Encouraging Civility in the Classroom: 
Scenarios for New Faculty Program

Teachers sometimes encounter situations in the classroom in which the students are not exhibiting civility toward one another or the teacher. Such situations can be emotional and stressful and occur with little or no warning. Other times, faculty members ignore the warning signs that problems are brewing. We let slide small civility infractions for the sake of time and instructional continuity. And sometimes, we are the culprits ourselves, letting a bad day or a particularly frustrating situation get the better of us.

As teachers, it is our responsibility to create a classroom culture that fosters respect and civility. Every aspect of instruction, from syllabus to grading, should reflect this commitment to civil discourse and behavior. Many issues can be pre-empted by creating classroom rules that reinforce the need for civility and discussing these policies at the beginning of the semester. Faculty can also improve the handling of such situations by learning to identify early warning signals, as well as actively thinking about how to respond in such situations, and role playing those responses with colleagues for practice and feedback.

Instructions: For each of the scenarios below, formulate a response of how you would respond.

**Scenario #1**
You are new professor, just a year or so out of graduate school. You teach a small course (15-20 students) that is discussion-based. You assess student learning by quizzes, essays, and journal submissions. One of these students is a retired police officer, Bill, who “encourages” his classmates to give him their study notes so, as he puts it, “we can all be on the same page.” You sense he intimidates the other students—by his former profession, which he speaks about frequently, but also his size and demeanor—but they hand over their notes. You ask your department chair how to handle the situation. Your chair says to ignore the case, as the “students need to learn to handle these situations.” You feel conflicted.

**Scenario #2**: You are teaching class and everyone is engaged in the discussion. From the back of the room you hear someone talking and laughing. You look to the back and notice the student is on her cell phone chatting away. She acknowledges you but refuses to hang up the phone stating, “I pay to go to school here, so I am going to finish my call.” The classroom discussion is halted and all are staring at you and the student on the phone.

**Scenario #3**: A male student comes to you (a male professor) and says that he is feeling uncomfortable by advances made by his female professor. He says that each time he visits her office she flirts with him and asks him to lunch to discuss his work. The student just wants to do his work and is not interested in pursuing anything with the professor.

**Scenario #4**: As the class is working on independent class work, a female student starts yelling out of nowhere, “I hate this @$#$ing school, this is ridiculous!” She looks at you as she stands up and yells, “This crap is too hard. You’re trying to make me feel stupid aren’t you?” You ask her to calm down and have a seat. The student screams several obscene words then throws a desk towards the front of the room.