A Case Study in Faculty Conduct

June 7-8, 2023
Case Study #1

Professor Jones, a senior faculty member in the Computer Science Department, has a longstanding reputation for being hardnosed and difficult to work with. That being said, Professor Jones brings in more funding from grant funding agencies and the private sector than anyone else in the department. Department colleagues do their best to avoid interacting with Professor Jones. They minimize service expectations to keep Jones away from committees, and the Chair has slowly decreased Jones’ advising responsibilities to shelter students from challenging demeanor.

At the end of the spring semester, an incident generated a great deal of attention regarding Professor Jones’ behavior. A student worker assigned to assist Professor Jones with a research study missed a critical deadline due to a family emergency. Professor Jones reprimanded and hollered at the student for over a half hour in the hallway. At one point, when the student attempted to walk away, Professor Jones told them that they were not to move until Professor Jones allowed them to move and monitored their watch as if timing the student’s punishment. After the incident, the student had to be taken by their family to be treated for an anxiety attack, which they had never previously experienced. The professor was so loud and aggressive that other faculty and staff in the department became aware of the disturbance.

The Provost became aware of the altercation and asked you to serve as the point person to learn more about the incident and, if necessary, recommend a response.
Guiding Questions #1:

• Your initial assessment of the incident. Was this harassment, bullying, or other inappropriate behavior? What evidence led you to that conclusion?
• Hostility and aggression are rooted in power. What sources of power do you see in this scenario?
• What norms of conduct, if any, were violated in this scenario?
• What other information do you wish you had about this incident?
• Knowing what you know, what recommendations would you make to the Provost’s team regarding this situation?
Case Study #2

You met with the student, who confirmed they went to the ER for a panic attack. The student reports feeling uncomfortable confronting Professor Jones about the situation and would like to "leave this all behind." The student hopes the summer break will give everyone a chance to settle down.

When you spoke with Professor Jones, they did not deny the incident occurred. Instead, Professor Jones claimed that students are too soft, and if they can't handle firm guidance, then computer science may not be the best career choice for them. Professor Jones believed they were teaching the student a life lesson, and while that might seem harsh, Professor Jones did not think the student was treated any worse than department colleagues treated other students. Despite their espoused belief that the incident was appropriate, Professor Jones requested representation from the Faculty Collective Bargaining Group be included in the review process.

You also interviewed faculty and staff in the office during the incident. Each interviewee made the same remarks confirming what everyone in the department knew; Professor Jones was difficult to work with, so they all tacitly agreed to try to buffer and minimize Jones' impact on others.
Guiding Questions #2:

• How do the student’s feelings and desires about the incident influence (or not) your approach to addressing the issue?
• Does Professor Jones’ or the student’s gender play any role in interpreting the situation?
• What concerns do you have about what you learned about the department being aware of Professor Jones’ behavior? Would you recommend any department-level interventions?
The professor was so loud and aggressive that another student in the office recorded the behavior and posted the video on social media, saying, “Story Street University is the place where students can go for one-on-one attention from faculty. Here’s what that looks like.” The posting caught the attention of students and the Provost’s office. The Provost wants this incident handled now!
Guiding Question #3:

• In what ways does the video alter (or not) your approach?
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