

The Holiday Blues¹

You're in your faculty office late in the afternoon on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving when the department administrative assistant phones you and says, "The Department Chair isn't here this afternoon and I have a very upset student on the line. She wants to talk to a faculty member. But she won't give her name. Please, can I transfer the call to you?"

You agree to help out. The AA transfers the call and the student, obviously nervous and not a little upset, says, "Hello. Who is this?"

You identify yourself as a faculty member in the department and ask who is calling. The student, who is clearly very ill at ease, strenuously declines to give her name. She does say that she is in a class being taught in your department. "What class?" you ask. She says she will get to that later and then recounts her predicament.

At the beginning of the semester she thought she was doing okay. But on the first big test she got a 70%. She had been thinking she would be a major in your department so she needs a C in the course. So she talked to the professor because it was near the time to drop with a W, and he told her not to drop the course because the things she got wrong on the first exam would be easy for her to understand as the term progressed. He invited her to come in and see him during his office hours. He promised he would help her and that she would do okay in the end. So she did not drop the class. She did come to see the professor one time; but after that she had a big project for another course and couldn't keep the appointment she had made for a second consultation. She said that she e-mailed him and left messages on his voicemail about missing the appointment, but that he did not answer.

Her voice starts to get more desperate. She says, "In class the professor began saying things about racial minorities that made me uncomfortable. And it seemed to me that he was talking about me because he was looking at me when he said those things...and, like, everyone else in the class knew it."

"What things did he say?" you ask.

"Well, we are, like, not capable of learning and fitting into university culture. And he also started talking about how people who don't understand the theory he was talking about are lazy and not trying hard enough. So on a week ago Monday I finally did get to see him after I got back a paper on which he gave me a C-/D+ and I started like really breaking down and he closed the door to his office and gave me some Kleenex. I was crying a little and he put his hand on my knee and told me that although I was a sweet girl, I seemed sort of, well 'clueless' in class. But

¹All characters, situations, and stories described here are fictional. No reference to actual persons, events, or institutions is intended or assumed. Drs. Peter and Noreen Facione developed and refined these hypothetical cases based on the experiences gained through their many decades of service as faculty, administrators, workshop presenters, and leadership consultants to colleges and universities throughout the nation.

he said ‘Not to worry,’ and that we should get together some time. He said that maybe we should pick some other place that would be more comfortable than his office...”

You’re worried now for several reasons. You say, “Did something else happen.”

“...We met at Starbuck’s a few blocks from campus yesterday. We had a mocha and a scone, and then he put his hand on my shoulder and suggested that maybe we should go somewhere else to talk about my paper, someplace where we were less likely to be interrupted by so many people. He kept his hand there on my shoulder the whole time we were talking about where to go. But I didn’t want to go with him, so I made up an excuse and left.”

Knowing that she still has not identified herself, nor named the course she’s in or the professor teaching it, you invite her to keep talking by saying, “Please tell me more.”

“Well there isn’t much more to tell about the coffee shop, but the thing is, there’s a big test coming on Monday next week. And I know that I’m going to flunk it!” She starts to sound angry as she continues, “I don’t know if I want to be a major in your department any more, or even if I can be. And the professor is still saying rude things to me in class. And I don’t think my C-/D+ grade was fair because I did what he asked for, not really well, sure, but I followed the directions, and what does a C-/D+ mean anyway? I don’t think my course grade is going to be fair, and I want to file a grievance or whatever you call it about that. And I’m not going to give you my name, because I don’t want you to tell the professor I called to complain because then he really will give me a bad grade. And if he even knows which class it is, then he will know right away who I am.”

“Well,” you say, “you’ve put a lot of things forward. Maybe the next steps would be....”

Questions:

1. **What issues appear to be wrapped into the student’s story?**
2. **How best might you respond to her concerns? Can you gain her confidence and learn more about the situation? Is that your responsibility at this point, or should you refer the student to some other person or office?**
3. **How do you evaluate the situation in which there may well be two different perceptions of reality?**
4. **Suppose the student does name the professor. Would the student need to identify herself before you or others in the department can take action against the professor.**
5. **What if the student declines to file a formal grievance, but specifically asks you to pursue the matter anonymously.**
6. **Suppose you work with the student and, encouraged by you, she files a formal grievance against your colleague alleging that his comments in class and his behavior toward her personally outside of class created a hostile learning environment. And suppose that her grievance is [is not] successful. What, if anything, should you be doing to assure the on-going productivity and professionalism within your department during and after the grievance process?**