

Though violence due to emotional distress is rare, it is nevertheless important to be aware of the possibility of encountering a potentially violent student, and to be educated on ways of keeping yourself safe.

## **STUDENT STANDARDS OF CONDUCT**

Azusa Pacific University has outlined clear expectations regarding potentially threatening and violent behaviors:

**4.0 Fighting and Violence:** Physical violence toward another person is strictly prohibited.

**5.0 Threatening or Endangering Physical or Emotional Safety:** The university will not tolerate expressed or implied threats against others. Any conduct that threatens or endangers the health, physical or emotional safety of a community member, including oneself, either on or off campus, is not acceptable. This may also include any conduct violation motivated by bias toward characteristics including, but not limited to, race, gender, religion, or class, will result in significantly more serious sanctions, and may result in immediate suspension or expulsion.

## **WARNING SIGNS**

Although student violence may seem to “appear out of the blue,” more often students display behaviors and tendencies that are associated with a potential for violence:

- **poor relationships with others**, e.g., lack of cooperation in group tasks, socially withdrawn, “loner”, blames others for own problems, intolerance of others, makes others feel uncomfortable or intimidated.
- **tendency to push limits** of normal conduct and safety.
- **disdainful or disrespectful of authority**, particularly, but not excluded to, yours.
- **trouble controlling feelings** and verbalizations, e.g., impulsive, has angry outbursts, handles criticism poorly.
- **other extreme, fluctuating, or bizarre behavior**, e.g., paranoia, sense that others are “against” him or her
- **recent changes in patterns**, e.g., tardiness, absences, decline in quality of work/academic performance.
- **recent experience of loss or some other traumatic event.**
- **drug and alcohol use**, e.g., coming to class intoxicated.
- **preoccupation with weapons**, war, violence in the media; owns weapons.
- **history of violent behavior.**

If you observe these behaviors in a student and would like to consult with a mental health professional to discuss your perceptions and possible responses, UCC counselors are available by phone during office hours to assist you.

It should be noted that the presence of one or more of the above does not automatically indicate a potentially violent student. If you are unsure of a student's intentions, two good questions to ask yourself are:

*Does the student's behavior feel threatening to me?*

*Would any reasonable person feel threatened by this student?*

## **VERBAL AGGRESSION**

Students usually become verbally aggressive in situations that they perceive as being beyond their control. Anger and frustration become displaced from those situations onto the nearest target – YOU. Explosive outbursts or hostile, threatening behavior become the student's way of regaining a sense of power and control. It is important to remember that the student is typically not angry with you personally, but at life circumstances. You are merely the object of the student's building frustration.

Although a good rule of thumb is to avoid managing a potentially volatile situation on your own, there are some things you can do that may help a student who appears to be at risk of losing control:

**Remain calm.** This may help the student to modulate their own emotions.

**Acknowledge their feelings**, e.g., "I can see how angry/frustrated/upset you are."

**Reduce stimulation.** Invite the student to a quiet place (like an office) if this is comfortable and does not jeopardize your safety.

**Allow the student to ventilate**, discuss the situation, and explain what is upsetting. Effective listening – making the student feel heard – can be the key to diffusing a critical situation.

**Set clear limits.** It is ok to be firm about behavior that is and is not acceptable, e.g., "I feel like you are in my personal space – please take a step back and we can continue to talk" or "I'd like to help, but when you yell at me, I find it hard to listen."

**Help to problem solve** and deal with the real issues once the student has calmed down.

**Be familiar with the appropriate referral resources** that are available on campus to assist the student (e.g., Counseling Center, Dean of Students, Learning Enrichment Center, etc.).

Some suggestions of less helpful responses you should avoid:

**Don't ignore nonverbal warnings**, e.g., agitation, aggressive body language, clenched fists, etc.

**Don't escalate the situation** by engaging in an argument or shouting match, or by making your own threats, e.g., "You can't talk to me that way!"

**Don't press for explanations** for their current behavior, e.g., "Now tell me exactly why you feel you have the right to behave so inappropriately..."

**Don't turn away** or turn your back to the student with the intention of simply ignoring the situation.

**Don't touch the student** for any reason.

## **POTENTIAL OR ACTUAL VIOLENCE**

If a situation feels like it is escalating to the point that you fear it may become violent, your immediate response should be to insure your own safety and (if possible) the safety of others present (e.g., dismissing class early if a student presents as a threat). Always try to have access to a door or way of escape when dealing with a potentially violent student. If at any time you feel personal safety is being threatened, **LEAVE THE SITUATION IMMEDIATELY**.

As soon as you are able, call (or instruct someone else to call) APU's Department of Campus Safety at (626) 815-3805. It is particularly important that faculty carry a cell phone when teaching, or at the very least know the location of the nearest blue light call box on campus. Campus Safety will provide immediate onsite presence at any level of perceived threat, and will coordinate any response from local police if this becomes necessary.

Your safety and the safety of others in the area are most important. Do not confront a violent or physically aggressive student. Do not attempt to gain physical control of a violent situation, or try to detain a student until Campus Safety arrives. Do not attempt to disarm or accept a weapon from a potentially violent student.

Any incident of verbal aggression, potential violence or actual violence inflicted by a student on an APU staff or faculty member should be reported to Campus Safety. Campus Safety will document this incident and insure that it is communicated to other campus officials as appropriate. In addition, it is important to report any such incident to one's immediate supervisor or Dean to insure that others are aware of a student's behavior that might be occurring in other places on campus as well.

For additional information and safety tips, please access APU's Department of Campus Safety website at <http://www.apu.edu/campussafety>.