Overview

Academic advising professionals know that there may be times when they are called upon to work with students who are frustrated or angry. The American College Health Assessment survey in 2017 reported that in a 12-month period 44% of college students surveyed said they had felt overwhelming anger. Not all students are able to express their concerns and frustrations openly or in a safe manner. Some may communicate hostility in a passive way; others may express themselves in a way that feels threatening to the advisor. How can advisors recognize warning signs, even if passive, that a student is angry? How can advisors help a student while defusing their frustration?

In May 2017, this team brought their presentation of When Students are Sad and Stay Sad: Best Practices in Advising Students with Depression to the NACADA Webinar audience. Enthusiastic participants described it as “the best webinar I have attended” and requested to hear more from this team. In response to popular demand, our Presenters return to share their ideas and expertise for strategies to help advisors stay safe when working with a student who is openly or passively angry. Video clips of advising sessions will be shown, and the Presenters will offer suggestions for recognizing angry students. They will provide strategies to calm a student and share possible plans to keep both advisor and student safe in the advising situation.

This webinar will assist viewers in developing Academic Advising Core Competencies from both the Informational and Relational components. For example, advisers need to know, understand, and have a plan to implement the rules, procedures, and regulations of their institutions when it comes to advisor and student safety (I-3). Being aware of the behavioral proclivities of students and issues that may lead to closed or open aggression involves core competencies I-5 (knowledge of the characteristics, needs, and experiences of major and emerging student populations), as well as R-6 (the ability to facilitate problem solving, decision-making, meaning-making, planning, and goal setting). The skills an advisor may need in order to calm a student and/or defuse an angry student may fall within the scope of R-2 (the ability to create rapport and build academic advising relationships), R-3 (the ability to communicate in an inclusive and respectful manner), and/or R-4 (the ability to plan and conduct successful advising interactions).

Pre-Webinar Activity Suggestions

Please consider the following questions.

1. What are my own thoughts, experiences and fears regarding students who are angry/aggressive?
2. How have my experiences with angry people (self, family, friends, others, television, movies) influenced/biased my thoughts regarding the expression of anger?
Self-Assessment about Advising Students who are Aggressive of Angry

Before the webinar begins, please consider the following questions. Try to answer them the best you can. No one is going to grade the answers, so feel free to attempt each question. It is all about you and your own learning/awareness.

1. Name possible manifestations of anger that a college student might experience.
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 

2. What does the data tell us regarding the number of students feeling overwhelming anger on our college campuses?

3. Please list resources on your campus to which you could refer a student with anger issues. How many can you think of?
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 
   d. 

4. Consider your student caseloads in past years. Think about a student you advise (d) who was a procrastinator, or who said they would take and use your suggestions but never did. What was that like for you? What impact did that experience have on you and your advisement?

5. What safety plan does your department have for you, your students’ and your colleague’s safety?

6. When you consider advising a student exhibiting angry behavior what concerns, issues, and/or successes come to mind both for the student and for you?
Academic advising professionals know that there may be times when they are called upon to work with students who are frustrated or angry. The American College Health Assessment survey in 2017 reported that in a 12-month period 44% of college students surveyed said they had felt overwhelming anger within the prior 2 weeks or less of taking the survey. A further 17% reported feeling overwhelming anger prior to the last year. Not all students are able to express their concerns and frustrations openly or in a safe manner. Some may communicate hostility in a passive way; others may express themselves in a way that feels threatening to the advisor. How can advisors recognize warning signs, even if passive, that a student is angry? How can advisors help a student while defusing their frustration?

The literature suggests that many colleges and universities are reporting numerous incidents of disruptive and uncivil behavior (Deering, 2011). Some students who have problems regulating their emotions will often exhibit angry or hostile behavior (Asberg, 2013). When these students experience anxiety or frustration typically the emotion manifested is often anger. Unfortunately faculty and staff tend to avoid confrontation with students exhibiting anger for multiple reasons: hoping instead that the behavior will disappear, fears that administration with not support them, worry that somehow the professionals teaching or advising is somehow provoking the behavior and possible fear of retaliation (Deering, 2011).

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management recommends that we recognize that all of us are vulnerable to the irate and even violent individual and admit to the slim possibility that we might be confronted with such an individual. By preparing a plan and gaining skills we may save a life (even our own). Advisors are often on the front line with students who need support and assistance and also on the front line for those students who may proceed quickly from anxiety and frustration to anger and hostility.

The way students express anger can be very different depending on the student. While some students exhibit annoying behaviors, such as procrastination, turning in assignments late and insist on special treatment from the advisor, other students may be threatening to the safety of the advisor, professor and fellow students (Ananda, 2010).

