

Dealing with Problem Students

Although no classification will capture all the cases of problem students you may encounter, this classification provided in McKeachie's Chapter 21 is quite comprehensive and may be useful. The problem student types discussed there are:

- Angry, Aggressive, Challenging students.
- Attention seekers and students who dominate discussion
- Silent students
- Inattentive students
- Flatterer, Disciple, Con man
- Discouraged, Ready to give up students
- Students with excuses
- Students in search of truth and students who believe everything is relative
- Students with emotional reactions to sensitive topics

Do you have any of these in your section? Although some categories are self explanatory and need no further discussion, some others are not. These latter categories are explained further below and suggestions on how to proceed for each type of problem student are stated next.

Dealing with Angry, Aggressive and Challenging students

The common "solution" to deal with these students is ignoring them. Although this attitude avoids public confrontation and creates less class disruption, it is not the best from the standpoint of motivating this type of student to learn simply because it does not address the cause of the problem.

The best attitude towards these students is trying to know them better. Discuss their papers and homework with them. By establishing contact with them, you may get to the causes that underlie their behavior. Do so with a lot of patience and avoid making them feel threatened. In particular:

Listen carefully and respectfully. Nothing is more frustrating than to be interrupted before your argument has been heard. Take into account the possibility that you may be wrong.

State your position as clearly and rationally as you can recognizing that not everyone will agree. If the issue is with grading, explain carefully how grades are allocated. State that although the system may not be perfect and that he may not necessarily agree with it, it is your responsibility to say what is right and what is wrong.

Dealing with Attention seekers and students that dominate discussions

Attention seekers are students who try by all means to be noticed by the rest. Although they may be useful to start a discussion, they may not allow the rest to participate if they are not controlled. Simply tell them that you want everybody to participate to enrich the discussion and ask other students to voice their opinion on

the subject matter. This should keep them at bay. If this is not enough, just talk to them separately and tell them your concerns.

Students that dominate discussions are usually very knowledgeable students so they are not really a problem. Although these are the students we would like to have, if you allow them to dominate your discussion, others will feel discouraged to talk because their ideas may not be as good or articulate. Again the solution is telling them that you want everybody to participate.

Dealing with Silent, Inattentive Students

Students are silent for different reasons which usually are the following:

Boredom

Lack of knowledge

General habits of passivity or cultural norm

Students do not understand the professor and are lost

Fear to be embarrassed.

Suggestions on how to make silent student participate depends on the cause of the problem.

A very common problem is the fear to be embarrassed. To deal with this one, say that you want somebody who did not participate to do so and keep a relaxed environment making clear that providing a wrong answer is absolutely fine and a step closer towards learning the correct one. After all, if they knew all the correct answers they should not be in your class!!

Boredom and lack of knowledge are signs of lack of interest in the class. Ask different silent students every class to be the class observer and ask him/her for comments on how to make the class better. This solution will also address the problem of not understanding the professor. Students will typically make comments that reflect that.

Dealing with Unprepared students

Students have a natural tendency to leave everything until the last minute before exams and this can be true even if they are interested in the subject matter. The way of addressing this problem is quizzing them regularly to make sure that they keep on reading their assignments.

Dealing with Flatterer, Disciple, Con man students

These are the students that are constantly flattering you. Although it is possible that they admire you, it is not the most likely reason for their behavior. They usually do this because vanity is a human weakness. Some Professors and teachers give in to it and these students get special deadlines or more lenient grading. This is absolutely unfair and must be avoided at all costs. State clearly that rules are the same for everybody. Extension of deadlines and special grading must be avoided by all means.

If somebody breaks the rules, make sure that he/she is penalized and that the rest learns about it without naming who is the one who broke the rule for the rules to be credible.

Dealing with Discouraged, Ready to give up students

A very effective way of encouraging these students is by giving them concrete examples of students who had similar problems, overcame them and succeeded in the class. The effectiveness lies that they do not attribute their problems to their lack of ability that can not be changed but rather a temporary problem.

Dealing with student with excuses

The goal is ultimately the same than the one pursued by the flatterer students discussed before. The solution is therefore the same.

Dealing with Students in search of truth and students who believe everything is relative

Students in search of truth are typical in UCLA. The Professor is supposed to be some sort of flawless creature and whatever he says must be repeated in the exam without question because it is the truth.

Students who believe everything is relative are exactly the opposite of the previous type. They believe that everyone is entitled to its own opinion and that there are no settled truths.

Both types of students must be helped to understand how to evaluate argument supporting claims. They must learn to recognize what counts as evidence and how to read critically and evaluate knowledge claims. Nothing must be a revealed truth but they must realize that there are certain basic truths that can be established logically and that other possibilities simply can not exist.

Dealing with Students with emotional reactions to sensitive topics

These students must be shown that by listening to opposing opinions is what helps to establish how well founded and clear is their own. An argument must be won using logic and not emotions. In order to show this, do not deck controversy, listen and get students listen to each other, keep calm and remember that problem students are human beings who have problems and need your help no matter how much you would like to strangle them!!