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Disruptive Students in Kentucky Colleges: An Analysis and Comparison of Policies and Processes

Teresa McGlone
Eastern Kentucky University

Judy Spain
Eastern Kentucky University, judy.spain@eku.edu

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DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS IN KENTUCKY COLLEGES:

AN ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON OF POLICIES AND PROCESSES

Teresa McGlone, D.B.A.
Professor of Marketing and Quantitative Methods
Eastern Kentucky University

Judy Spain, J.D.
Assistant Professor of Business Law
Eastern Kentucky University

RESEARCH TOPIC

This exploratory study examines the disruptive and violent student policies currently used by SACS accredited four-year or higher degree granting institutions and compares Kentucky institutions with the ten other SACS states. The basis for the research is that policy examination may produce more valid and reliable results than comparing statistics.

RESEARCH ISSUES

This research explores the number of SACS four-year or higher degree-granting institutions that have formal policies for dealing with disruptive students, the policy content, how the information is disseminated, and the mechanisms used for discipline. The Kentucky institutions are compared to other four-year or higher degree-granting SACS accredited institutions. Additionally, information was solicited from the institutions concerning numbers of disruptive student incidents.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Most Kentucky institutions have formal policies for dealing with disruptive students. The content of their institutional policies are similar to other institutions, but differences are noted. Comparing statistics alone produces a twofold problem: a reluctance of Judicial Affairs officers to produce breakdown information and a lack of consensus regarding how information is reported. Comparing policy content produces a clearer picture of comparisons.

INTRODUCTION

Violence and disruption in the classroom setting are not novel problems, especially at the high school, middle school, and elementary school levels. Student assaults on teachers and students have become commonplace in the news. The problem appears to be increasing in frequency and intensity.

College professors have not typically been faced with this type of disruptive behavior, but one questions if the increase in violence at lower educational levels is impacting behavior in the college classroom. So, is there a problem with disruptive student behavior in higher education? Whether there is or not, institutions are faced with the reality of public perception. One questions whether image conscious institutions are prepared to handle disruptive and violent students on campus and altercations with faculty members and other students. One also questions whether new reporting mandates will cause colleges to examine existing or create new processes for developing more proactive methods for handling these matters.

It is presumed that, throughout the state of Kentucky, four-year and higher degree-granting institutions, public and private, are faced with these dilemmas. It is further presumed that, throughout the area serviced by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) which includes

Kentucky, similarly situated four-year or higher degree granting colleges may also be dealing with disruptive students and reporting dilemmas.

The problems addressed by this research include: how many SACS accredited four-year degree or higher institutions have formal policies for dealing with disruptive or violent students; what is the content of these policies; how is the information disseminated to stakeholders; what is the mechanism for discipline; how do the Kentucky colleges compare; what is the reported number of incidents of disruptive student behavior in the classroom setting.

BACKGROUND

Research on the problem of disruptive or violent college student behavior is sparse, and no study similar to the present one appears to exist. Most of the literature that does exist centers on crime reporting, revising or developing judicial or disciplinary processes for dealing with disruptive students, or counseling these students.[1] For example, a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* indicates that the number of reported crimes on college campuses involving arrests for weapons violations grew significantly from 1996 to 1997, and a smaller rise was seen from 1997 to 1998.[2] Also alarming is the number of alcohol arrests in 1998, a 24.3% increase over 1997. The *Chronicle's* crime survey, which has been conducted annually since 1992, is based on the most recent statistics that colleges and universities are required by federal law to disclose. The survey only includes four-year or higher institutions since those schools typically experience more crimes than two-year schools. Of note is the fact that arrests for alcohol and drugs have consistently gone up since 1993. This is of concern because health researchers point out that students who abuse alcohol and drugs often commit other crimes such as aggravated assault.[2] Of even greater concern is the fact that the situation may be worse than we realize.

Existing reports of campus crimes and other disciplinary actions do not appear to tell the whole story. Two of the main sources of college crime statistics are not able to get full disclosure from all colleges. Many schools do not report crime statistics to the first of these sources, which is the voluntary Uniform Crime Reporting program operated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The second source is the Federal Campus Security Act which, in 1992, began mandating the public release of campus crime statistics. These disclosures are required to include crimes reported to a broad range of university agents other than campus police, but many schools fail to do so.[3] In addition, none of these disclosures necessarily report incidents of serious disruptive or violent behavior that did not result in criminal charges. Nor do these statistics delineate where the behavior occurred, such as in the classroom, dorm, student activity, and so forth.

