Preventing Dangerous Conflict With Students: A Guide for Faculty

1. **Make both academic and behavioral expectations clear.**
   When you create your syllabus, include any guidelines for permissible behavior in the classroom.

2. **Address inappropriate behavior immediately.**
   If a student is shouting at you, don't continue the discussion until you say, "I'd like to talk this over, and we'll continue when you lower your voice. We need to be able to disagree in this classroom while still maintaining respect for each other." Don't return to discussing content until the student is willing to use an appropriate approach.

3. **Be sensitive to perceived humiliation.**
   You may think you are just joking with a student or making a minor criticism, but the student may feel humiliated and demeaned, which can cause rage. Sarcasm and public criticism are often seen as humiliating.

4. **Anticipate tough discussions.**
   Academic discourse should certainly include the right of students to disagree with each other and with the professor. If you know you are steering into a possible storm, tell the class that you want to be able to talk about difficult subjects in a courteous way, and perhaps ask them to assist you in drafting guidelines for behavior during such discussions.

5. **Set appropriate boundaries.**
   You can be friendly with students, but your role is different than that of a friend. Be clear about inappropriate sexual behavior, personal comments, or intrusions into your personal life. If you are concerned about how you are handling these issues, seek consultation from a colleague, a supervisor, or the head of your department. If a student is violating your boundaries and you feel uncomfortable, you can consult with a professional from the Counseling Center.

6. **Don't dismiss threats.**
   For example, if you receive a paper from a student and you believe that there are statements in it that are threatening to you or to other students, ask to talk to the student to clarify (if you feel safe to do so), and then seek consultation with the Counseling Center or the Department of Public Safety. If a student confides in you that he or he has been threatened by another student, take that very seriously and offer to accompany the student to Public Safety.

7. **Don't minimize harassment.**
   If a student calls you at home several times after you have asked him or her not to, for example, this is an indicator of poor boundaries and might mean that you have been targeted by this student.
8. **Beware of students who have suffered a loss or a loss of status.**
For example, if the failing grade you give a student (well-deserved, of course), means that the student will not graduate on time, and the student is threatening you, pay close attention.

9. **Listen if other students indicate they are concerned about someone.**
Again, don't try to minimize their worries or tell them that you are sure it is nothing. Try to get specific, accurate information about the basis of their fears, and then seek consultation.

10. **If a student is being stalked, abused, or threatened by a former or current intimate partner, and confides in you, get help in making an assessment of the danger to the student, your class, and yourself.**
Prior intimacy is one of the factors shown by research to be most strongly associated with violence. Bystanders can be hurt by this violence as well.

11. **Don't ever promise students that you will keep what they say secret.**
If a student says, "If I tell you something, will you promise you won't tell anyone?" a good answer might be, "I will certainly be discreet, but if anyone would be in danger from what you tell me, I may have to say something to protect that person." Don't hesitate to get input and consultation because of a mistaken sense of loyalty to the student. You can consult with someone from the Counseling Center confidentially as long as there is no threat to someone's well-being.

12. **De-escalate the situation if you can.**
Try not to react with anger or annoyance. Take a deep breath, lower your own voice, move slightly away from the other person, and speak as calmly as possible. Don't respond with threats. Try to listen actively and respectfully to the student's concerns.
   - For a more detailed description of some de-escalation tactics, go to [http://pc.brooklyn.cuny.edu/Conflres.htm](http://pc.brooklyn.cuny.edu/Conflres.htm)

**Trust your instincts. If you feel that you or one of your students is at risk, don't try to override that feeling. Pay attention and seek help.**