

# Faculty Checklist: Steps to Respond to Classroom Incivility

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## Be Prepared to Address Hot Topics:

The first step in navigating a charged political environment is to make sure students feel comfortable questioning statements and issues without feeling judged.

1. Set expectations at the start. How are you introducing yourself to your class? What is the underlying purpose of the class and does it include tough topics?
2. Clarify the role of free speech in the classroom. *At a private institution*, clarify for students the extent to which speech in the classroom will be guided by the institution's mission and values, as well as the responsibilities that faculty, staff, and students bear under applicable policies to promote civil and collegial discourse on issues that may be viewed as challenging or contentious. *At a public institution*, remind students that free speech, though constitutionally protected, is not unfettered; in addition to being guided by policies regarding civil and collegial discourse, we need to be attentive to the time, place, and manner in which our speech occurs. So, for example, in order to create a space for open, respectful discussion, remind students that free speech doesn't make it okay to shout down other students who express ideas or positions contrary to their own.
3. Enforce expectations consistently throughout the class.
4. Recognize that your students come to their learning with diverse sets of beliefs, and work proactively to present course material with sensitivity to demographic, economic, racial, religious, and other differences. Model this for students.

## If a Discussion Becomes Intense or Threatening:

Faculty should consistently remember to rise above the situation and not get pulled into debates. Faculty are in a position of power and influence, and they need to build their reputations as researchers and scholars. Students are transitory. Keep the big picture in mind when thinking about how you want to interact with students.

1. Act immediately to deescalate the situation:
  - a. Don't take the bait.
  - b. Tell students the language is getting inappropriate.
  - c. Point out that class is not a political rally, and everyone is attending class to have a professional, respectful, and educational conversation.
  - d. If one or more students can't calm down, ask them to leave.
  - e. Don't engage the students in debate on social media. Social media often feeds anger.
2. If the discussion continues to escalate to the point where you need to ask a student to leave:
  - a. *Establish a next step* ("I'm going to ask you to leave the class, and would like you to come see me in my office sometime in the next few days")
  - b. *Document the situation* as well as any threats — direct or indirect.
  - c. *Report threats of any kind* to your chair and campus security.
  - d. *Don't try to resolve the situation on your own*. Talk with your human resources department, legal counsel, or student affairs office. If it's happening in your class, it's happening in others.
3. Later, when meeting privately with the student:
  - a. Make sure you have reviewed the student handbook so that you are familiar with your institution's current behavior and civility codes.
  - b. Frame the conversation in terms of professionalism: "We were talking about this topic, and you made statements that made other students feel uncomfortable. We need to conform to professional standards in the classroom."

## If You Receive an Official Complaint

"It's important to remember that you're not managing — nor should you manage — a complaint alone."

- Kathleen Reinhart

If a student has threatened to file a complaint or you suspect that they will:

1. Contact student affairs or your legal counsel office. This may give these offices time to intervene before the threat becomes an official complaint. In addition, you probably have professional liability coverage that will protect you in accidental violations of a policy or procedure.
2. Discuss with student affairs or legal counsel any external factors that may be affecting classroom incivility ("What factors contributed to unproductive or conflict-laden discussions? What can/did we do to help students reframe their statements so as to engage one another in a more civil or collegial manner?").
3. Maintain control in the classroom. If the situation recurs and escalates, note that you and the class have heard what the student had to say, but that the discussion isn't leading the class down a productive path. Invite the student to come see you after class if they'd like to talk about the topic further.
4. Do not engage the student about the issue on social media — even if the student is posting to or about you.