In recognition of these reporting problems, a new bill was signed into law in October 1998 which will expand the disclosure of campus crime statistics and require many colleges to keep a public crime log for the first time.[3] Beginning with their 1999 reports (many of which are not yet available), colleges must disclose annually the number of incidents of several types of crimes. However, there is still no mandate that colleges have to report crimes known only to nonpolice university agents such as counselors and faculty. Nor is there a mandate to release information from formal student disciplinary records involving no criminal charges. Apparently, incidents that are not reported to the campus police are both a problem and a point of contention in terms of if and where the information should be made public.[4]

Experts on campus safety caution against comparing institutions or trying to establish trends because of inconsistencies in reporting. For example, with their 1999 reports, colleges are supposed to include property "reasonably contiguous" (which is not well defined) to campus and in university-owned buildings off campus.[2] In addition, the legislative changes require the reporting of disciplinary referrals for drug, alcohol, and weapons-law violations. Some schools separate referrals and arrests and some do not, making comparisons actually misleading.

Because of the inconsistencies and problems associated with comparing disruptive or violent student behavior at institutions, our contention is that comparisons warrant examination of institutional policies. This may be a more valid and reliable method of direct comparison, especially since this method compares the definitions used to define behavior, which is rarely clear when examining statistics alone.

Since this research centers on "disruptive" student behavior, an initial conceptualization of this construct is warranted. Several authors have defined disruptive behavior, including Amada,[5] Reed,[6] and Sorcinelli.[7] Our definition includes elements of their definitions but narrows the focus to the following.

Disruptive behavior is defined as any behavior that seriously jeopardizes the learning experience in the classroom or results in immediate physical harm or fear of immediate or impending physical harm to a faculty member or another student. Behavior may take place in the classroom, faculty office, or other campus location. Disruptive behaviors include: having authority challenged; arguing relentlessly over a grade or over a team project; hostile verbal attacks on either a faculty member or another student; threats to the physical safety of a faculty member or student; hitting, pushing, shoving; throwing objects; and willfully damaging college property such as kicking doors.

This conceptualization was shared with all respondents who participated in this research.

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in two phases. Phase one

consisted of accessing and analyzing institutional policies of SACS accredited four-year or higher degree-granting institutions for dealing with disruptive or violent students. Phase two consisted of designing and executing a survey sent to Judicial Affairs officers in the same set of schools used in phase one.

Phases One and Two- Sampling

The sampling plan involved a defined universe of SACS accredited schools in eleven states. SACS defines institutions on six different levels. For the purposes of this research, we did not consider theological seminaries, medical centers, or art schools. These types of institutions have not historically dealt with disruptive students. We also did not consider community colleges because they are largely commuter campuses and typically do not experience as many crimes of any sort as do four-year degree-granting institutions.[2] The SACS database produced a universe of 453 schools of levels 2 through 6.[3] Level 2 is defined as baccalaureate degree as highest degree; level 3 or 4 as master's or education specialist; level 5 or 6 as three or more doctoral degrees as highest degree. After eliminating 28 seminaries, 14 medical centers, and 2 art schools, we examined the remaining schools as to the percentage comparison with the level 2-6 Kentucky public and private schools. We found that the level 2 private schools were overrepresented in the sample, so we randomly selected a set of level 2 private schools to be eliminated from the sample. The final sample size used for the study was 347 schools. Of this sample, 54.8% (190) are private institutions, and 45.2% (157) are public.

An attempt was made to contact all 347 schools during spring and summer 2000 to request a copy of their disruptive student policy, if one exists. An initial Internet search generated only 45 policies; all remaining schools had to be personally contacted. Repeated e-mail requests were followed by mailed requests and phone calls once the appropriate Judicial Affairs contact persons were identified. This lengthy process finally produced a list of 260 schools who responded, 11 of which have no formal policy. Therefore, the final database used consisted of the policies of 249 schools, which is a 72% response rate.

