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Students Crossing Boundaries

Rudeness, disruptions, unrealistic demands. Where to draw the line?



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CLASSROOM CHALLENGES

By *Beth McMurtrie*

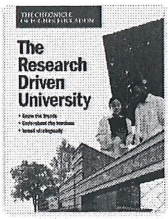
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Marcela Alfaro-Córdoba began teaching introductory statistics at the University of California at Santa Cruz in the middle of the pandemic. Because she wanted to stay connected with her students, hundreds of whom she was teaching over Zoom, she set up a Discord channel for the course. The regular pings on her phone were alerts telling her that students had questions. Some of her students needed help with the material. But others had personal issues, and she found herself spending a lot of time navigating their challenges. “I was struck by how much attention they were needing,” she says. “At some point I couldn’t keep up with all the messages.”

But it was more than just the steady stream of requests that she found difficult. Alfaro-Córdoba, an assistant teaching professor, has had some run-ins with students who she felt tried to turn her policies on deadlines and grading, or their lack of preparation for exams, into a problem that she was expected to solve. One student got so upset that she wasn’t allowed to take a makeup exam at a different time that she complained to the head of the department, the dean, and some advisers that she wasn’t being given a fair chance.

“It’s something, sadly, I see more and more of,” Alfaro-Córdoba says. “And I don’t have any recommendations on how to solve it.”

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Aggressive demands. Inappropriate classroom behaviors. Faculty members who feel pressured to be endlessly flexible. These and other challenges are becoming more common, says Jody Greene, associate campus provost for academic success at UC Santa Cruz. Greene has noticed that a growing number of faculty members are seeking help with classroom disruptions, sometimes well after they have spun out of control. Professors, Greene concluded, often believe that it is their responsibility to solve these problems on their own. And they worry — sometimes rightly — that if they resist student demands, they will be accused of being unreasonable.

Greene sees many issues driving these boundary-challenging behaviors, including a rise in mental-health challenges and a lack of interaction during the pandemic that left students underprepared for the social norms of college. Students' growing use of social media, along with national political divides, has given some a warped view of appropriate classroom behaviors, Greene says. And a shifting power dynamic, in which students feel more comfortable advocating for their needs, has left some faculty members feeling uncertain about their authority.

“I often see students using the language of, ‘You need to be flexible, and you need to be more caring,’ which I think they’ve picked up from an institutional discourse that we are flexible and we are caring. And we are,” says Greene, who has designed a workshop in conjunction with the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Education to help professors navigate this terrain. “But people like me have warned for a long time that the discourse of flexibility will eventually come back to bite us.”

hat’s happening at UC Santa Cruz is not unique, but it’s not universal either.

Wthe classroom. Some see no increase in faculty requests for help, while others report problematic behavior across campus. Two variables may be at play: when colleges returned to in-person learning, and how students navigated their high-school years.

Montclair State University, for example, pushed hard for a full return to campus in the fall of 2021. That year was “a low point,” says Emily Isaacs, executive director of the Office for Faculty Excellence. “It was just exhausting.” Professors spent months re-establishing academic expectations and scaling back the extreme flexibility of the pandemic’s early days. Today, says Isaacs, “we’re on the other side of that.”

“What I’m realizing is what faculty need these days, more than a checklist of how-tos, is a permission slip to do what makes sense in their context.”

By contrast, faculty and staff members at California State University-Dominguez Hills have reported a wide range of behavioral problems this year, says Matthew Smith, senior associate vice president for student life. Students are struggling with academic expectations in the classroom: wearing AirPods the entire time, showing up 30 minutes late with food in hand, not turning in assignments but expecting professors to “bend over backwards” to help them pass.

In the first-year dorms, he says, there’s been a problem with sexual harassment by young men. Female students, meanwhile, are increasingly getting into physical altercations over what Smith calls “high-school stuff,” such as disputes over rumors or boys.

