Interprofessional Relations

College-level educators have traditionally enjoyed considerable autonomy and often work independently of one another. Yet, virtually all of us must have at least superficial relationships with our peers and other departmental and campus personnel. In what ways might loyalties or obligations, such as to a student on one hand and a colleague on the other, come into conflict? How can such conflicts be managed? This chapter depicts instances of overheated personal or professional disputes as well as faculty who refuse to participate with their peers on committees or other group tasks. Additional cases cover triangles involving two instructors and a student, being privy to information about unethical or embarrassing behavior by a colleague, and allowing stereotypes and biases to color our personal views of colleagues. As shown elsewhere in this casebook, the fallout from ethical problems like these is unpredictable and can radiate from the immediate situation to cause damage to others.

Case 14-1. Sour Grapevines

Professor Bada suspects that Professor Bing voted against his internal grant proposal. So, when a colleague tells Bada that she heard from a neighbor who heard from another neighbor that Bing's wife was having an affair with the provost, Bada took notice. Bada had reason to doubt the story, but passed it along to other colleagues anyway.

Gossip, for better but often for worse, appears to be part of human nature. Good and bad news about the community is passed along, and the more fascinating the news, the more efficient its spread. An ethical problem arises when one tells, as fact and with malintention, a damaging story based on flimsy, hearsay evidence. In smaller locales or tight-knit academic communities, malicious rumors can cause considerable, undeserved harm. Reversing untrue stories proves next to impossible. Despite Bada's suspicion that Bing may not have supported his grant proposal, the ethically principled response would be to express doubt about the veracity of the story and to refrain from retelling it. (See also 14-2.)

Discussion Questions

1. Does harmful gossip plague your institution?

2. When you hear a campus story you know is false or distorted, do you attempt to correct it?

3. Can gossip reflecting something negative about individual faculty, staff, or administrators be ultimately valuable for the academic community? In what ways? What might be a fictional example?

Case 14-2. Warring Colleagues

Professors Cain and Abel do not get along. They intimidate and embarrass each other during faculty meetings and gossip behind each other's backs. Sometimes the stories are quite foul or intrude deeply into personal matters. Their running feud is taking a toll on the department's morale, and students complain that both are cantankerous.

Professionals are supposed to show respect (or at least display overt behavior that suggests tolerance) for each other. This does not mean that they must like each other. However, conspicuous nastiness for no purpose other than to degrade a colleague is, in our view, unethical as well as unprofessional. Unfortunately, there seems to be an informal consensus that this kind of situation, in more or less extreme forms, is not uncommon on college and university campuses.

Harms extend well beyond the grief the primary actors heap upon each other. Students are short-changed because considerable energy is being diverted away from them. It is difficult on the enemies' colleagues, especially if choosing sides leads to a splintering within the department. Department spirit can be dampened, souring all teachers and affecting all students.

Institutional or departmental leadership should have the courage to take action to defuse the effects of feuding colleagues on the department.
Colleagues can be especially helpful if they make it known that they do not want to participate, even by listening to griping and gossip. Stronger sanctions, such as issuing a restraining order of sorts might ultimately be necessary, and such steps should be taken if the situation becomes intolerable. We know of a department, for example, that put the warring colleagues’ offices in different buildings and required both to submit their comments in writing to the chair during departmental meetings. Sending the parties to sessions with a skilled mediator might prove successful if less formal mechanisms fail. (See also 14-1.)

Discussion Questions

1. Does the resolution plan for a situation like this differ for tenured as opposed to non-tenured and contract faculty members? More specifically, should uncollegial behavior by untenured and contract instructors be considered formally in the annual review?

2. What if colleagues intentionally shun both Abel and Cain? Is such behavior unprofessional or merely an acceptable behavior shaping technique?

3. Should salary sanctions (or related ones, such as ineligibility to teach summer courses) be used as a means of trying to change Abel’s and Cain’s behaviors? Should academic institutions establish policies allowing for this possibility in cases of entrenched and damaging uncollegiality?

