of the scale and level of violence in classrooms and moving on quickly to the most common disruptions would make better use of scarce resources—both time and money—for faculty. While faculty members may fear violence in the classroom, what is most disruptive are the day-to-day, small events that combine to create a classroom environment in which none of the participants is pleased or feel respected. Based on our research, additional training on millennial student behavior and expectations, the effective use of technology, clear communication between faculty and students, and reflection on teaching all would be most helpful in creating professional development opportunities for faculty.

References

to meet the challenge. *American Secondary Education*, 33 (3), 51-64.
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Acknowledgment

The researchers offer their sincere thanks to Elaine Rubinstein, department of measurement and evaluation of teaching, University of Pittsburgh, for statistical analysis.

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