

Academic Bullying Case Study #1 - Faculty bullies student

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Faculty bullies student

- **Side One (Alex):** Alex is a new Master's student in the department. Alex's advisor (Dr. Smith) is a tenured faculty member. When Alex interviews with Dr. Smith, Dr. Smith seems open and friendly and discusses how important it is for students to maintain a work-life balance. Alex is impressed with this outlook and appreciates the fact that someone understands the importance of life outside of graduate school, and thus, joins the lab. Within the first month of starting in the lab, Alex begins suspecting that the work-life balance discussion is all a façade. Specifically, one week Alex completes the required research work (as defined in the assistantship contract) and mentions to Dr. Smith a trip for a family visit that weekend. This is after Alex's lab mate (a third year PhD student) took the prior weekend to go to a wedding with his girlfriend. Later that evening, Dr. Smith emails Alex and states that they are not paying Alex to visit family on the weekend and that more research is expected to be conducted over the weekend. Not only does Dr. Smith ignore the requirements set by Alex's assistantship, Dr. Smith also copies all members of the lab, to make an example out of Alex. Alex feels humiliated for being publically reprimanded and upset that the expectations previously discussed were now null and void. Alex approaches Dr. Smith to discuss the work-life balance, and Dr. Smith shuts down the conversation, stating that there are many students interested in working in the lab, and if it isn't right for Alex, Alex's funding could be used elsewhere.
 - **What are your thoughts about Alex's experience?**
 - **If you were Alex, how would you feel? What outcomes would you want to see happen?**
 - **Why do you think Dr. Smith acted in this way?**
 - **What actions do you think could be taken to address Alex's concerns?**
 - **If you were on the email list and saw this message, what actions would you take, if any?**
 - **Whom do you think Alex could talk to in order to get perspective on Dr. Smith's actions?**
 - **What do you think would be some possible outcomes if Alex talked to other students in the lab about their experiences with Dr. Smith?**

- **Side Two (Dr. Smith):** Dr. Smith accepts a new Master's student (Alex) into the lab. Alex comes highly recommended with an impressive track record demonstrating hard-work, dedication, and commitment to research. Shortly after starting in the program, Alex tells Dr. Smith about travel that coming weekend to visit family. Dr. Smith feels that Alex has not been in the lab long enough to travel and wants Alex to capitalize on weekend time by conducting more research. Dr. Smith knows that putting in extra hours is part of "the job" and that is the way people succeed in the field. Therefore, Dr. Smith emails Alex and the other lab members about the research expectations. Dr. Smith feels it is important and helpful for the students to push them to their potential.
 - **What are your thoughts about this situation after hearing Dr. Smith's side?**
 - **If you were Dr. Smith, how would you feel if you were approached with Alex's concern?**
 - **Have your opinions on how the situation should be handled changed since hearing side 2? If so, how?**
 - **What do you think could be done in the short term to resolve the immediate tension and what would have to change long term in order to create a working relationships between Alex and Dr. Smith?**

- **Case Study 1: Final Thoughts**
 - **How does this case resonate with your experiences at Virginia Tech?**
 - **What level of support would allow you to move forward in a positive direction?**