“We’ve seen more fights in the first five weeks of school than we’ve seen in the last

Unlike many campuses across the country, CSU-Dominguez Hills' students remained mostly online through the 2021-22 school year, Smith notes. "I think they just lost social interaction and social development and understanding how to deal with conflict." Meanwhile, local high schools were focused on trying to get students to graduate, and some of their policies didn't demand much accountability, he says. They allowed students to repeatedly redo work and miss deadlines, and used in-school suspensions for problematic behavior. That made it more difficult for students to adjust to college norms.

Smith has met with students in residence halls to hear from them firsthand and was struck by two things: The ones acting out were aloof and not willing to engage, while others spoke about a range of personal challenges. Students on his campus are predominantly low income and first generation. So while they don't come in with a sense of entitlement, he notes, "at times there's this level of, Well I'm going through this and therefore you should just understand and not hold me to these standards or expectations."

Smith plans to convene people across campus, including housing, student psychological services, and instructors of first-year courses, to figure out how best to deal with what they're seeing. The message he wants to convey to students: "Even though you're going through stuff, it doesn't absolve you of your responsibility. And we won't lower our standards for you. But we have all of these things that we can wrap around you."

If students struggle to stay on top of their academics, for example, student-affairs staff might talk to them about what else is going on in their lives. Perhaps they have a long commute, work long hours, and have difficulty figuring out how much time to devote to coursework. The wraparound services could include academic coaching, help finding scholarships or on-campus jobs, and time-management workshops.

At Appalachian State University, Lindsay Masland, a director at the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning for Student Success, says professors on campus seem to be both exasperated and perplexed. So the center has increased faculty development in two areas: understanding the student experience and being honest about where your boundaries are.

“What I’m realizing is what faculty need these days, more than a checklist of how-tos, is a *permission slip* to do what makes sense in their context,” Masland writes in an email, “which often means that their teaching choices will and should look different than those of the person in the cubicle next to them.”

Masland says they have not heard of anything that could be labeled as hostility from students — more like unrelenting frustration with professors, sometimes with good reason. For example, upon investigating student complaints about an instructor, Masland sometimes realizes the complaints have some merit, usually because class policies or assignment instructions were unclear.

Being clear and explicit — transparency — is the approach faculty developers and teaching experts favor, especially given students’ changed expectations, the wide variety of rules and policies among professors, and the feeling — among everyone, it seems — of being overwhelmed.

“It’s clear that stressed-out students and stressed-out faculty can struggle to communicate on high-stakes issues,” notes E. Shelley Reid, executive director of engaged teaching at George Mason University’s Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning.

Because it’s often hard to determine what lies at the root of a classroom challenge, Reid says, she would rather focus on “generalizable strategies” that help in many

it reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings and surprises. If you discover late in the semester that you're at risk of failing, or you waited until 2 a.m. to start an assignment that turned out to be much more complicated than you thought, "those are the spaces where a lot of us will send an intemperate email."

Transparent course design rests on the idea that explaining not only what your policies are but why you have them helps students feel confident in what is expected of them and how it benefits their learning. Transparency might include detailed information on deadlines and late work policies, how students will be assessed and why, and ground rules for classroom conduct. Individual assignments may also come with similar explanations of why they were designed in a certain way and what the instructor wants students to achieve.

If tense moments arise, faculty developers say, professors can refer to the syllabus or conduct codes, and remind students of the policies they had discussed.

Reid recently had a conversation with a faculty member who was approached by a student who had missed the first two exams and said that she needed to catch up on everything in the final three weeks of class. When the instructor said that was against her course policy, the student replied that another of her professors allowed students to complete their work anytime before the end of the semester. So, the student asked, why don't you?

To avoid conflicts like this in the future, the faculty member told Reid, she planned to set up a system in which students who fell behind would get a message reminding them about class policies and suggesting where to get academic help.

It's also important, Reid notes, for faculty members to talk to one another about what they consider reasonable course expectations. While such policies might vary from person to person, professors being challenged by students are less likely to feel

with students about their policies early in the semester, students are less likely to get frustrated by those differences.

“The more we are publicly talking about expectations and rationales,” Reid says, “the better we are.”

At UC Santa Cruz, faculty members are also hearing that it’s easier to prevent a problem than manage one that’s already out of control.

