

Handling Difficult Students

Here are some ideas of what to do when you have students who...

1. *Resist the class*

- a. Sell the course – at the beginning of the class, sell the students on the benefits they will receive from taking University 101. Talk about how you think it is valuable, what USC’s philosophy is for the first-year student engagement, and what they can gain, both personally and academically.
- b. Point to transferability of skills and techniques – Many of the skills and techniques students learn in this class will help them build successful academic careers, form happy relationships, and improve the quality of their lives regardless of their choices.
- c. Distinguish between “liking” and “benefiting” – We don’t always like that which is beneficial to us. Most students find something about the class they don’t like. At the same time, it is almost certain that there will be beneficial suggestions. Even if students find only a few ideas that work for them, their performance can improve significantly.
- d. Collect and read anonymous evaluations – throughout the semester, ask students to answer several questions about their reactions to the seminar such as “What is effective and what is ineffective in this class?” and “What would make this seminar more worthwhile for you?” Also ask what methods and strategies students have found helpful and which have not worked. Read and share both positive and negative comments and try to incorporate suggestions into the rest of the class meetings.

2. *Say they don’t need this course*

- a. Agree with them – Acknowledge that students probably already know a great deal about being successful. Also acknowledge that there is always room for improvement. Ask students to consider the possibility that learning and adopting a few truly effective strategies can save them time, improve their performance, and make a significant difference in the quality of their USC experience.
- b. Celebrate small achievements – Very few of us even have an opportunity to improve 100 percent. Suggest that improving 100 percent in a hundred different ways can accomplish an equally impressive result.

3. *Are failing*

- a. Hold a conference – Set aside a time for a face-to-face talk about your expectation and the student’s expectations for the class. There may be confusion about what is required. Often, homework is neglected due to other difficulties in a student’s life. A committed listener is sometimes all that is needed. If more help is appropriate, refer students to other resources.

4. *Seem to dislike you*

- a. Don’t jump to conclusions – Sometimes the most unresponsive-looking students are creating an incredible amount of value for themselves.

- b. Don't give up – Some students have a cool or tough act that takes awhile to break through.
- c. Don't take it personally – Of the over five billion people in the world, some won't like you, no matter what you do.
- d. Remember your purpose – Your job is to promote student success, not to win a popularity contest. Holding students accountable for self-responsibility is not always a popular role. Sometimes, you must choose between being liked and doing your part.

5. *Who do not participate*

- a. Review advantages of full participation – Discuss what students will gain, what obstacles to their success they might overcome, and how each exercise or discussion relates to the purpose of the course. Ask them to explore how much more they learn when they risk feeling foolish.
- b. Be structured – Give highly structured directions that lead students through exercises step-by-step. Sometimes, having to discuss with others and even having to choose a partner is scary.
- c. Demonstrate – Use volunteers or yourself to model what is expected of participants. Demonstrate the whole exercise if necessary to clarify what is expected and to help students feel more comfortable with it.
- d. Give them the choice – Students who choose not to participate have as much to learn about themselves as those who do take part. You can still ask students who do not participate to write reflecting statements about what they learned by not participating.

6. *Who do not attend class*

- a. Be sure that your records include telephone number and email address for each student. A contact works best if it is done in a completely non-threatening way. Avoid making judgments. The purpose of this course is to encourage each student to succeed according to a personal definition of success.

Adapted from University 100 Peer Instructor Manual, Radford University, 1999.