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ADVICE

What Is Your Responsibility as a Bystander to a Colleague Having Problems?



By Allison M. Vaillancourt | AUGUST 19, 2018

When you first joined the faculty, chances are your orientation included an overview of your responsibilities as a member of your new academic community. You were probably informed that you had an obligation to support the success of your students and colleagues,

were expected to be an exemplar in terms of your scholarship and contributions to your discipline, and were required to devote a percentage of your time to departmental, college, or university service.

It's unlikely that you imagined meeting those expectations might involve calling out intimidating behavior, dealing with sexual coercion, or persuading a colleague to seek treatment for substance abuse. In a perfect world, all of our colleagues would be healthy, professional, resilient, highly ethical, and committed to inclusion. Alas, sometimes that's not the case.

Imagine your options for responding to the following situations:

- **Scenario No. 1:** Your new colleague proposed an innovative, yet controversial, idea in this morning's faculty meeting. A senior colleague responded, "Everyone who agrees that the uninformed assistant professors should shut the hell up until their 40th birthdays, please raise your hand."

- **Scenario No. 2:** During a search committee meeting, a regularly present member of your department proclaimed, "Can we all agree that the candidates who were still breastfeeding during their candidate visits aren't real scholars?"
- **Scenario No. 3:** As you enter the departmental business office, you observe your colleague hovering over the administrative assistant's desk shouting, "Can you be any more incompetent? Oh, no, don't you dare try to get out of that chair. Sit back down. We're going to go through this spreadsheet line by line."
- **Scenario No. 4:** Since his partner left him last month, your officemate Eric has been sullen, continually misses meetings, and often smells like gin.
- **Scenario No. 5:** A usually quiet undergraduate pays you a visit during your office hours and reveals that he feels trapped in a relationship with his statistics professor, who happens to be your running partner. "I liked her at first, but she's so jealous and she's constantly texting to ask me where I am. When I tried to break things off a few weeks ago, she said she had the power to get all my professors to fail me. I don't want to get her in trouble, but I'm afraid of her and don't want to lose the A- I've earned in your class so far."

You know that remaining silent in response to dangerous, unethical, or disrespectful behavior makes you complicit in allowing bad behavior to continue. At the same time, it is natural to want to keep yourself safe and to consider the risks inherent in damaging a relationship or crossing a person who has the power to influence your short- and long-term career prospects. You have bills to pay and a career trajectory to manage. You may find yourself debating whether an intervention is ethically imperative or politically and economically reckless.

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The good news is that there is a range of options you can employ to help members of your community, including taking direct action and calling on outside resources. You can take a lesson from the Green Dot program — originally designed to reduce sexual violence on college and university campuses — to plan how you might support others. The Green Dot approach offers the strategies of "direct," "distract," and "delegate" for dealing with a colleague's concerning behavior. Specifically, you can intervene directly, create a distraction to interrupt the behavior, or use a stealthier approach and call on someone else to intervene.

For a good example of how to employ various bystander interventions strategies, check out "Who Are You?" a haunting eight-minute video on preventing sexual assault that you may have seen or heard about. (Note: Some viewers may find minutes 3:00 to 5:00 of the video disturbing). The video makes clear that there are often multiple opportunities to intervene before someone is sexually assaulted.

In the workplace as well, you often have several chances to intervene and possibly shift the dynamics of a situation that is on course to end badly. Here's how direct, distract, and delegate might work in the scenarios described above.

In response to the senior scholar who wanted to silence the new assistant professors:

- **Direct:** "I want to hear Miguel expand on his idea. Miguel, please tell us more."
- **Distract:** "We have only 15 minutes to get through the next three agenda items. Robyn, you're up."

- **Delegate:** After the meeting, talk to a trusted senior colleague and with the offender about the impact he is having on departmental

To address the search-committee member who wanted to eliminate candidates based on their new parent status:

- **Direct:** "If we are going to address the gender imbalance in this department, we need to stop making assumptions like that."
- **Distract:** "I'm hoping for a colleague who will help us launch the health disparities initiative. I can see both Belinda and Celesta as being good partners in that. Which candidate should we talk about next?"
- **Delegate:** After the search-committee meeting, ask the committee chair how she will ensure that all candidates are treated fairly.

In response to the colleague who berated an administrative assistant:

- **Direct:** "Linda, I can tell you are frustrated, but we don't shout at each other around here. Let's go for walk."
- **Distract:** "Linda, I'm so glad I found you. I need your advice on my proposal. Can you come to my office for a few minutes?"
- **Delegate:** Express your concerns about Linda's increasing volatility to your department head or human resources.

There is not an appropriate distraction strategy for Eric, the despondent colleague, but you might consider:

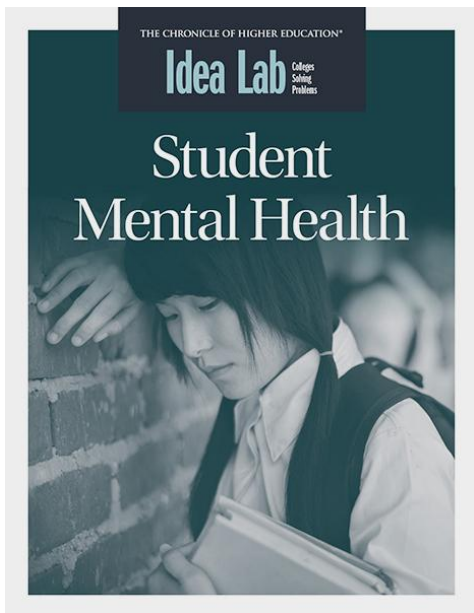
- **Direct:** "I really value you as a colleague and I'm worried about you. You are not yourself lately. I've noticed it and others have, too. Could I help you get an appointment with one of our employee assistance counselors?"
- **Delegate:** Share your concerns about Eric with your department chair and ask him to request support.

As for Scenario No. 5 — the student who feels trapped in a relationship with a professor — resist the instinct to use the direct approach of pulling your colleague aside to ask her if she understands she is ruining her career. The delegate option is your best strategy here. This is not a solve-it-yourself issue and would be most safely handled by

documenting the conversation, referring the student to appropriate resources, and reporting the allegation through formal channels. You will want to assure the student that you want them to be safe and that you plan to take steps to help. You can encourage others to determine if the situation the student described is accurate. Your running partner colleague will never need to know that you were involved.



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Idea Lab: Student Mental Health

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In each of the scenarios described here, the problem seems obvious, but what if you only *suspect* there is a problem? What if you have no actual proof that a colleague is selling departmental property on Ebay, or making the international undergraduate interns work in his lab for 60 hours a week?

Try contacting the office assigned to investigate your type of concern through. Alternately, consider asking some colleagues if they are noticing. Confidential reporting systems that let you submit expressions anonymously can be valuable in these cases, so find out if there is such a system available on your campus.

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You can intervene most effectively when you have a network of supportive colleagues and are aware of existing support systems. Early on, get to know people in the dean's office and in your college's human-resources or equity offices so you will feel comfortable contacting them should you need assistance in the future. Find out:

- How your ombuds office works.
- Whether your provost's office offers faculty advising.
- Which services are offered by your dean of students office.
- When to engage your campus police.
- How to access your organization's confidential reporting system.

Do not worry about reporting concerns to the wrong office, just share your report somewhere and be open to being referred in the right direction.

When it comes to taking care of our students and colleagues, there is rarely one right approach or path. Whether we choose to be direct, attempt a distraction, or delegate the concern to someone else, being a good academic citizen requires that we do our part to keep the members of our community as safe as possible.

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