

Academic Bullying Case Study #6 - Student bullies Faculty

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Student bullies Faculty

- **Side One (Dr. Smith):** Dr. Smith is a new faculty member and just finished a PhD last year (and is thus young compared to most other faculty). Being young and feeling the need to create an appearance of distinction from graduate students who are often of similar age, Dr. Smith is firm and has a hands-on approach to advising. Alex is a graduate student in Dr. Smith's lab. Dr. Smith always is very thorough in editing papers and thus always has extensive edits and suggestions for students. Alex submits a manuscript draft to Dr. Smith, and Dr. Smith has a lot of feedback for Alex, which is not sugar-coated and will require several weeks of work. One day, Dr. Smith hears students from other labs whispering in the hallway about how Dr. Smith is too harsh, conceited, and difficult to work with. Later that day, the department head approaches Dr. Smith about what the students are saying. Dr. Smith feels cornered and unfairly reprimanded.
 - **What are your thoughts about Dr. Smith's experience?**
 - **If you were Dr. Smith, how would you feel? What outcomes would you want to see happen?**
 - **Why do you think Alex acted in this way?**
 - **What actions do you think could be taken to address Dr. Smith's concerns?**
 - **Whom do you think Dr. Smith could talk to in order to get perspective on Alex's actions?**
 - **What do you think would be some possible outcomes if Dr. Smith talked to other faculty members about their experiences with upset students?**

- **Side Two (Alex):** Alex is a first year graduate student in Dr. Smith's lab. Alex is a high achiever and is accustomed to performing well and receiving positive feed-back. When Dr. Smith has extensive negative feedback for Alex, Alex feels personally attacked and that the way the feedback was given was overly harsh and verged on being inappropriate. Annoyed and frustrated, Alex discusses personal thoughts and feelings with other students. Because Alex is popular in the department and out-spoken, word of Dr. Smith's behavior spreads quickly among graduate students and ultimately is brought to the department head's attention.
 - **What are your thoughts about this situation after hearing Alex's side?**
 - **If you were Alex, how would you feel if Dr. Smith approached you with these concerns?**
 - **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 Dr. Smith and Alex?**

- **Case Study 6: 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?**