

## **Case Studies for Chairs**

Tackling the Bullies in Academe

Jörg Waltje, Ph.D. and Laura Trujillo-Jenks, Ph.D.

Texas Woman's University

### **Case Study One**

Terra (26, swf) just completed her doctorate at a major university and is now an assistant professor in your department. Terra was interviewed in late March with three other candidates, but due to the snail pace the administration takes in order to process candidates, the first two candidates that were voted on favorably by the faculty declined your university's offer since they had already accepted jobs at other universities. Therefore, Terra was offered the position as the runner up, of which the whole department was notified by you, the Chair, in early August.

In your department, the majority of the faculty, about 18, has the required credentials and on-the-job experience, which is highly regarded. The rest of the faculty, about seven, may not have the on-the-job experiences, but have proven research agendas. With Terra coming on board, she brings no job experience outside of working in higher education as both a graduate assistant and an adjunct, and her research agenda has been solely focused on her dissertation, which she has turned into one journal publication and two conference presentations.

After Terra has been on board for a few weeks, two outspoken members of the faculty email you, the Associate Dean, and the Dean of the College expressing their displeasure over Terra's hiring. What was troubling about the email was that the two outspoken members claimed to speak for the whole department. Once the semester was fully underway, it appeared that a number of faculty ignored Terra when they were in meetings with her, and they interrupted or consistently challenged her when she spoke. It also appeared that Terra was not taken seriously as a faculty member because she looked young and more like one of the department's graduate students.

By March, Terra felt disillusioned and unsupported -- she did not communicate with anybody about how she was treated, but rather decided to look for a position elsewhere.

#### Questions:

1. As a chair, how do you deal with a situation like this concerning a new faculty member?
2. What is your responsibility and how and when would you intervene?
3. How do you handle something that hasn't been brought up directly and that you only have heard about through the grapevine?
4. Describe the instances of bullying within this case and discuss whether or not you have seen these types of bullying within your own department. What have you done or would you do to address these instances of bullying?

## Case Study Two

Dr. Best, a tenured full professor, enjoys teaching in his field and within your department, and he exclusively teaches graduate classes. He is known for lecturing about his strong ideals about the discipline and he feels comfortable preaching and teaching those ideals throughout each semester. When students challenge him, he strongly defends his points until the students feel too intimidated or embarrassed to speak.

It is the beginning of a new semester and Dr. Best has introduced himself and his viewpoints to the class, as he always does. He then asks pointed questions of each student about his field that allow him to detect which students think the way he does and which ones do not. For those who do not, Dr. Best knows how to handle them: he finds opportunities to shame them and correct their way of thinking throughout the semester. For example, in one particular class, Dr. Best prepared his lecture about the assigned topic by weaving in his ideals in a manner that made many students uncomfortable. After he had lectured for about 30 minutes a group of five students, out of a class population of 18, asked him a series of questions:

1. Where can we find more information on what you are discussing, since that was not a part of the reading?
2. What publications are you referring to in your lectures, since none are listed in our readings?
3. Where can we find the supportive evidence for your position?

At first, Dr. Best calmly answered the questions, but he soon began to argue with the students in an angry, judgmental, and threatening manner. Most semesters, students would listen attentively and not ask questions, so Dr. Best was used to having the floor to say whatever he chose. As the students continued to ask probing questions countering some of his claims, Dr. Best began to respond with,

“If you believe your line of thinking, you’re completely misguided and I have to question your sanity!” and “If you don’t change your attitude, chances are you’re not going to do well in this course!”

Dr. Best then stormed out of the classroom after saying, “That’s it -- Our time is up!” The five students decided to go to their advisor Dr. Mellow (the graduate chair) to report on the incident and to seek his advice. Dr. Mellow has heard similar complaints before and thinks it is time to involve you, the department chair.

Questions:

1. As chair, how do you deal with a situation like this concerning a tenured full professor?
2. What is your responsibility and how and when would you intervene?
3. Describe the instances of bullying within this case and discuss whether or not you have seen these types of bullying within your own department. What have you done or would you do to address these instances of bullying?

## Extension Questions:

You have known Dr. Best for years, and he has shown similar headstrong or obstinate behavior towards colleagues and staff during departmental meetings. As the chair, you decide to talk to Dr. Best before the graduate student situation escalates and to inform him of the students' concerns. His response is that he has been teaching for 30 years, and he states angrily and unapologetically,

“I don't need anybody to tell me how to teach my classes -- these students interrupted my class with unprepared and unfocused questions! They used the class to air their misguided opinions!”

How should the chair react to Dr. Best?

How can you, as chair, mediate this before it escalates further and becomes a formal complaint?

### Extension 2:

You suggest a meeting with the students to clear the air and to come to a mutually agreeable solution, but Dr. Best does not seem convinced that any fault should be found in his behavior. As the chair, how do you proceed in this matter?

## Table Activities

These case studies can help you as you work through bullying issues within your department. In fact, using these case studies, or other ones that you create, could be a useful professional development activity that can allow for open discussions among the faculty and you. This discussion allows for everyone within the department to have a chance to voice their perceptions and hear others' perceptions concerning a specific issue, like bullying.

1. In your group/at your table, think about different issues that could be considered bullying issues within your respective departments and write them down.
2. Rate these issues and focus on the most pressing ones that you would like to work on through this semester.
3. Create a case study you could use with your faculty as a professional development activity that would encourage a 15-30 minute discussion with possible ideas for solutions. (If you think that more time is needed for such an activity, list the reasons why and plan for more time.)
4. At your table, discuss the case study you created and think of ways to set the stage, prepare guiding questions and handle possible confrontations. How do you deal with faculty that don't want to participate or have negative ideas on how to solve the case study?
5. Be prepared to share your insights with the whole group.

### Oral Evaluation of the Presentation

- In one word, or a short phrase, what have you learned from this session that can be immediately implemented within your department?
- What was the most helpful information?
- What could make this presentation stronger?



**Room for Notes:**