When Students Become Class Bullies, Professors Are Among the Victims

Katherine Almquist, an associate professor at Frostburg State U., says she made a big mistake by letting a disruptive student stay in class.

By Audrey Williams June

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Katherine Almquist is certain that, every semester, at least one of her students will push the limits of classroom civility and the professor-student relationship. The wild card, however, is just how over-the-top the incident will be.

"It's all about acting out aggression now. They don't hold anything back," says Ms. Almquist, an associate professor of foreign languages at Frostburg State University. "Dealing with it is just part of my job."

She is not exaggerating. The topic of student incivility on college campuses has not been exhaustively studied, but some recent surveys indicate that most professors can recount a moment when students have been excessively rude, threatened them, or even made them fear physical violence. Female professors are more likely to be seriously affected by those encounters than are men. The incidents cause some to consider quitting. And those who report such behavior to their department chairs or deans are frequently frustrated by a lack of action; a more effective route seems to involve the dean of students as well.

Claudia Lampman, a professor of psychology at the University of Alaska at Anchorage who has surveyed professors about the extent of student incivility, says a run-in with a student six years ago triggered her research. While she was teaching a class on the psychology of women, a student glared at her the entire semester from a desk right in front of her and would communicate with her only by notes, which he had handwritten in an angry tone. He refused to do his assignments or take exams, and he threatened to sue her if she tried to make him do them, she says.

"I was just so freaked out and unnerved by his presence in the classroom," Ms. Lampman says. "Once I let class out early without even realizing it. I just wanted to get away from him."

She didn't report his behavior until just before giving him a failing grade. She waited because she was worried that reporting him would make the student even more angry.
"It was just a really, really bad experience," says Ms. Lampman, a professor at Alaska for 19 years. "Even after that class was over, I still felt that kind of primal fear that sometimes a woman can feel."

But after talking with colleagues about her experience, especially women, Ms. Lampman found that she wasn't alone. She began some formal surveys on her campus to learn more about all the ways that students intimidate, bully, and threaten their professors—behavior known as "contrapower harassment." The results were eye-opening.

Out of 399 full- and part-time faculty members at Alaska, about 30 percent said a student had yelled or screamed at them, and almost one in four had received hostile or threatening e-mails, letters, or phone messages from students. More than 60 percent said a student had answered a cellphone, interrupted them continuously, or challenged their authority in class. And roughly one in five said he or she had received unwanted sexual attention from a student.

Unequal Effects

Such behavior takes its toll on faculty members, particularly women. In a subsequent study of 525 professors nationwide, conducted last year, Ms. Lampman reported that one-third of the women said that during a very serious confrontation, they had felt physically afraid. Fewer men, 21 percent, had felt that way, Ms. Lampman told a recent regional higher-education conference. More than two-thirds of women tried to avoid the unruly student outside of class, while only about half of the men surveyed did so.

Another side effect of classroom incivility: Faculty members get less done in its wake. Thirty-four percent of women and one out of four men saw their productivity take a hit, according to Ms. Lampman's national survey. About a quarter of the women and 12 percent of men felt like quitting their jobs.

One faculty member at a community college in the Midwest did just that after dealing with unruly students on her own for several years. She didn't
want to be named, because she fears retribution from college administrators. In one memorable incident, she says, a female student shouted a warning to the rest of the class: "I just want everybody to know this is the worst teacher you'll ever have here!" The professor filed an incident report on the student, who had also been a problem for the professor in another class, she says. Although the troublesome student was expelled for the rest of the year, the professor said the response she got from administrators along the way—inserting a note into her evaluation that she viewed as faulting her—was not reassuring.

"I cried a lot. I was just so frustrated," says the professor, who has since moved to another two-year institution in the Midwest. "If I had more support, I could have stayed there."

Even when faculty members have administrators' support, professors sometimes make poor decisions that allow students' bad behavior to ripple across the classroom. Ms. Almquist knows firsthand about that.

