

Hypothetical – Faculty Mental Health

Professor Jim Brown has been in the Department of Geological and Environmental Sciences at Major University for almost six years. His research is directly relevant to global climate change and he is a rising star in his field of interest. Professor Brown is gaining considerable recognition in the academic world, he is frequently quoted in the media, and he has been quite successful in attracting grants from the federal government and other sources.

Professor Brown has numerous publications to his credit, all in prestigious journals and well-received by his scientific peers. He has taught both undergraduate and graduate courses, with widely varying student evaluations. He is praised by some students as an amazing teacher, while others, especially those in the undergraduate courses that all non-tenured faculty in the department must teach, have given him low evaluations. Professor Brown has served on committees, but there have also been several incidents when he has precipitously dropped off a committee. In one instance, he simply stopped attending the committee meetings and in another, he and a colleague had such a heated exchange that the committee chair abruptly adjourned the meeting and Professor Brown never returned to that committee. He is now an associate professor and is scheduled for a tenure review next year.

Professor Brown works long hours and he is often seen in his office or lab late at night, working feverishly on his latest project or paper. He is described by colleagues and students as “strange” and “temperamental” – his moodiness, rapid style of speaking, and constant fidgeting are accepted by some, but bother others. Occasionally he has yelled at a student or colleague and there are stories that circulate about the time he told another scientist at a disciplinary society meeting that he (Brown) would “wring your neck” because the other scientist called one of Brown’s theories on climate change “ill conceived.”

Recently, Molly Jones, a graduate student in one of Professor Brown’s seminars, went to his office to talk about her paper. Instead of offering her a chair, he stood up, threw the paper across the desk at her, and told her to get out and stop bothering him with her “trash.” She left the building in tears. Although Professor Brown wrote her an apology the next day, she dropped out of the program a few days later. Professor Brown repeatedly called and emailed Molly Jones after she dropped out, but she did not respond. Molly Jones’ best friend, Pam Nerfs, is also one of Professor Brown’s students. (They became friends as a result of a graduate seminar both took from Professor Brown.) She has asked the department chair, Professor Von Wolke, for permission to switch advisors from Professor Brown to another professor.

Professor Anna Sweet, who is new to the department, has the office next to Professor Brown’s. He has tried to be friendly to Professor Sweet, but she finds that Professor Brown makes her nervous and she tries to limit their interactions. For example, she switched her office hours so they would not coincide with his, and she has made excuses to avoid accepting his invitations to lunch or coffee. She has told Professor Von Wolke, Chair of the Geological and Environmental Sciences Department, about this situation, but has not asked him to do anything about it. This is not the first time that other faculty members have felt uncomfortable around Professor Brown and some of them have made their feelings known to Professor Von Wolke. In the past,

Professor Von Wolke has gently hinted to Professor Brown that perhaps Brown ought to see a counselor, but Professor Brown did not have any discernible response to those suggestions.

Coincidentally perhaps, Professor Brown has told Professor Von Wolke, that he (Brown) will not be able to teach the Geology 101 lecture class, as he has in the past, because he has to have surgery for an unspecified condition. He has also asked for a reduced load of advisees in the next year, and has asked for additional time in which to complete his tenure portfolio. He made veiled references to needing to “straighten out a medical situation.” These changes would result in other professors having to pick up the class and advisees, and the logical person to teach Geology 101 is Professor Sweet. Professor Brown now has more advisees than any other professor in the department.

You are the dean of the School of Earth Sciences. Professor Von Wolke has requested a meeting with you to discuss responding to Professor Brown’s requests to 1) reduce his teaching and advising loads; 2) give him an extension on his “tenure clock.”

1. Is there any additional information that you want Professor Von Wolke to obtain before the two of you discuss how to handle the requests? If so, what information and how should it be obtained?
2. What will you advise Professor Von Wolke to do if he expresses concern over Professor Brown’s behavior toward Professor Sweet?
3. What should be your next steps?

After discussion with you, Professor Von Wolke decided that he would try to gently point out to Professor Brown that some of his behaviors were having a negative impact on Brown’s relationships with colleagues and students. He hoped a heart-to-heart talk with Professor Brown would help. They met late one afternoon at Professor Brown’s office. The talk did not go well. Professor Brown took offense at Professor Von Wolke’s comments and expressions of concern. (Professor Von Wolke himself would later say that in retrospect perhaps his expressions had sounded patronizing and he regretted some of the phrases he used –Von Wolke said Brown “surely is not crazy”, but that he had been “acting bizarrely of late, spooking out people” and wondered if the strain of being up for tenure was “getting to be too much.” He urged Brown to “calm down” and “take a deep breath, metaphorically speaking.”)

In any event, Professor Brown raised his voice, pointed toward the door and his fist on his desk as he demanded that Professor Von Wolke leave. Professor Brown threw a book down the hall in Professor Von Wolke’s direction as the latter left the office. It turns out that Professor Sweet had arrived in her office while this was going on. She heard the shouting and opened her door and looked out just as Professor Brown threw the book past her. The next day, she asked Professor Von Wolke to move Professor Brown’s office to another floor in the Earth Sciences building, saying that she was afraid of him. Professor Von Wolke has come back to you for advice.

1. How should he respond to Professor Sweet?
2. What, if anything, should Professor Von Wolke do with regard to Professor Brown?

Two weeks after Professor Von Wolke's attempted intervention, Professor Brown reveals that he suffers from bipolar illness and anxiety. He presents Von Wolke with a note from his doctor stating that he needs electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and medication in order to stabilize his moods. The note estimates that he will need the ECT for three weeks, during which he will be out of the office entirely. His doctor estimates that after that time, he will be able to return to the department on a reduced-work basis, teaching a reduced load and advising only two graduate students. In addition, he will need to maintain regular hours, arriving at 8:30 a.m. and leaving every day at 4:30 p.m., and cannot spend more than an hour at a time in group situations (such as committee or departmental meetings). The electroconvulsive therapy is scheduled to begin in two weeks, which is approximately two weeks before the end of the semester and four weeks before final exams. Professor Von Wolke returns to you with a copy of the note.

1. What additional information should you request to help you assess the situation? From whom should, or can, you request it?
2. What reasonable accommodations must be made, if any?