

Hypothetical—Dealing with Faculty a Member’s Disruptive Behavior

Marilyn Moore is a tenured professor of psychology at Parker State University in Smithville, Virginia. Moore has been on the faculty of PSU for fifteen years, and, although she has had some interpersonal problems with her colleagues, students have rated her teaching as excellent.

Over the past eighteen months, Parker’s differences with her colleagues have escalated. She has accused several male faculty of “leering” at her, and locks herself in her office in order to “protect” herself from the “slimy attentions of the juvenile male faculty” in her department. The department faculty are surprised at this behavior, since Moore teaches a course in adolescent sexuality and another on deviant sexual behavior. In fact, Moore is a published expert on these two subjects. She also has refused to attend department meetings, to advise students, to attend graduation, or to hold office hours.

Last semester, the department chair, Leon Little, received complaints from six undergraduate students (of both genders) that Professor Moore was directing sexual comments to individual students and seemed to take an “inappropriate” personal interest in them. Little asked Professor Moore about these complaints; her response was that she was using the comments as “pedagogic examples,” and that they were protected by academic freedom. Since the course had ended, Little decided to let the matter go.

A month ago, two graduate students approached chair Little, complaining that Professor Moore had embarrassed them at a dinner they all attended at a psychology conference at a neighboring university. They said that Professor Moore had discussed a television program about male sexuality and had asked them a number of personal,

intimate questions at the dinner, which was attended by seven graduate students and four other faculty members. They said she persisted in questioning them after returning to the campus of PSU, and threatened to “blacklist” them if they didn’t help her with her “research.”

When Little questioned Moore about these recent complaints, she flew into a rage, stating that she was being “persecuted” and that Little’s questions were motivated by “personal jealousy” because her scholarship was far superior to his. She also threatened to “show those students what it means to complain about me,” and stormed out of the office.

The next day, a messenger delivered a letter to chair Little from Professor Moore’s doctor. The letter stated that Professor Moore was “totally incapacitated” and would be unable to work at all for the next six months. No diagnosis was provided.

It was two weeks before midterm exams, and Professor Little wanted to try to persuade Professor Moore to return to teaching, because he could not find another faculty member to cover these specialized classes. He called Professor Moore, who at first resisted, but then said she would agree to return to the classroom on the condition that chair Little “leave her alone” and “stop violating her academic freedom to interact with her students.” She also stated that she had a condition called “impulse control syndrome” that meant she had difficulty censoring her speech, but “since all her classroom discussions were protected by academic freedom anyway,” it didn’t matter.

Do you have any advice for Chair Little?