One of her students was insistent that he be able to make up a quiz he had missed, although Ms. Almquist's syllabus clearly stated that was against her rules. When she wouldn't budge, the student, who had missed the quiz because of sketchy attendance, slammed his hands down on his desk repeatedly, while shouting at her in anger.

"He was just yelling, 'You're going to let me make up this quiz!'" Ms. Almquist says.

Ms. Almquist says she quickly asked the student to leave her classroom. But he wouldn't leave until she threatened to call the police.

"I kept thinking: He probably won't hit me, but he could hit me," Ms. Almquist recalls. "The rest of the class was just sitting there in stunned silence."

Ms. Almquist detailed the incident in an e-mail to her department chair and to her dean, and she notified the dean of students. She met with administrators, who had already talked with the student. She could have
asked for the student to be dropped from the class, but because he apologized almost immediately for his behavior, she decided to let him stay. That, she says, was a big mistake.

Throughout the rest of the semester, students talked constantly while she was talking, Ms. Almquist says, and some students contested her course policies. "Effectively, he didn't get punished in their eyes. The whole atmosphere was ruined."

The Importance of Reporting

A long-running display of intimidation by a male student at Montgomery College, in Maryland, not only marred the classroom environment for a professor of English there, Judy Pearce, but also made him "the only student I've ever really been frightened by," she says. Although she taught the student a decade ago, Ms. Pearce says she will never forget him. "I definitely was not comfortable with him."

The student's attendance was erratic throughout the summer term, she says, and he told her that a stint in a local detention center had kept him from turning in his assignments. Ms. Pearce thought the student would scrap the class, but instead, he showed up again at its last meeting. He turned on a tape recorder from his desk in the back of the room, and when she denied him permission to record, "he just sat there brooding," she says. "He glowered and looked at me in what was clearly supposed to be an intimidating manner."

Ms. Pearce says the other students stayed in class until he had left. "The class knew what was going on. They weren't going to leave me alone with him when class was over." Then she asked one of them—a man in the military who was dressed in fatigues—to escort her to her office and then to her car.

Although Ms. Pearce's students were wary of the man, Montgomery College officials knew nothing about his behavior. Ms. Pearce says she didn't know how to report the incident. Now she's well aware of the procedures in place.
The college's newly formed behavioral-intervention team has made readily available the literature on how professors should report student misbehavior.

"I think too often we feel like, OK, if that kid is misbehaving, it's my fault, and I should be able to do something about it," Ms. Pearce says. "The college has set up something that says, No, it's not your fault, and you don't have to deal with it all by yourself. I don't think any of us see the behavioral-intervention team as punitive."

In Anchorage, Ms. Lampman's university has used her research as a way to teach faculty members how to deal with and report incidents of student incivility and bullying. Accurately reporting misbehavior, she says, is key.

"Lots of people don't report things correctly—they go to the department chair or their dean because that's who they know and deal with all the time," Ms. Lampman says. "But the dean of students is the boss of students, and that's where you need to go with your complaints. They can take it out of your hands and free you from that."

In fact, Ms. Lampman's research showed that professors who reported incidents to the dean of students were generally satisfied with the outcome. Still, pretenure faculty members, especially women and members of minority groups, worry that acknowledging student incivility could jeopardize their careers. They think it could "make people think they don't know how to handle their classroom," Ms. Lampman says.

She believes that new-faculty orientation would be a good place to reframe participants' outlook on the issue. "You could hear early on that things are going to happen in class, and when it happens you won't think it's about you," she says. "Some things are just going to happen."

She also thinks the problem is not going away. Ms. Lampman believes confrontation and incivility are now more common among students because the so-called millennials are focused on getting their own way and get upset when they don't. "This is the reality we live in now," she says.
Ms. Almquist shares that matter-of-fact attitude. She's on sabbatical now, but her prediction for her return to the classroom, is, well, predictable: "Some student is going to call me a bastard or start yelling at me because I toe the line. It's going to happen again."