Since last academic year, Greene has been working with Ross Maxwell, deputy director of the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Education, to develop a workshop for faculty members on how to set boundaries with students to support learning. The session, which was first offered this fall to a group of new faculty members, is designed to give instructors a framework for why setting boundaries is beneficial for everyone, practical advice on how to respond to boundary-pushing behavior, and scenarios taken from real life that they can discuss.

Ad hoc flexibility without consideration of its effect on learning can lead to worse outcomes for students.

In one case, for example, a faculty member learned about a Discord channel that some students had created. The problem: They were sharing quiz answers and making rude comments about the professor, which eventually got back to the professor. Other cases involved a student making a random offensive comment in class, and a faculty member being approached by a panicked student as office hours ended, demanding immediate help with an assignment due the next day and saying that they were paying a lot in tuition. In each of these cases, Greene and Maxwell ask workshop participants to discuss how best to respond.

Ideally, says Greene, future workshops will be done with entire departments so that faculty members can see that they're not alone in their challenges and create a support system for each other if confronted in the classroom. Younger faculty, women, and instructors from underrepresented groups are more likely to see these sorts of challenges to their authority, Greene notes.

One of the messages Greene wants to convey to faculty: Ad hoc flexibility without consideration of its effect on learning can lead to worse outcomes for students. It's better to build it into a course rather than trying to determine on a case-by-case basis whether students have a "good enough" reason to, say, be granted an extension or an excuse for absence.

Maxwell, who has been working with Greene to solve classroom behavior problems since the pandemic started, says that the types of interruptions and inappropriate behaviors have shifted since the return to in-person learning, having been shaped by online interactions.

One conversation stood out to him. A student was called in to discuss inappropriate behavior. The student had been using a Discord channel for class, and a Discord channel with his friends.

"Essentially he said, 'The difference between joking with my friends in a way that would probably be inappropriate during classes is a click. It's less than a quarter inch away. I click on one, I'm talking with my friends and we're laughing about what I'm learning in class and I'm maybe saying things that wouldn't be appropriate in class. And then I click back into the class, and I'm back in the classroom. Those blurred. I started just acting the same way with my friends and in class. And what my friends thought was funny was not funny in class.'

"Students are having a harder time making that distinction," says Maxwell, "like what

classroom setting?”

Re-establishing boundaries may be a lengthy process. Faculty members may find that they get dinged on student evaluations for allegedly demanding too much from their students. Or they might find that their colleagues tell them it's easier to acquiesce to students' requests than risk a complaint. Such scenarios have happened at UC Santa Cruz. Still, professors who have made changes have seen results.

After that first exhausting spring, Alfaro-Córdoba, the statistics professor, revamped her own policies.

She stopped using Discord and began directing her students to a communication tool in her learning-management system, known as Ed Discussion. That allowed her and her teaching assistants to work together to respond to questions and comments, which helped balance out workloads. It also tamped down on the informality she saw on Discord, where, she says, students would sometimes behave as if they were commenting on a YouTube video. On Ed Discussion, students knew that while their posts might appear anonymously to their classmates, the professor and the TAs would see their name. That's especially important in very large classes, she notes, where her enrollments are upwards of 200 students.

Alfaro-Córdoba also included in her syllabus the hours that she is available to meet with students and how long they should expect to wait before she responds to queries. On the first day of class she reviews her syllabus in full and explains why she has certain policies, noting that sticking to deadlines helps prevent them from falling behind. She has also found that she regularly needs to remind students about all of these things throughout the term.

So far, she says, these changes have worked well. “The new generation understands

rules into a context, some of them are really thankful for it. But authority just for the sake of authority this generation really hates.”

Correction (Nov. 15, 2023, 7:41 p.m.): This article originally misidentified Ross Maxwell's title as assistant director of student conduct at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Maxwell's title is deputy director of the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Education. The article has been updated to reflect this correction.

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We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

TEACHING & LEARNING

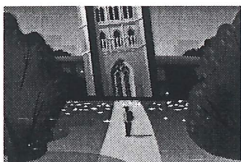
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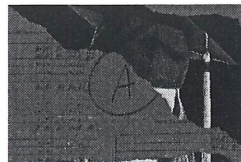
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