Phase One - Survey

The survey used for Phase one, by necessity, was generated after compiling the database of policies. This research is exploratory, with no preexisting instruments or scales, so the terminology had to be developed using the existing policies. In order to develop the instrument used to evaluate all 249 policies, a random sample of 25 policies was chosen to evaluate for terminology. In addition, in order to incorporate an expert opinion, a Judicial Affairs officer from the researchers' institution was depth interviewed as to her professional opinion of what should be contained in a formal disruptive student policy. The final version of the instrument used contained 61 variables

that included type of institution (public or private, levels 2-6), policy availability, and whether the policy is general or Christian based. It also included: the type of disruptive terminology used, how the information of charges is disseminated and to whom, and delineated the hearing agencies involved in the disciplinary process and the applicable penalties and sanctions. The survey also identified whether the institution had a policy for dealing with high risk students in need of psychological treatment as well as whether the institution has a policy dealing with off-campus criminal and civil conduct.

All of the policies were analyzed by one researcher who has considerable legal expertise. To increase reliability, when the entire 249 policies were evaluated, the rater re-evaluated the first 50 policies in order to compare earlier with later evaluations. The two sets of evaluations were exactly the same.

Table 1 presents the breakdown of the 249 schools as to state, and whether public or private, levels 2-6. Note that the rate of inclusion for private institutions was 51.6% and 49.4% for public institutions. Of the Kentucky schools, 24 schools provided policies, which comprises 93% of the 26 schools with policies. Other state percentages ranged from 68% to 84%.

Table 1. Sample Summary for Public (P) and Private (PR) Institutions
P = 51.6% of sample; PR = 49.4%

State	P2	P3/P4	P5/P6	PR2	PR3/PR4	PR5/PR6	Total Schools in Sample	% Response Rate
Alabama	1	6	5	2	2	2	18	72
Florida	0	0	9	5	4	3	21	68
Georgia	3	9	5	2	6	4	29	73
Kentucky	0	4	3	6	10	1	24	89
Louisiana	0	5	6	1	1	3	16	84
Mississippi	0	1	3	1	3	1	9	69
N. Carolina	2	4	6	5	7	1	25	64
S. Carolina	0	5	2	5	4	0	16	70
Tennessee	0	2	4	4	11	2	23	68
Texas	1	9	16	1	9	6	42	71
Virginia	1	3	8	6	4	4	26	70
Totals	8	48	67	38	61	27	249	72

Phase Two - Survey

The 189-variable instrument used for phase two contained several reliability checks since the survey was sent to the same set of 347 institutions used in phase one. These questions covered information dissemination, terminology, and hearing agencies. The remainder of the survey identified how the institution documented and disclosed the statistics on disruptive behavior and requested data on reported incidents of disruptive behavior. This survey progressed through several drafts. The final draft was approved by six Judicial Affairs officers across various institutions.

An initial mailing was made to each of the institutions

in early fall, 2000. The request included a copy of the survey as well as a cover letter with a promise of confidentiality. In addition, the cover letter provided an inducement for response by indicating that the results would be sent to any responding institutions. In mid and late-fall, follow-up requests were made to all non-respondents by mail and/or telephone. The final response total was 65 institutions which is only 19% of the 347 school sample. Six of the Kentucky schools that had formal policies for dealing with disruptive student behavior responded. The response rate was relatively low because many of the Judicial Affairs officers informed us, during follow-up requests, that the information we requested on numbers of reported incidents would take many hours to break-out and they were not willing to devote this kind of time, even if promised the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Phase One

A majority (97%) of the 249 institutions have their policies available in the student handbook. The types of policies that institutions adopted are generally divided into Christian-based and non-Christian-based. The difference between these types of policies did not rest solely upon the distinction of the school designating itself as being associated with a religious organization, but upon the language utilized in the policy to describe the prohibited behavior. For example, if the policy referred to the Golden Rule, with student behavior reflecting upon the institution and its values and beliefs, it was coded as a Christian-based policy. In addition, the distinction between general code of conduct and specific code of conduct centers on the amount of specificity in the policy, not only in terms of the terminology but also in terms of the disciplinary process. The type of policy that is available at the various institutions ranges from 16% having a Christian-based general code of conduct; 14% having a Christian-based specific code of conduct; 15% having a general code of conduct; and 55% having a specific code of conduct.

