

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL DISABILITIES: HOW FACULTY CAN HELP**

*Richard A. Beyer is a counseling psychologist at Pasadena City College. He holds a doctorate in leadership and human behavior. The following is a reprint of an article as written for FACCTS, journal of the Faculty Association of California Community Colleges.*

*By Richard Beyer, Pasadena City College*

John is a 26-year-old paranoid schizophrenic who enrolled himself in an intermediate algebra class at Pasadena City College.

He arrived for the first class on time and sat in the last row next to a wall. The instructor called roll, reviewed the syllabus then began working on an algebra problem on the board. The answer happened to be 666.

When John saw this, he jumped up, crossed his right arm over his left and said, "That's the sign of the Beast. You are the Devil incarnate. This whole class is just a bunch of Devil worshipers! You are all condemned to burn in Hell."

The instructor asked John to sit down and see him after class, then later walked him over to me in the Office of Psychological Services. The three of us talked about what faculty could do to help John. The impromptu meeting was my first contact with him.

John, not his real name, worked with me that fall semester in 1999, and we've met at least four times per semester since then. He's doing well; he ended up earning a B in that algebra class and has had no further episodes.

This type of situation can happen in any classroom. If it happens in yours, do you know what to do?

Students with many different kinds of psychological disabilities are on our campuses. Prepare yourself by contacting your college's psychological services office or disabled student services. They can assist you immensely by putting you in touch with someone who understands the student's psychological disorder, and who can meet with the student to help prevent inappropriate behavior in class.

### **TWO GROUPS OF STUDENTS**

The two most prominent types of students with psychological disabilities are those who are on record with the disabilities office, and those with impaired personality patterns.

**Students who come to us through the Disabled Students Programs & Services office are easier to work with.** We know what medications they're on and the characteristics of their disorders. We can work with faculty and determine strategies for helping the student succeed.

Students with disorders such as anxiety, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obsessive-compulsive traits, bipolar or schizophrenia usually make contact with our offices because they seek academic adjustments.

It's important for all faculty members to teach these students as they would any other. We should not compromise academic standards because of a student's functional limitations.

If a student has anxiety, he may be allowed to sit near a doorway and leave the class intermittently if his anxiety increases. If a student has ADHD, he may need to tape his lectures and take his tests in a quiet room, free from distractions.

Students with impaired personality patterns are more difficult to work with. They usually don't come in seeking help. Occasionally they may seek guidance at the disabilities office, but it's usually because they have been referred, not because they saw the need for it.

These students believe that everyone else around them has "an attitude." If instructors would just give them what they wanted, everything would be all right.

How do they change a light bulb? They hold on to it and the world revolves around them. They don't understand the need for mutual cooperation and respect in relationships.

These students with personality disorders will show up during your office hours demanding that you see them immediately. They'll demand more of your time than you're willing to give. They'll try to make you feel incompetent because you didn't put them before three other students who were waiting. They won't take "no" for an answer. They'll try to wear you down so you just give up and give them what they want.

They may pit you against other faculty members, saying, “Dr. Smith told me just the opposite. I don’t know which is true. Maybe you should go and have a talk with him.” In psychology we call this “splitting.” These students are often very manipulative. If they need to get into a room or office that’s locked, they’ll tell you the secretary said it was all right.

### **SEEK CAMPUS RESOURCES**

Remember, you don’t have to deal with difficult students alone. In fact, your college may belong to a consortium of local organizations and governmental agencies that can offer you further resources and assistance. Inquire about training. I speak at new faculty orientations and department meetings, and provide in-service training.

Pasadena City College is a member of the California Community Colleges Psychological Services Consortium, an organization of community college representatives. It promotes students’ psychological well being through campus psychological services.

The consortium seeks to establish psychological services where none exist and to enhance the quality of care offered by existing programs.

Through its network of member colleges, the consortium offers technical assistance, serves as a clearinghouse of psychological and program development information relevant to community colleges, fosters intercollegiate communication and consultation of psychological issues, and promotes adherence to the highest ethical and legal standard of practice for providers of psychological services in community colleges.

In 1999, the consortium completed the document *Standards of Practice for Psychological Services in California Community Colleges*. Call or e-mail me to request it: (626) 585-7996 or [rabeyer@paccd.cc.ca.us](mailto:rabeyer@paccd.cc.ca.us).