

Summary of the UPAC Panel on
Identifying and Responding to Threatening Student Behavior in Advising Settings

Eight Practical Points for Advisors

1. **A student's *behavior* is the issue at hand, not what you might think is *causing* the behavior.**
Example: if a student you think is bipolar begins to yell at you in the middle of an advising appointment and throws your lamp across the room, the point is that the behavior is unacceptable. It does not matter if you feel the student has some legitimate reason for her actions ("she's bipolar... this is what she struggles with"), or not; the behavior is wrong according to the Student Code of Conduct and should be reported.
(http://deanofstudents.arizona.edu/policiesandcodes/studentcodeofconduct#prohibited_conduct).
2. **If you feel comfortable, set boundaries with students who exhibit behavior that is unacceptable.** For example, when you are notify a student about disqualification, she swears at you and angrily stands up over your desk. You can say "Right now, you are swearing and speaking to me in a manner that doesn't allow me to be able to help you. I can speak with you when you are calm, and if that means we have to meet at another time, we can do that."
3. **As unpleasant as it may seem, thinking in advance about possible threatening situations can be helpful.** (Sample Scenarios are listed below.) Discuss this issue with others in your office and come up with some plans. Example, identify a code word that the whole office can use (e.g. asking for "the purple folder" can mean that you are asking someone to come into your office during an uncomfortable student meeting). Or have an office partner that you can IM to bring them into your office as needed. Train front desk employees and student workers on any of these policies so they will know what to do on the front lines.
4. **When should you call UAPD?** If you feel imminent danger, call them; if you dial 911 on any UA phone you will be directly connected with UAPD . If you don't feel that you're in immediate danger, but feel that something is not right and should be reported (for example, if a student says something directly threatening about a professor who gave him a bad grade, but you personally are not being threatened), call UAPD as soon as you can. Contact the Dean of Students for inappropriate student behavior.
5. **It is your duty as an advisor to report inappropriate behavior; if a student violates the Code of Conduct, it should be reported to the Dean of Students.** Know in advance that anonymity cannot be guaranteed, and that your name may be connected with the report. (Every individual on our campus has the right to know who is accusing them; you would want this right too if someone accused you of doing something!) While reporting threatening behavior might seem intimidating, keep in mind that: 1) if others have reported the same student, the dots can be connected, which can lead to appropriate action against the student, 2) depending on the situation, the Dean of Students or UAPD will play a role in addressing the situation so that you individually will not serve as a sole target, and 3) if you don't report it, then the situation can't be appropriately addressed. Remember, it's better for the University to be aware of something early than too late.

6. **Help your advising colleagues across campus** by using Advisor Notes to describe inappropriate student behavior in an objective manner. You can state things that are said (e.g. “if I only had a gun...”) and students’ actions (e.g. “he leaned over my desk, put his face inches from mine, and spoke loudly enough that others in my office came to my door”). This helps other advisors to be alerted to suspicious/threatening behavior, but doesn’t allow for personal perceptions to take over (e.g. “the student was creepy and mean!”). If you feel a fellow advisor/staff/ faculty is in imminent danger (for example, if a student leaves your office muttering “I’m going to hunt down Mr. _____, and boy is he going to get it!”), call UAPD.

7. **Wisely arrange your office** so you have easier access to your door than your students do if you need to leave quickly. Kevin Haywood from UAPD is available to visit your office to assess your room arrangement.

8. **If you are alone in your office frequently**, take steps in advance when preparing to meet a student with whom you’re not comfortable. For example, ask someone on your floor to check in on you 10 minutes into the meeting with an excuse (“you have an important parent call”). If things are going well, you can continue the meeting, if not, you have a reason to leave. Or, arrange for the meeting to be in another, more public location such as a conference room with big windows facing the main hallway. Make sure your advising meetings take place during regular business hours when there are still individuals in your building.

Panel Members’ Contact Information

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Resources To Help You

Threatening Behavior in the Classroom, UA Office of Instruction and Assessment

<http://oia.arizona.edu/resource/threatening-behavior-classroom>

UA Dean of Students’ Disruptive and Threatening Student Behavior: Guidelines for Faculty and Staff brochure

http://deanofstudents.arizona.edu/sites/deanofstudents.arizona.edu/files/disruptive_threat_bklt_Web_0.pdf

Information on the Behavioral Assessment Team, UA News

<http://uanews.org/node/38247>

Sample Scenarios to Discuss

Scenario 1:

Matt is coming in to see you for the first time. Due to a busy advising schedule, you are about 10 minutes late in starting the advising appointment with Matt. You receive an instant message from the administrator working at the front desk that the student is upset, and you need to come get them right away.

