Both the Office for Women’s Affairs (OWA) and the Campus Instructional Consulting (CIC) want to help in the IU-B effort to make classrooms more civil places in which to learn and teach. We know that inexperienced faculty, women faculty, and persons perceived as mild-mannered are more likely to be treated with disrespect in the classroom environment. Any faculty can experience such disrespect. We offer here an article that may be useful in guiding you to develop strategies for preventing or discouraging classrooms disruptions and incivility.

Do contact CIC or OWA for further information or assistance if you encounter instances of disrespect or incivility in the classroom.

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Maintaining classroom comfort while earning your students' respect can be a tightrope act. If you insist they call you Dr. or Professor, will they think you are insecure or overly formal? Does going by your first name undermine credibility? And how do you handle a disrespectful student without alienating the rest of the class?

Establish your credentials from the first day of class to combat gender-based devaluation, advises Bernice Resnick Sandler, senior associate with the Center for Women Policy Studies and keynote speaker at the recent University of Vermont conference on Reconciling Gender Issues in Higher Education.

Although Sandler considers the lack of respect for women faculty “a public problem that women faculty alone cannot overcome,” she says there are techniques to help your individual situation.

These techniques can help you start a semester in firm but gracious control of your classroom.

Don’t Be Humble

Although women are socialized to be modest, don’t be humble in mentioning your professional accomplishments. An inherent “connotation of incompetence” is attached to your gender, she warns. If you devalue yourself, rest assured that so will your students.

Never disparage yourself in an attempt to develop rapport or empathy with your students. Self-effacing remarks such as “I had a rough time in grad school with this, too” may be viewed as charmingly candid by a man, but by a woman they will be taken as indications of incompetence.

Students expect more smiles and nurturing from women professors, but they also devalue the typically female classroom style as less competent, professional and intellectually dynamic, Sandler says. Many students are uncomfortable with women instructors whose classroom styles don’t meet their expectations.

It’s Your Class

A little discomfort never hurt anyone, Sandler says, but students who feel threatened by your strong style or challenging questions may show it.

Address disrespectful, disruptive or sexist behavior as soon as possible, if not immediately, Sandler stresses. Otherwise, students may assume that you don’t mind the behavior, or that you are powerless to deal with it, “perceptions that often increase the likelihood that such behavior will recur and escalate,” she predicts.

If you prefer to reprimand in private, tell the student in front to the class to see you after class, so that everyone gets the message that you do not tolerate such behavior.

Especially early in the semester, students may test you, Sandler notes; it’s up to you to make your limits clear. She offers these suggestions to control negative behaviors:

..Frowning, eye rolling, smirking: Confront them openly and bring it into the discussion. For example, say, “I notice you are frowning. Can you tell me why?” Or “I see some skepticism. Let’s talk about what you are thinking.”

..Interruptions: Keep talking and making your point, saying, “Let me finish, then you can have a turn.” If that fails, a light response, such as “Ah, I just knew you were going to interrupt at that point! I predicted it to myself about five minutes ago” may break the cycle.

..Hostility: Express interest, such as “Tell me why you believe that,” or sympathy, such as “It’s hard for many people to talk about these issues.” Disarm a hostile accusation, for example that you’re politicizing the class by discussing gender issues, with humor: “Of course I am, and it will probably get worse!”

..Sexist jokes or remarks: Tell the class you find the joke offensive. Or put the joke on the spot by pretending not to understand, and asking the person to repeat or explain the joke, which probably won’t sound funny the second time.

..Aggressive disagreement: Affirm the student’s feelings without yielding ground: “You really don’t like what I am saying, and that’s okay,” or “I’m not here to convince you, but to get you to think.” Or, deflect the question to the class: “Well, what do the rest of you think?” Remember, for some people disputation is simply a style of intellectual interaction, and it may not be personal or based on gender at all.

..Classroom disruptions: Don’t ignore them. They won’t go away. Outside of class, inform the student of the seriousness of the situation.
situation. Ask the students to make an appointment to see you, or warn him (or her) that if disruptive behavior continues, he (or she) will be asked to leave the classroom. Keep a written record of the disruptions and your conversations.

If the disruption continues there is a procedure for having a student removed from your course. The procedure involves:

1. After class, consult with your chair or unit head about the disruption.
2. Send a written notification of the disruption immediately to the Dean of Students Office.
3. Work with your chair or unit head and the Dean of Students Office to follow the University’s guidelines [See “Guidelines for Dealing with Disruptive Students” available from the Office of Student Ethics and Anti-Harassment Programs (855-5419)].

Not every student is going to like you or accept your teaching. But you have the right to expect each student to treat you with respect, as well as the responsibilities to demonstrate your competence to women students as a role model and to share your ideas with them.

“Women are learning the politics of power and the politics of change, and the campus and the nation and the world will never again be the same,” Sandler predicts.