Over the years there has been a call in the advisement profession for institutional policies to protect all employees and students on our campuses (Stolar, 2009, Svartoien-Conway and Rathburn, 2010). Suggestions of skills that advisement professionals ought to master have also been presented as a way to keep the advisor and student safe (Stolar, 2009). This webinar will better prepare advisors to know when to apply defusing techniques or, at least, to not continue to stoke the fire of a frustrated student. The focus of this presentation is not only on college safety or dealing with potentially violent on campus, but rather on working with students who come into an advisement situation frustrated and angry. We will not only focus on the disruptive and dangerous student but also on advising the student who cannot express their anger and hostility overtly but never-the less feels it keenly. These are the noncompliant students who resist and appears to work against all suggestions and requirements at the same time appearing pleasant and amenable. The main focus of our presentation will be exploring, observing, and using strategies to protect the safety of both the advisor and the student. We will focus on techniques such as empathy, calming the student and setting up boundaries. However, there will be some suggestions given for overall advisor safety such as understanding the college safety plan, having a plan for him/herself and the advisement center (including some ideas on what that might look like), and learning how office space can impede or support an advisor’s physical safety. We will also focus on how an advisor can use simple solutions to organizing their office for maximum safety.
Suggested Questions for Post-Webinar Discussion

1. Review the pre-questions and your answers. After your participation in the webinar, are your answers the same or different?

2. As an advisor, what changes could you make in your own practice to support and assist students who maybe passive aggressive?

3. As an advisor, what changes could you make in your own practice to support and assist students who maybe openly hostile?

4. As an advisor, what changes could you make in your own practice to protect you from students who maybe threatening?

5. Please list what you already specifically do which assists/protects (or could assist/protects) you, students and colleagues from those who are passive aggressive or hostile in your advisement sessions.

6. What changes or shifts could you make in terms of “Best Practices” in adjusting your advisement to better serve and keep safe students with aggression issues?

7. Consider your advisement center safety policies. What are they? Do you know who to call for help? Do you have a specific Student Disruptive Behavioral Council/Policies at your institution? Do you know how to make a report?

8. When did you last practice (similar to earth quake and tornado drills) a drill to train on what to do when working with a student exhibiting violence? Do your part-time and student workers know the drill?

Possible Post-Webinar Activities

1. Arrange to have a member of counseling services at your institution come and meet with your colleagues during a staff meeting. Discuss what the Counseling Center polices are, what resources are on campus as well as emergency hours, and referrals for treating students with mental health crisis and aggression.

2. Invite a member of your institution’s Disruptive Student Committee to visit with you and your colleagues to discuss referrals and resources with regards to aggressive students.

3. Have a member of your campus Police visit with your colleagues during a staff meeting. Have the officer review your department/office plans for escape and safety when working with a hostile student. Consider having the office check your office space for possible insights for safety and escape.

4. With a trusted colleague, practice role playing the scenario of advising a student who is:
   - Passive aggressive
   - Hostile
   - Violent
Videos for Post-Webinar Viewing

Feel free to watch them by yourself or with colleagues at your institution. There are many more on the web that you could watch if you prefer. None of these videos are specifically endorsed by the presenters, these are just some ideas.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9usYVvNrd0
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6S9UJwyyJ8
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8nji0Rebng
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o97fVGTJe4w
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UYfU7juWtE
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sm6NCwyBrgg

The following videos are quite intense. These videos are made by institutions of higher education regarding surviving active shooters.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmB0ym9WHeo
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVKtfzaVWU
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vY-avaG_0eY
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrMhyk6zBfo
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPQpj_k_Fl4

Presenters’ References, Resources, and Suggested Readings


American College Health Association National College Health Assessment (Spring 2016). Retrieved from https://www.acha.org/


The Center for Advising and Student Achievement. Retrieved from http://www.casa.colostate.edu/advising/Faculty_Advising_Manual/Chapter2/angry%20students.cfm


Ideas for Constructing your own List of Resources

1. List specific people (include contact information) to whom you could refer a student and reach out to with anger issues both during and after office hours.

2. What is the phone number for the college counseling center? Who would be your first and second point of contact? What is the after-hour emergency intake process and phone number? What is the intake process?

