

FACULTY TIPSHEET

Facilitating Safe and Civil Discourse in Learning Spaces

Teaching and learning are our most important academic endeavors, and in a climate where faculty are reporting unprecedented levels of incivility in their classrooms, we must balance academic freedom with safe and civil behavior on our campus. The University of Nebraska–Lincoln Student Code of Conduct prohibits physical abuse, verbal abuse, threats, intimidation, harassment, coercion, and other conduct that threatens or unreasonably endangers the mental or physical health, safety or reputation of any person or oneself, including any such conduct achieved through means of social media or any other means of electronic communication.

As teachers, we want to encourage free speech, freedom of expression, and academic freedom in the classroom but help students avoid speech that might be abusive, harassing, and intimidating. Unfortunately, the lines are not always clear. Ideally, instructors should set a tone of civil discourse in their classrooms from day one, or even before the semester starts. This can be done through a syllabus statement and a careful discussion of the topic on the first day and throughout the semester. Here are some things instructors can do mid-course if they are unexpectedly faced with difficult situations.

- 1. It's never too late to include a safe and civil discourse statement in the syllabus.** The syllabus is your contract with your students. Include a clear statement about expectations for safe and civil behavior in the course. For example: “An inclusive learning environment is where diverse perspectives are recognized, and respected. Conversations in this course must be respectful and civil. According to our Student Code of Conduct, speech that is abusive, harassing, intimidating, or coercive is prohibited. Students who engage in such speech will be asked to leave the classroom and further disciplinary actions may be taken.”
- 2. Establish clear ground rules.** Specify that class discussion is based on the content of the course. Content not related to the course detracts from instruction.
- 3. Respond immediately to disrespectful speech.** If you fail to respond to rude speech or behavior, or do so inconsistently, the behavior is likely to continue and may spread to other students. How you choose to address the problem will depend on the nature of the behavior as well as your individual style. Upon encountering rude behavior, you might choose to address the class as a whole, delineating what is and is not acceptable for your class (e.g., “My T.A. has drawn my attention to some inappropriate laptop use in class. Here is my policy concerning laptops.”). If the problem stems from one or two individuals, you might respond in a number of ways, beginning with a gentle admonition (e.g., “Jane, please put away your drink until after class.”) and then, if the behavior continues, addressing the problem more forcefully. Some instructors might choose to take the problem student(s) aside after class to discuss the issue. Others might opt to address the behavior publicly by stopping what they’re doing and directing a hard look or pointed comment at the problematic student (e.g., “Tom, as stated in the syllabus, please confine your comments to the material being discussed.”). While it is important to respond immediately and consistently, how you handle the matter will depend very much on the nature of the problem, the student(s) in question, and what feels most comfortable to you.

RESOURCE

- “Navigating Difficult Moments in the Classroom” from Harvard University
bokcenter.harvard.edu/navigating-difficult-moments