Case 14-3. Colleague Interference

Professor Collegial knew that the son of a member of her department was going to enroll in her class. She did not know the student and was prepared to treat the young man in an objective manner. What she was not prepared for was her colleague’s intrusion into the process. He frequently asked her how his son was doing, requested a review of his exams, and once expressed that a paper on which his son had done poorly was a flawed assignment.

Although the father’s behavior clearly violates Collegial’s academic and employment rights, no single solution resolves all issues in this case. Professor Collegial may consider the following:

1. Approach the father and discuss the common goal of the welfare of the student.

2. Firmly refer the father to his son, explaining that to discuss his son’s performance violates his son’s rights to confidentiality.

3. Seek consultation from a colleague and/or the department chair.

4. Transfer the son to another class.

5. Bring a formal complaint against the father. It must be noted that the redress decision would complicate the matter considerably if the father is more powerful than Professor Collegial (e.g., a member of the promotion committee).

Collegial could capitulate, protecting her status in the department. But, this is a pale last resort that does not properly address—and probably rewards—the father’s unethical interference.

Discussion Questions

1. Suppose another colleague is also having problems with the son and asks Collegial to discuss the matter, knowing that Collegial is also having problems with the son. How much can we share about students with others?

2. In most institutions, any member of the academic community may attend thesis defenses. Suppose the son is a masters student who is ready to defend his thesis, and Collegial is the committee chair. The student’s father shows up ready to participate in the meeting. What would you do if you were Collegial?

Case 14-4. Stuck Between a Colleague and a Student

Professor Middlestuck’s disappointed advisee, Larry Scorched, shows Middlestuck a term paper he wrote for Professor Blue. Blue assigned Larry’s paper a C minus. Larry believes Blue was biased against Larry’s arguments because Blue favors genetic determinism and Larry’s paper argued for strong environmental influences. Middlestuck briefly reviews the paper and judges it to be very well done. Middlestuck believes that Larry was ill-treated.
Academic ethics admonish us to respect the autonomy of our colleagues as well as to facilitate our students’ educational development. Thus, this case poses an ethical dilemma for Middlestuck because cogent arguments can be made for both involvement and noninvolvement in the dispute between Larry and Professor Blue.

Most instructors do not have access to all of the information concerning the requirements and grading standards of courses taught by colleagues. On that basis alone, if Middlestuck feels strongly about the apparent biased evaluation that his student received, it is unwise for him to jump in prematurely with opinions about the grade that Scorched received, because Middlestuck has heard only the student’s perspective. Middlestuck may opt for sharing his assessment of the paper with Larry if Middlestuck has accurate information about the assignment. Moreover, Middlestuck can offer Larry some ideas or options for finding appropriate relief from what may be an unfair situation. For example, Middlestuck might review procedures for filing a grade appeal, offer suggestions for ways Larry can approach Blue to request a re-evaluation of the paper and, under limited circumstances, might offer to serve as a mediator between Blue and Larry. (See also 14-9.)

**Discussion Questions**

1. What if Middlestuck was a faculty member in different department? Does this alter the interventions that Middlestuck might consider?

2. Imagine that Middlestuck decides to speak with Professor Blue about the paper. What are some ways he might approach Blue in a way that will not upset Blue?

3. Larry decides to file a grade appeal and asks Middlestuck to speak on his behalf. What considerations should influence Middlestuck’s decision to do so?

4. The pre-existing relationship between Middlestuck and Blue would be an important factor in determining how Middlestuck responds to any matter involving a conflict. How would the approach change if:
   a. Blue is a tenured full professor and Middlestuck is untenured?
   b. Middlestuck is tenured and Blue is untenured?
   c. Blue is known to be resentful and hold grudges for long periods?
   d. Blue is a kind, gentle, apologetic man who is known for being fair to students?
   e. Blue seems to be burned out and uninvolved with departmental affairs?
   f. Blue is disliked by most students and most colleagues?