When in the appointment, Matt is clearly upset. You apologize for being late, but Matt cannot seem to get past this. Throughout the appointment Matt constantly interrupts you, and there are clearly bigger issues going on, as Matt jumps from topic to topic and does not make sense. Matt mentions he is interested in Business majors. You pick up the phone to call the business advising office to find out when there is an information session for the student. Matt begins yelling at you, and takes the phone from you and hangs it up. At that point, you feel very uncomfortable and slightly threatened by the student. Matt says that he is going to follow up with the advisor in the Business School. When he leaves you feel concerned for the student and concerned about their odd behavior. After the appointment is over, the administrator at the front desk mentions that the student mumbled "if I only had a gun...." when they were upset about the appointment not starting on time. You do not want to meet with this student in the future due to their behavior.

Questions: How do we as advisors inform other advisors of concerns about students? If the advisor feels threatened/uneasy about a student, what are recommendations for when the student needs to meet with that advisor again? Can an advisor refuse to meet with a student? What kind of follow-up needs to be done with a student?

Scenario 2:

You've met with John several times in the past for advising meetings. He seems rather quiet, and always appears very nervous in your meetings. His hands shake a little whenever he writes down the courses you suggest he take for the following semester, and while he's very polite, maintains a 3.8 GPA, and never says anything threatening or scary-sounding, he somehow just doesn't seem like a very stable person to you. He's mentioned before that he's seeing a psychiatrist for "things", but doesn't elaborate.

One day, he comes in for his appointment and looks very angry because he's received a D in a course, his first ever. He shakes more than usual, clenches his jaw, and stares at your desk. You do your best to explain options, but he won't give you hardly any eye contact and reiterates several times how this D will ruin everything for his future. While you're explaining the GRO policy to him, he suddenly gets up, gathers his things, and walks out of your office with no explanation.

What to do?

Scenario 3:

Jane is an older student who told you in her previous meeting that she suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. During that meeting you filled out a form for Vocational Rehabilitation, as they are paying for her education. At the time, nothing seemed out of the ordinary and the appointment went smoothly. This semester, though, things haven't gone smoothly for Jane. Doing a degree review revealed that the previous advisor miscounted her transfer courses, so now there is an extra requirement to take. Plus, an independent study arrangement she was doing with a faculty fell apart because the faculty abruptly left the university without telling Jane. And finally, in one of her classes this semester, she felt the faculty humiliated her in front of all the other students in class (and she subsequently dropped the class).

In an effort to resolve the issues you email her several times to set up a meeting. Her responses are rambling and she never answers when she would be available to meet. Also, you notice that she is now copying President Shelton on every email and even states that "there will be only one contact person at the U of A for questions/problems/situations and that person is Robert Shelton" (whose admin assistant contacts you to find out what the heck is going on).

When you finally get her to meet, Jane's pleasant demeanor is gone and she seems very stressed. She is very mad at you and the University for all the things that have happened this semester, and is worried that she may lose her Voc Rehab funding because she may now be off track for degree completion (and this is your fault!). She also mentions her psychologist is recommending she takes a total break from studies because all of what happened this semester is not good for her PTSD.

You try to help her by offering up ways to rectify each issue and how to go about doing a Leave of Absence, but she doesn't seem to be hearing anything you say. She then states how unfair it all is, that this could ruin her life, and that someone "should have to pay".

She leaves without saying another word.

Scenario 4:

You are an advisor working in a very competitive college where most students must have at least a 3.6 GPA to be admitted, so there are a lot of tears or anger from the letters of denial from well qualified (and sometimes unqualified) candidates. An international student, Valerie, has come in requesting information and during the sessions she acts like she doesn't understand English, but when she sends emails to the advisor they are very well-written. As an advisor, you explain all of the rules and regulations to the student but she acts like she doesn't understand. You have met with this student twice and both times, she asks for a copy of her unofficial transcripts and when you return to your desk she is gone, along with all of the copies you made throughout our conversations.

Although you have patiently given her all of the information that have presented at our College's information session, Valerie shows up to every one of them, each time disrupting the large group and asking the same questions about her personal issues with her transcripts (which are in a foreign language that you cannot read). After the information sessions, she will often argue with you about the exceptions we should make for her. You have also seen this student wandering around the parking lot after the information sessions and have even called UAPD but they didn't respond quickly enough (30 minutes) and you ended up alone in a large building watching this student pace by your car.

Are you just being paranoid or do you think there is something to worry about?