Only 13 institutions (5%) included off-campus civil conduct as a definition of disruptive student behavior with sanctions for such. Interestingly, 77 institutions (31%) provided for discipline of students for off-campus criminal conduct. Of the institutions surveyed, 219 (88%) responded that they do not have a formal policy in place for dealing with high risk students and/or students in need of psychological treatment.

Table 2 presents the frequencies pertaining to how the various policies define disruptive student behavior in terms of terminology used. Frequencies reported include percent of total policies stating the term, and percent of public, private Christian, and private non-Christian stating the terms. In addition, the frequencies for the Kentucky schools are presented. Associative analysis was used, using the chi-square statistic, to detect significant differences between the public and private schools in their use of terminology. The chi-square statistic

was used because the data are nominal.

Table 2. Terminology - Disruptive Behavior Defined in Policies (N=249)

Terminology	% of Public	% of KY Public	% of Private-Christian	% of KY Private-Christian	% of Private Non-Christian	% of KY Private Non-Christian
Disorderly conduct	70	57	39	13	47	44
Disruptive conduct in classroom	76	86	48	25	52	33
Disruptive conduct outside classroom	67	43	43	13	48	44
Disturbing peace outside of classroom	33	29	18	25	23	33
Conduct unbecoming student	9	0	33	1	15	11
Threatening faculty/staff	79	100	48	38	58	78
Threatening student	78	100	51	38	58	78
Intimidating faculty/staff	16	0	19	0	25	33
Intimidating student	16	0	16	0	25	33
Physically attacking faculty/staff	87	86	66	38	78	78
Physically attacking student	89	86	67	38	80	89
Failure to follow orders	79	86	57	38	58	67
Obstruction academic programs/operations	79	86	42	25	63	78
Conduct violating laws	73	86	54	38	63	78
Academic dishonesty	62	71	60	13	53	78
Computer use violations	44	43	25	38	27	22
Damage to property	77	86	66	1	72	78
Sanctions/penalties	89	86	83	88	83	89

With the exception of the sanction/penalty section that appears in most of the policies, the definition of disruptive student behavior as involving a physical assault is the number one definition. In contrast, the language "conduct unbecoming a student" as well as "intimidating faculty/staff" and "intimidating student" is found in the fewest number of policies.

In general, the public schools are more likely to include disorderly conduct (significant at the $p = .000$ level); disruptive conduct outside the classroom ($p = .002$); disturbing the peace outside the classroom ($p = .052$); threatening faculty/staff ($p = .000$); threatening another student ($p = .000$); physically attacking faculty/staff ($p = .003$); physically attacking a student ($p = .002$); failure to follow orders/directions ($p = .002$); obstruction of academic programs/operations ($p = .000$).

Of note are the frequencies of schools using "conduct unbecoming student" language, which was significant at the $p = .000$ level, in the direction of private-Christian use. This language provides a catch-all for possible discipline of a student if the faculty/staff is not sure whether the student was high, drunk, or simply being obnoxious when the student became disruptive in the classroom. It would seem that more schools would utilize this language, including the public schools.

The Kentucky schools do show differences when compared to the public versus private totals. Meaningful significant differences could not be detected because of small cell sizes (for example, there are only 6 Kentucky public schools in the sample). However, several comparisons are of note. All of the Kentucky public schools use the threatening student or faculty/staff terminology which compares to, respectively, 78% and 79% of the public total. Only 25% of the Kentucky private-Christian and 33% of the private non-Christian schools used the disruptive conduct in the classroom terminology compared to, respectively, 48% and 52% of the comparative totals. None of the public and private-Christian Kentucky schools used "intimidating faculty/staff/student" compared to 16% to 19% of the comparative totals. Other differences are also evident in the table.

Table 3 identifies the types of hearing agencies that handle disruptive student issues/sanctions. This table, similar to Table 2, groups the responses by public, private-Christian, and private non-Christian institutions. The majority of the surveyed institutions utilize the VP/Dean of Student Affairs as a part of the disciplinary process. More public than privates utilize the VP/Dean, significant at the p = .007 level. Interestingly, 52% also utilized a disciplinary council composed of faculty/administration with one or more students, with public schools again more likely (p = .095). Only 8% of the total uses the Board of Regents/Trustees, again with public schools more likely (p = .000).