3. What is the number for campus security and your Disruptive Student Council?

4. Any other resources you would like to include?
A Good Place to Begin...

Is the student:
• Annoying/troubling (passive aggressive)
• Disruptive
• Dangerous
• All may require different interventions/actions

Becca  Sid  Marcus

Photo courtesy of Utah State Hospital
Becca
• Mid-twenties, senior
• Cumulative GPA very low
• One semester to graduate
• Reports family issues got in the way of focus and concentration
• Petitioned and is permitted to stay
• Agrees to work with learning specialists and advisors and use free tutoring services provided especially for her
• Keeps first 1-2 appointments with everyone and then MIA

Becca
• Appears distracted during visits; when asked to repeat back her understanding is unable to do so accurately
• Checks phone
• Does not reply to 6-10 emails or to phone calls
• Re-suspended

Sid
• Early thirties
• First Generation, College Freshmen
• Poor grades; 2 semesters below a 2.0
• University reached out: numerous phone calls, emails, and letters inviting him to come and meet with his academic and Academic Support Advisors—Sid never came
• Sid lost his financial aid—without it he would find it difficult to stay at the university
Sid

- Verbally abusive
- Went to various advisement offices on campus after swore and shouted at staff members...
  police were called

Marcus

- Mid twenties, college upper classman
- Reports two or three mental illnesses
- Problems creating and maintaining relationships
- Impulsive
- Attacks a fellow student with a weapon
- Threatens faculty and other college personnel with personal harm

What is Passive Aggression? Why is this anger?

- Passive-aggressive behavior is a deliberate, but covert way of expressing feelings of anger (Long, Long & Whitson, 2009)
- Motivated by fear of expressing anger directly
- The passive-aggressive student believes life will only get worse if people know of their anger; expresses anger indirectly
- Passive-aggressive behaviors are designed to “get back” at an authority figure without that person immediately recognizing the individual’s underlying anger
How to Recognize Passive Aggression

“…if your interactions with a child, a parent, a teacher, a student, a coworker, your boss, or even a spouse, give you the feeling that you are just on an emotional rollercoaster going up and down all of the time, chances are good, you are dealing with a passive aggressive person.”

Common Passive-Aggressive Behavior Patterns

- Denial of anger
- Procrastination
- Resentment of authority
- Claims of forgetfulness or misunderstanding
- Keeping others waiting and dangling
- Intentional inefficiency
- Evasiveness and secretiveness
- The silent treatment
- Shutting down conversations with “Fine” and “Whatever”
- Often charming and intelligent
- Eliciting temper tantrums and feelings of guilt in others

Passive Aggressive Behavior

- Verbal compliance
- Intentional inefficiency
- Allows the problem to escalate (crimes of omission)
- Hidden but conscious revenge
- Self depreciation (failure)
Possible Ways to Support the Student with PA Behavior

- Sometimes the professional may feel angry or troubled when working with a student
  - Consider why you might feel annoyed or troubled?
  - Acknowledge and accept your own angry feelings
- Recognize passive aggressive behaviors as they are acted out
- Manage personal anger and role model assertive behavior
- Maintain a calm, non-threatening stance (let the student know you understand that they might be angry)
  - “Colombo” technique (quiet, pondering)

Long, Long & Whitson. (n.d.)

Possible Ways to Support The Student with PA Behavior

- Set up boundaries; email, call, meet with and clearly establish what is expected of the student. Write it out.
- Establish and enforce precise limits
- Minimize opportunities for secondary gratification
- Employ logical, natural consequences
  - Stress the positives and yet be clear about consequences
  - Maybe inquire as to what the student sees as issues in their way that keeps them from fulfilling their commitments
  - Ask the student for ideas to help them keep appointments, turn in paperwork, etc. Compliment on skills and attributes
  - Be willing to visit with the student even if the consequences turn out to be difficult

Long, Long & Whitson. (n.d.)

Disruptive/Demanding Students

- Verbally intimidate
- You feel bullied or demeaned
- Makes excessive demands on you or your staff
- Insist you meet every week, every day, etc.
- Aggressively take over your meeting
- Want you to take responsibility for them or their academic success
- Blame others for their problems and insist that you resolve issue for them

Possible example: Student tells advisor and faculty member that unless they receive an “A” for the course they will kill themselves
How to Work with Disruptive/Demanding Students

• Remain calm—avoid a fight
  • DO NOT get into a power struggle
  • Angry people are often not able to reason

• Give the person some space
  • Most people take at least 20 minutes to calm down from anger, some may need longer

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How to Work with Disruptive/Demanding Students

• Try NOT to become defensive
  • Typically the anger is NOT about you

• Stay calm and quiet—let people vent
  • If you speak, speak in a level voice with neutral facial expression and open/nonthreatening body language

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How to Work with Disruptive/Demanding Students

• Don’t say “calm down” or “be reasonable”
  • If being abused verbally or berated: “I understand that you are frustrated. I would like to see how I can help you, but please don’t take your anger out on me . . .”

