A Question of Civility:
Expectations for Classroom Behavior

What level and types of behavioral expectations are appropriate in the college classroom? This is a challenging and sensitive question for faculty members. At the same time, it is critically important that we give thought to the types of behaviors that are acceptable, and those that may pose a threat or disruption to the learning process. To further contemplate these reflections, let's throw in the issue of personal preferences: What are the behaviors that are significant enough to identify and talk about with students as opposed to those behaviors that are more in the category of our own personal biases or "pet peeves?"

In this edition of *The ToolBox*, we will attempt to sort out some of the key issues in identifying and responding to those student behaviors that are a disruption to the learning process and, generally speaking, challenge the limits of classroom civility. Part of this process is for each of us to personally identify the behaviors that we would consider falling outside the general rubric of "civility." As a first step, you are invited to complete the inaugural version of "The Classroom Civility Inventory."

Review the list of classroom behaviors and place a checkmark next to those behaviors that you believe would be disruptive or distracting in a classroom setting. As a guiding principle, identified behaviors should be those: 1) You consider important to being a good citizen in the learning community of your classroom, and/or 2) You would consider including in your course syllabus, and/or 3) You would address directly with offending students.

What Do You Expect?:
The Classroom Civility Inventory

___ Eating/drinking in class

___ Overtly sleeping in class (i.e., head down or propped up with eyes closed)

___ Using a laptop computer in class for purposes other than taking notes or participating in classroom activities (e.g., electronic games, email, Facebook, Google)

___ Reading a textbook or other material that is unrelated to course content or classroom activities

___ Talking in a loud manner to the extent that it is disruptive to the learning process

___ Arriving late to class

___ Leaving behind trash (e.g., cups, containers, wrappers)

___ Wearing a hat or hood in class

___ Overt, ongoing demonstrations of affection toward another student

___ Text messaging or other forms of cell phone usage

___ Inappropriate or rude comments to classmates or faculty during class discussions

___ Other (specify_____

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As a way of prioritizing your chosen responses, and thinking about them in a larger context than your classroom, go back through the list of items that you have identified with checkmarks. This time, circle the checkmarks placed next to items that are inappropriate in the classroom *and* that would also be considered inappropriate behaviors in most workplaces. This is a critically important connection if we take seriously our role of preparing today's students to be tomorrow's citizens, leaders, and community members.

Ways to Define and Promote Civility in the Classroom

Creating a Civil Learning Environment

We must begin thinking about the expectations that we place on our students, how we determine those expectations, the manner in which we communicate those expectations, and the strategies used to enforce those expectations in a fair, reasonable, and humane manner. Consider the following guidelines for promoting civility in the classroom:

Create a list of your "civility expectations" for the classroom. Think about what you consider to be most important, why you chose the individual items on the list, and whether or not you are willing to expend the effort necessary to enforce those identified expectations.

Confirm the validity and fairness of your list by consulting with a fellow faculty member that you trust and who will give you honest feedback on the behaviors that you have identified.

Communicate your expectations to your students in a variety of ways. At a minimum, it is necessary to include the list of desired behaviors in your course syllabus and to talk with your students about the rationale for these particular behaviors and the role of civility in their current and future lives.

Consistently enforce the expectations that you have set and communicated to your students. Students typically expect and respect fairness in the administration of classroom and school rules. If we set a standard for behavior, we should also be willing to do the hard work of enforcing those rules. Remember the adage: "Praise your students in public and correct them in private."

Sending a Clear Message

In a recent keynote address at a national conference on "Students in Transition," Scott Evenbeck, dean of IUPUI's University College, made the following observation about one of the greatest ironies of higher education practice:

Behavior is a function of the person and the environment. So — our entering students come to campus and we expect them to figure out our rules and our assumptions and our way of doing things…. On campus, our philosophy is that students are adults. Children one day and miraculously transformed into adults the next. Really quite amazing….But, we have this happy fiction that they will be adults who make choices and live with consequences and then will grow up and live happily ever after. You have to go to class when you're in high school and you have to go to work when you graduate. But when you're in college you can do what you want to do because you are an adult and we are moving you to the path of adulthood by treating you this way.

If we are serious about preparing our students for life after college, then we have a responsibility to define the parameters of acceptable behavior (e.g., coming to class, demonstrating appropriate classroom social skills, respect for self and others) and then enforce those expectations in a fair, consistent, and reasonable manner — but enforce them. This level of seriousness about "civility," although just "one more thing that we have to do," is a valuable and important contribution that faculty members can make to the lives of their students.