Table 3. Types of Hearing Agencies That Handle Disruptive Student Issues/Sanctions (N=249)

Hearing Agencies	% of Public	% of Private-Christian	% of Private-Non-Christian	% of Total
Board of Regents/Trustees	16	1	2	8
College/Univ President	45	43	35	42
Academic VP/Provost	20	22	17	20
VP/Dean Student Affairs	70	46	62	61
Dean/Coord. Student Life/Student Development	45	54	50	49
Disciplinary Council (composed faculty/admin with no students)	4	6	3	4
Disciplinary Council (composed faculty/admin with >1 students)	58	42	50	52
Disciplinary Council (composed only of students)	12	15	15	13
University grievance officer	2	1	0	2
Other	1	0	2	1

Table 4 highlights the different penalties/sanctions specified in the policies. There are some noteworthy results.

The penalties of suspension and dismissal/expulsion were universally utilized by all types of institutions. Reprimand/warning, and institutional probation are also prominently utilized sanctions. Interestingly, only 2% of public and 0% of the private Christian and private non-Christian would utilize a written statement by the student that the incident will not reoccur. Of note, regarding the initiation of criminal actions on behalf of the institution, only 2% of the public institutions and 3% of the private non-Christian have this type of penalty stated in their policy.

Table 4. Penalties/Sanctions Specified in Policies (N=249)

Penalties/Sanctions	% of Public	% of Private-Christian	% of Private-Non-Christian	% of Total
Reprimand/Warning	77	69	63	71
Student written statement of assurance that will not reoccur	2	0	0	1
Damage restitution	70	49	52	60
Social probation/restriction of privilege	67	52	53	60
Institutional service hours/public service	54	42	43	48
Educational Sanctions	52	30	37	46
Counseling (institution)	26	15	22	22
Counseling (private)	7	9	13	9
Monetary fine	29	40	48	37
Housing sanctions	31	19	20	25
Eviction from univ. housing	32	30	38	33
Institutional probation	73	61	62	67
Suspension	84	75	80	81
Dismissal/Expulsion	81	73	82	79
Initiation of criminal actions on behalf of institution	2	0	3	2

Table 5 provides information on whether or not charges and/or dispositions are disseminated to various individuals. The possible groups of individuals who would want or

Table 5. Information of Charges/Disposition Disseminated To Various Individuals as Identified in Policies (N=249)

Information Sent To	% of Public	% of Private-Christian	% of Private-Non-Christian	% of Total
Student body	1	0	0	0
Involved faculty/staff	5	3	2	4
Faculty/staff	1	1	0	1
University newspaper or other University media	1	1	0	1
Non-university media	1	1	0	1
Student government association	1	1	0	1
Parents	7	21	22	14

seek access to this information are identified in the first column. Not surprisingly, only 7% of the public institutions sent information about the charges and/or dispositions to the student's parents as compared to 21% for private Christian and 22% for private non-Christian. The information in this table should be revisited within the next few years to disclose if any new state or federal reporting mechanisms change these results.

Phase Two

The phase 2 survey that 65 institutions completed does not comprise an adequate response allowing meaningful comparisons or projections. However, the discussion of several interesting observations is warranted since the data can provide insight into what some institutions are actually doing.

Forty-eight institutions (74% of the 65 school sample) report university statistics, other than alcohol and drug-related incidents, to the FBI Crime Reporting program. The same percentage also report, under the federal Campus Security Act of 1990, incidents of disruptive or violent student behavior that did not result in criminal charges. Thirty-three institutions (51%) compile summary statistical information on student disruptive behavioral incidents known only to nonpolice university agents.

Fifty-two percent of the schools instruct faculty in how to report a disruptive classroom incident but only 23% of the schools have a formal disruptive incident report form.

The reliability checks dealing with terminology, hearing agencies, and policy dissemination showed a remarkably high degree of reliability between what the 65 schools reported on the self-administered survey and the researchers concluded through policy examination.

Table 6 summarizes the data received from the 65 institutions regarding the issues of disruptive incidents reported for the 1999-2000 academic year. The schools were asked for every year beginning with the year 1996, but since the majority of the incidents were reported for 1999-2000, incidents before 1999 are not reported here. The reason for the reporting difficulties noted by many Judicial Affairs officers who responded to the survey centered on the fact that the university reporting mechanism did not distinguish between disruptive behavior in and outside of the classroom. Thus, a person reporting the statistics would have to evaluate each incident to make the determination. However, it should be noted that the higher numbers for 1999-2000 may reflect an increase in disruptive incidents.