**Case 14-5. Recommending Colleagues to Students**

Professor Insider privately recommends one of his colleagues over another to students because, as he tells them, “One is far and away the better teacher.”

Let us assume that Insider is sincere in his opinion, thus creating a difficult situation in which one loyalty is pitted against another. On the one hand, instructors should normally show outward respect for colleagues, and Insider’s insinuation that one instructor is not up to par could be construed as disrespectful. On the other hand, if the unrecommended instructor is indeed an incompetent teacher, Insider is helping students avoid a potentially detrimental educational experience.

Some might argue that the student grapevine is sufficient to warn students about incompetent, hostile, disrespectful, uncaruing, or disturbed instructors. Yet a browse through almost any instructor’s teaching evaluations reveals that the instructor one student rates as “poor” is another student’s “excellent.” The same phenomenon may operate among colleagues. We do not know, for example, the bases of Insider’s judgment of his two colleagues’ abilities.

At the bottom line is the question, should instructors be in the business of advising students about which instructors to take or to avoid? Our response is a very highly qualified “yes,” though not in Insider’s brash way. Our more intimate knowledge of our colleagues may allow us to help a particular student link up with an instructor who is especially well-suited to that student’s special needs. For example, an instructor known to give extensive special tutoring sessions may be recommended to a student who seems likely to require such a service. Or a student with an intense interest in some specific area might be directed toward the course section of an instructor who is actively engaging in scholarly work on that topic.

Another approach would be to briefly enumerate the positive qualities of the instructors the student is considering. Even if the list of positive attributes is much longer for one than for another, the student is left to make the choice. When any recommendations are based on a careful consideration of individual student needs and are given in the form of a suggestion (as opposed to Insider’s uncharitable wording), ethical problems are usually avoided. (See also 3-4.)

**Discussion Questions**

1. What if the instructor has information that a recommended colleague is
considering taking an extended leave, taking another job, or retiring, thus leaving
the student in the lurch? Is the instructor making the recommendations at liberty
to divulge this possibility?

2. What if Insider has confidential information that a colleague is being
monitored as part of a sanction for showing bias against students with disabilities?
Is it ethical to steer a disabled student away from that colleague’s course without
explaining why?

3. What should an instructor do with respect to a colleague known to make,
in private, sexist, racist, or homophobic remarks? Is it permissible to steer affected
students away from this colleague’s courses?

Case 14-6. The Anonymous Charge

Professor Recipient finds an anonymous letter in his
campus mailbox informing him that a colleague is a “rat
who humps and dumps students right and left.”

Students have expressed to us that they feel they cannot make any open
or public criticisms of, or charges against, instructors because the revenge
their educators are in a position to take could result in even more damage.
This dilemma has likely served to protect many instructors who should
have been scrutinized.

Anonymous charges, however, are insufficient to substantiate an
allegation. Recipient could, therefore, simply ignore the letter. Or, he may
wish to show it to the colleague while making it clear that his motivation
is not to accuse but rather to inform the colleague of an event affecting
him. Unless Recipient has other information, he should assure the
colleague that he need not defend himself. If the colleague is behaving
inappropriately with students, learning that he is in danger of being
exposed might have some salutary impact, especially if other colleagues
also received letters. (See also 20-9.)

Discussion Questions

1. Are there any circumstances when anonymous letters should be given
credence? Does the specific message or accusation make a difference?

2. Whether the letter is credible or not, does Recipient have an obligation to
show it to someone? If so, who?

3. What are the arguments against showing the letter to the accused?

Case 14-7. Knowledge of Poor
Judgment Off-Campus

Mary Jane offhandedly remarked to one of her
instructors that Professor Hit attended a party where lots
of students were present and that marijuana was
smoked. Mary Jane seemed delighted that Hit joined
in on the rounds.