• Apologize if you (or colleagues) were in the wrong
How to Work with Disruptive/Demanding Students

• Show empathy
  • Seek to understand what issues and pressures the student is experiencing/perceiving (other than the meeting with you)

• Use good listening techniques
  • If a person does not want to have a heart to heart do not force it

• Validate the person’s feelings
  • Validation does not mean you have to agree
    • “That must be difficult” or “makes sense that you would be frustrated”

How to Work with Disruptive/Demanding Students

• Stay in the present
  • “That sounds important, we’ll certainly want to talk about that. I wondering right now if it might be helpful if we focus on what is immediately upsetting you and find a solution to that.”

How to Work with Disruptive/Demanding Students

• Don’t ignore the problem
  • Express kindly what you can and cannot do—KNOW your boundaries
    • Describe the process that needs to occur
      • If possible, be willing to give a carrot without negating expectations
    • Be willing to provide other resources to the student as needed (referrals to other on/off campus resources)
    • Set up a follow-up appointment
How to Respond if a Student Displays Disruptive/Demanding Behavior

- Arrange a private time to talk, away from classmates but in a semi-public setting if safety is an issue
  - Ask a colleague to join you
  - Be supportive and respectful
  - Don’t get into arguments
  - Feel free to end the appointment
- Manage any physical dangers immediately
  - Don’t let a dangerous situation escalate
  - In the rare chance that a student becomes violent, don’t engage with the individual—remain calm and call campus safety or 911

“Angry” or Violent?

- Advisors have legitimate concerns regarding which students are merely angry, and which are violent (such as ‘campus shooters’)
- There is NO fully accurate profile, BUT, some characteristics have been noted in the literature:
  - On campus – generally International students (but not exclusively)
  - Off-campus – generally White males (but not exclusively)
  - Not necessarily mentally ill, BUT...
    - Paranoia, narcissism, and resentment are often present
    - As are depression and psychopathy (i.e. lack of empathy, possibly sadistic)
  - Look for a history of domestic violence perpetration (lowers threshold)

Violence Factors

- Sense of grievance and being wronged
- Desire for notoriety and acting on behalf of a ‘larger cause’
- Failure in multiple aspects of life (e.g., failing school, fired from job, romantic break-up)
- Look also for “leakage” – shooters often tell others of their plans or post intentions on social media


Photo courtesy of Pexels.com
Dangerous/Threatening Behavior

- Threatening correspondence (letters, emails, text messages, etc.) to others
- Harassing or stalking staff, faculty, or another student
- Verbal or physical threats toward others or themselves
- Scanning the room
- Displaying a weapon or firearm
- Physically attacking someone

Based on: Managing Difficult Student Behavior. UT-Dallas Community Standards and Conduct

When Advising Dangerous, Threatening, Angry Students...

DO NOT ignore warning signs (trust your intuition) that a person may explode

- Changes in physical demeanor
- Raising one’s voice/verbal abuse
- Visible tensioning of the body
- Increase in breathing
- Staring/locking one’s gaze
- Wiping one’s hands on one’s pants
- Clenching fists/stomping one’s feet
- Moving into someone’s personal space
- Assuming an aggressive stance

Based on: Guidelines for Dealing with Disruptive and/or Emotionally Distressed Individuals. University of Colorado at Boulder

Are You Set Up For Safety?

Be familiar with university resources that deal with angry students
- Know university policy for who to contact and how
- Be familiar with university policies regarding aggressive students
- How do you access Disruptive Student Councils?
- Does your school have a Threat Assessment Committee or Team (CTAC, CTAT)?
  - Know how to access them?
Are You Set Up For Safety?

If you are anticipating that the student may be threatening:
• Inform a colleague
• Leave your door ajar
• Position someone outside your room
• Position yourself in the room with a means to escape
• Develop a code word/signal for your co-workers to summon help—practice it
• Panic button systems
• Invite a colleague to attend the appointment
• Invite a campus police officer to be present in your area
• Invite the officer to join your appointment

Are You Set Up For Safety?

• Do you ever meet with students before or after typical office hours?
• Do you ever meet with students when you are alone in the office?
• Could anything in your office be used as a weapon by anyone? Scissors, knives etc.?

Questions

Presenter email addresses are in the event handout
(Please note the presenters can not address individual student matters)
Academic Advising and Anger: Keeping Advisors and Students Safe

Presenters:
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