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ESF offers its students lesson in civility

Disruptive behavior results in guidelines for proper classroom etiquette.

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By Nancy Buczek
Staff writer

Some State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry professors say they were shocked by the lack of respect and common courtesy some students displayed in class during the past academic year.

One professor said a student had a shouting match during class with the professor about information given during a lecture.

Another said students came to class late or left early, distracting other students and the professor.

A third said a student threatened a professor during class.

"We've had some incidents recently. They've been very, very few," said Scott Turner, executive chair of SUNY ESF's Faculty Governance. "There's kind of a general feeling that maybe we could be nicer to each other."

The incidents caused college officials to consider putting posters outlining proper classroom etiquette around campus during the fall academic year, which began this week. They also considered requiring students to sign a pledge that listed acceptable student behavior during class, such as not eating, sleeping or using cell phones. They solicited e-mails from the faculty about the issue and posted 21 responses on the college Web site to facilitate discussion.

James Heffernan, SUNY ESF's vice president for student affairs and educational services, said the college decided against a pledge because only a few students are causing the problems. Instead, the college will give all students guidelines for proper classroom etiquette.

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"About half our students come here as transfer students. We have some unlearning to do," Heffernan said.

SUNY ESF is not the only school experiencing civility problems. It's a problem many colleges and universities across the country are dealing with, said Kevin Kruger, associate executive director of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.

SUNY ESF President Cornelius Murphy said he thinks college officials simply need to remind students of appropriate behavior in class.

"I think there is a fairly small number of those students who are self-involved and don't think about how their behavior affects their fellow students," Murphy said. "We need to raise the sensitivity of mutual respect. As soon as we do that, the students will respond accordingly."

Murphy said he is impressed with the maturity and responsibility of most ESF students. Some students may have acted inappropriately during the past academic year as a response to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, he said. "Everybody's nerves were raw as a result of the events of Sept. 11," he said.

Turner said ESF's change in admissions policy about a decade ago may also be a factor. Instead of admitting only junior, senior and graduate-level students, ESF began welcoming freshmen and sophomores. Shifting to a four-year institution has been difficult, Turner said.

Many of the faculty members had established curricula and didn't want to change, Turner said. ESF students can take classes at Syracuse University, so students traditionally took lower-division classes at SU and then took their upper-division classes at ESF.

"We farmed out a lot of students," said George Kyanka, chairman of the construction management and wood products engineering faculty.

David Potter, associate dean of SU's College of Arts and Sciences, said he has not heard from his faculty that classroom civility has been an issue. The college is the largest of SU's 11 schools and colleges, with about 3,500 students. Potter may be asked only once during a typical academic year to talk with a student about disruptive behavior, he said.

Students need to let their peers know when their behavior is unacceptable and affecting the learning environment, Kyanka said. In some situations, students have taken it upon themselves to talk to the students causing the classroom disruptions, he said.

Sarah Spooner, president of SUNY ESF's Undergraduate Student Association, said the college, as well as students, needs to nip the problem in the bud.

Turner said the State University of New York mandate that all SUNY schools, including specialty colleges such as ESF, offer general education classes may also be causing students to act out.

The college developed an offering of lower-division classes, but instead of being small classes that fostered discussions, they were large lecture classes.

"Everyone is pushed into one course," Turner said.

Murphy said a typical class at ESF has a faculty-student ratio of 1 to 12, but in the lower-division survey classes, the ratio could be as much as 1 to 100 or 150.



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Some students were unhappy with the format and so were the teachers, Turner said. The students' displeasure may have shown up as misconduct, he said.

But not all teachers experienced difficulty in their classrooms.

Many of the e-mails posted on the college Web site said professors had not experienced any problems with their students.

Heffernan said the issue came up enough from various faulty members that it was something the college wanted to be proactive about and stop before it perpetuates.

"It may be what is acceptable in the high schools, but it just is not acceptable at the college level," he said. "A student here is going to be annoyed if he can't hear."

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