The student might have found Professor Hit’s behavior entertaining, but
engaging in illegal behavior with students constitutes extraordinarily poor
judgment. Hit should be told that renditions of the event are circulating
and, if they are true, he has put himself at serious risk in more than one
way. Furthermore, the reputation of the department and the institution is
jeopardy should Hit’s behavior be made public. If Professor Hit fails to
recognize the problems his behavior could cause, the department
chairperson should be informed so that formal action can be taken. Finally,
rather than being a “relevant guy,” Hit is actually a very poor role model
for students. (See 11-5, 12-2, 12-3, and 12-4 for other cases about outside
social activities with students.)

Discussion Questions

1. Is Hit’s presence at the party a where drugs are being used a problem,
even if he does not participate in the illegal behavior? What would you do in that
situation?

2. What if the adult students are not doing drugs, but are drinking liquor or
watching X-rated video tapes? Both actions are legal. How should a faculty
member respond?

Case 14-8. It’s Not In My Job Description

When attendance is taken in faculty meetings, Professor
Shut is never there. Shut serves on no committees or
other university posts. According to Shut, he was hired
to teach, not to do administrative work or to sponsor
clubs. He views himself as a dedicated teacher who
intends to focus his efforts exclusively on the job for
which he was hired.
Although taking on a college or university teaching position requires that helping students learn as our priority, institutions of higher education affect students in ways far beyond the classroom. The teaching staff should have input and influence throughout all functions of the institution. Active involvement in departmental affairs, institution-wide committees, and student activities are the mechanisms through which such influences are realized. Professor Shut fails to recognize, for whatever reason, that much of the impact that instructors have on students occurs outside of the classroom.

Conditions of employment may or may not specify which duties, other than teaching, are required of instructors. Nevertheless, Shut has drawn his calling much too narrowly.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What intervention can or should be imposed on Professor Shut?

2. What if Professor Shut has excellent teaching evaluations and students seem to flock to him? Should he still be admonished for his lack of campus citizenship?

3. Is it unethical for an instructor to err too far in the other direction, that is, becoming overly involved in activities, committees, and outside functions to the detriment of teaching responsibilities?

4. What if Professor Shut also has a large externally funded research program that provides paid research opportunities for many students in the department. Does this now excuse him from contributing to campus affairs?

**Case 14-9. When a Student Informs Us of a Colleague’s Problem**

A teaching assistant confides to another instructor that something should be done about Professor Spearmint. According to the student, Spearmint slurs his way through disorganized lectures and, despite attempts to cover up, his breath smells of alcohol.

When personal problems conflict with professional responsibilities, instructors have the obligation to take action that safeguards students’ welfare. The instructor in this case has a second-hand yet seemingly credible report suggesting that Spearmint is conducting his classes under the influence of alcohol. Furthermore, this practice appears to interfere

with what Spearmint offers to students. The colleague might opt for approaching Spearmint directly, if the relationship with Spearmint is such that open discussion would lead to constructive solutions (e.g., Spearmint acknowledges his behavior as problematic and agrees to seek treatment). However, Spearmint may deny the student’s report, or the colleague may feel the relationship she has with Spearmint is not conducive to a discussion. Spearmint may become abusive or threatening. Should untoward reactions occur, especially careful consideration would be called for. The colleague may want to pass the information to the department chairperson who is in a position to evaluate the situation systematically and take appropriate action, such as observing Spearmint’s classroom performance or removing him from the classroom.

Fortunately, many institutions have recognized the need for identifying and assisting dysfunctional educators. Formal mechanisms may already be in place for dealing with student or peer reports of possible impairment, and a call to the appropriate office describing the problem (not necessarily revealing identities at this point) is a place to start. Such services highlight the need for ensuring that the students’ welfare is protected and that the dignity, privacy, and welfare of impaired faculty are also considered. (See also 14-4 and chapter 19.)

