GUIDELINES FOR INSTRUCTORS ON DISRUPTIONS OF ACADEMIC ACTIVITY

As you know, we have seen a number of student protests this year. Among these have been a handful of walkouts, some of which were accompanied by classroom disruptions. MIT policy does not allow classroom disruptions, but they may happen. What follows provides some guidance on how to think about classroom and academic disruptions so that instructors can be prepared to manage them if they do occur.

The guidelines that follow were prepared by the Division of Student Life in collaboration with the Office of the Vice Chancellor and the Chair of the Faculty. While they don’t cover all potential questions about situations and outcomes, or indeed all possible responses, we hope they will be useful to instructors in thinking ahead.

Perhaps the two most important pieces of advice in these guidelines are:

1. Think ahead about how you would like to respond to a disruption (and ask for any support needed in considering or executing that plan).
2. Make clear to students (a) that interrupting instruction is not allowed and (b) there may be consequences if they engage in or continue disruption of a class.

You might consider including a statement on your syllabus that disruptions of classes are not permitted, and that students can be subject to the disciplinary process or excluded from a class if they don’t respect this limit. (Walkouts that are minimally disruptive can also be treated as absences under the usual attendance policy on your syllabus.). Alternately, you might provide a link to the Division of Student Life’s guidelines on protests.

**Background:**

To be clear, these guidelines are *not* meant to preclude discussion of current events at the discretion of the instructor, nor the expression of particular viewpoints in such a discussion. Rather, a disruption might be (for instance) a student standing up and making a statement that interrupts the delivery of instruction: the impact of the interruption matters more than the content of the speech, which might be appropriate at other times or places.

As the faculty statement on freedom of expression and academic freedom notes, expression is subject to “time, place and manner” restrictions so as also to protect “the essential activities of the Institute.” Teaching is one such essential activity. Rules and Regulations 2.91 charges instructors with maintaining order in the classroom. This section of R&R also provides that students can be excluded from the classroom by the instructor for sufficient cause; instructors should report these actions to the Vice Chancellor, Dean for Student Life. Classroom disruptions may also be a violation of Section II, 8 and 18, of the Mind and Hand Book.

**Practicalities:**

Our first priority is academic continuity, along with reasonable de-escalation of the immediate situation and clarity about consequences for the student(s).
1. Think ahead of time about what you would do if your class was disrupted, and the thresholds for possible responses.

2. If you have reason to believe that your class may be disrupted, consider (a) previewing your response with colleagues in your DLC or in the Division of Student Life; (b) saying something at the beginning of class: this is a time dedicated to teaching and learning, and students in the class need to respect that. (This could also be a time to say what you will do if a disruption happens.)

3. If a student does disrupt your class, tell them clearly and audibly that they are not allowed to interrupt a class, and what will happen if they continue, both immediately (5. below) and afterwards (in particular, referring them to the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards).

4. Stay calm! The class will look to you to set the tone and bring everyone back to learning afterwards.

5. After some version of the verbal reminder in 2, some immediate responses might be:
   a. Pause teaching briefly; if the disruption has not ended after (for instance) one or two minutes, either end class for the day or contact the MIT Police (617-253-1212) to assess the situation and determine the best next steps.
   b. Invite the student(s) to speak with you after class is over.
   c. Call the MIT Police (617-253-1212) when the disruption begins; they will assess the situation and determine the best next steps.
   d. End class for the day.

6. After class ends, we ask you to provide the names of students who disrupted class, if you know them, and a description of what happened to the OSCCS, the administrative office that in DSL that supports the faculty Committee on Discipline. You can do this by e-mailing osccs@mit.edu or using an online reporting form.

   As appropriate, the Division of Student Life will work with OSCCS and/or the Committee on Discipline to consider whether interim measures may be necessary to prevent future disruption by the same student. Repeated disruptions by a student, if any, may be considered an aggravating circumstance in future cases.

   *This kind of action is within the scope of practice for MIT Police, and they are interested in keeping the level of conflict as low as possible. However, some colleagues strongly prefer other means of resolving a classroom disruption, and we simply encourage instructors to reflect on a response that they would find both comfortable and effective.