Table 6 contains three types of incidents: Type I is comprised of incidents reported to campus police which result in both criminal prosecution and disciplinary sanctions through Judicial Affairs; Type II is comprised of incidents reported to campus police, do not result in criminal prosecution but do result in sanctions through Judicial Affairs; Type III is comprised of incidents not reported to campus police but are reported to Judicial Affairs, resulting in sanctions. The findings are reported by type of sanctions as well as by public (P), private Christian (PrC), and private non-Christian (PrN). In each category, each number represents the number of reported incidents for one particular school. For example, in the Type 1 column, under reprimand/warning, a public school reported one incident, a private non-Christian reported two incidents, and a public school reported 50 incidents.

Table 6. 1999-2000 Survey Results (Phase Two survey; N=65)

Penalties/Sanctions	Type I	Type II	Type I
Sanctions - Other	5-P 6-P 178-P	1-P 2-P 3-P 12-P 39-P 109-P 178-P	2-P (2 schools) 3-P 15-P 178-P
Reprimand/Warning	1-P 2-PrN 50-P	1-P (3 schools) 1-PrC 1-PrN 3-P (2 schools) 4-P 10-PrN 20-P 50-P	1-P 2-P (2 schools) 2- PrN 2-P (3 schools) 50-P
Restitution	2-P 35-P	1-P 1-PrC 35-P	1-P 2-PrC 3-PrN 35-P
Social Probation	2-PrN	1-PrC 87-P	2-PrC 3-PrN 8-P
Institutional Service Hours		1-PrN 3-P	1-P 4-P 33-PrN
Educational Sanctions	1-P 1-PrN 2-P 156-P	1-PrC 4-P 3-P 3-PrC 14-P 156-P	1-P (2 schools) 1-PrC 1-PrN 2-P 6-PrC 11-P 12-PrC 156-P
Institutional Probation	1-PrC 2-P 5-P 35-PrC	1-P (2 schools) 2-P 4-P 5-P 6-P 10-P 12-PrN	2-P 8-P 10-P 35-PrC 59-PrN
Suspension	2-PrC 15-P	1-P (2 schools) 3-P 5-PrN 15-PrN	1-P 1-PrN 2-PrC 2-P 10-PrN 15-P
Dismissal/Expulsion	1-PrC 3-PrN	1-P 1-PrN 2-PrN	1-PrC
Initiation of Criminal Actions by Institution	1-PrN		

The fewest incidents reported were Type 1; most of these were by public schools. Of the Type 1's, private-Christian schools reported only institutional probation, suspension, and expulsion. The private-Christian schools also had the lowest number of Types II and III reported, mostly centering on educational sanctions and probation.

CONCLUSION

As indicated by researchers in this field, difficulties arise in comparing disruptive student behavior across colleges and universities. The focus of the current research is to stress that a direct comparison of policies instead of solely comparing numbers is a more reliable and valid method. This research is important for several reasons. One, it identified the number of Kentucky colleges and universities that have formal polices for dealing with disruptive or violent students as compared to other SACS institutions. Secondly, it is important for college officials to be aware of other colleges' policies and procedures because they provide valuable insights into possible methods for resolving these issues. As such, this project provides a valuable resource for Kentucky colleges that are interested in adopting or revising a process for dealing with disruptive or violent students. Thirdly, this research supports the findings in the literature suggesting that we have an apparent lack of any standardized reporting mechanisms for disruptive behavior.

Limitations of the study include the reluctance of those who compile and report college crime statistics to produce specific breakdowns. This reluctance lowered the response rate to the Phase Two survey. Thus, we were unable to get meaningful differences between Kentucky schools and the other schools in the sample.

Future research suggestions include an analysis of "well written" college policies that could provide direction to those schools either revising or instituting disruptive or violent student policies. In addition, a study of college and university faculty is warranted that would measure number of incidents encountered by faculty in the classroom. Faculty knowledge of their institutional processes for dealing with disruptive students would also be necessary to help gauge the success of these processes.

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