**Discussion Questions**

1. Impairment resulting from substance abuse often results in noticeable signs. Other forms of impairment also exist, yet can be more difficult to detect. Examples include major depression and certain physical problems such as Alzheimer’s disease. What criteria should instructors use to decide when to intervene when a colleague’s performance appears to be impaired?

2. Colleagues are usually reluctant to confront their colleagues. How would you proceed with professor Spearmint?

3. As colleagues in a unit with a reputation to protect, to what extent are we our brothers’/sisters’ keepers?

4. Does your institution have a program to assist colleagues with alcohol abuse?

**Case 14-10. More Biased Assumptions**

The undergraduate advisees assigned to Professor Wheel, a highly regarded scholar in his field, are all physically disabled. Wheel is a paraplegic. He enjoys
advising students. However, he resents the seeming assumption that he is an expert in physical disability and that he, alone, is best suited to work with physically disabled students (and perhaps, by inference, less suited to work with able-bodied students).

Members of the academic majority group (White, male, and able-bodied) may often assume that instructors who represent another group may both be expert in their group status and make the very best role models for students in the same group. To stereotype minority group faculty (or women faculty) in that way is, perhaps unwittingly, insensitive. Furthermore, all students are disadvantaged if assigned to advisors who may not be the best academic mentors for them.

In this case, able-bodied students are denied easy access to Wheel, and disabled students are denied access to advisors who might provide assistance more relevant to their particular academic and career interests. If advisees are not matched (e.g., by request, similar interests, need for expertise in career counseling), then a random distribution of advisee assignments is probably warranted unless a particular advisor requests a certain type of student, and that assignment appears to be in the students' best interests.

Discussion Questions

1. A few students from a particular minority group approach the department chair and request that they all be reassigned to a faculty member who is also a member of that group, arguing that only members of their group will be sensitive to their needs. How should the department chair handle such a request?

2. Are there appropriate circumstances that warrant matching students according to ethnic, religious, or sexual orientation?

3. What if an advisor is expert in graduate school advisement? Would it be appropriate to assign only the best and the brightest undergraduate students to this advisor?

Case 14-11. Negative Comments About Another Specialty

Professor Adamant, whose specialty is neuropsychology, counsels students away from taking courses in clinical and counseling psychology, claiming them to be "soft-bellied." He tells students that if they want to be "real" psychologists, they will take only courses oriented toward the "hard" sciences. The clinical faculty members get wind of this advice and protest. Adamant responds that he can support his conclusions and that he "owes it to the students to steer them in the right direction."

Although Adamant is correct that courses in the physical and biological sciences are valuable to students, he is wrong to imply that such courses have a monopoly on scientific and intellectual rigor or that related professionals are not "real" professionals. Furthermore, Adamant’s tactic and demeanor show disrespect for his colleagues. He breeds low morale and dissension, and his rigidity ultimately does not serve his students’ individual needs and goals. He has his own point of view, to which he is entitled, but he expresses it inappropriately.

Academic advisors should tailor their advice to each student’s circumstances and work with students’ inclinations rather than forcing their own beliefs on them. For example, Adamant could point out that many psychological disorders have physiological components, and so indicate the usefulness to a clinician of a strong background in biology and neuroscience. It would be acceptable to present—with the prelude that a personal opinion is being expressed and that other points of view exist—the strengths and weaknesses of various specialties within a field. This expression of opinion can be voiced in a professional and respectful way and without resorting to pejorative language.

Adamant might also want to consider whether he is the best person to advise students whose interests appear to be very different from his own. It would be prudent to refer such students to colleagues in the students’ areas of interest. (See also 3-4.)

Discussion Questions

1. What if Adamant has reasonably objective evidence, such as the results of an external review, that his colleagues are deficient relative to the accepted standards for their field? What are his obligations to his colleagues and to students in such a situation?

2. How best can faculty members remain true to their convictions and advise students whose interests are directly in conflict?