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Fight Your Own Battles

By Gary A. Olson

From time to time over the decades, I have witnessed what I consider to be one of the more disgraceful practices that we as academics can engage in: using students to further our own personal and political ends.

That dishonorable—not to mention unethical—practice takes many forms. It's mobilizing students to spread damaging gossip about a colleague. It's enlisting students in a campaign to unseat your department chair. It's encouraging them to contribute to a blog devoted to embarrassing the university's president. It's organizing them behind the scenes to write letters to the editor of your local or campus newspaper about a policy, colleague, or administrator you disagree with—and, in many cases, actually writing the letter for them.

A dean of liberal arts told me about one such incident in her college. A popular professor was denied tenure based on his weak record of scholarly productivity.

His department tenure-and-promotion committee had warned him in several successive annual evaluations that he was in danger of not making the grade and that he needed to ramp up his research activity. He had been counseled similarly by his department head.

The professor apparently did not listen and was denied tenure, with a letter informing him that he could continue working for the university for the coming year, but after that would no longer be on the payroll.

"He actually thought that he could pressure the university to reverse its decision," the dean told me. "He convinced his students to stage a protest on the quad, complete with placards and bullhorns. The students had been convinced that the university had done him some grave injustice, but they just didn't have the facts."

The dean explained that the protest petered out after a long weekend and had no effect on the tenure case, but by enlisting

students in his personnel cause, the professor had succeeded in generating substantial ill will, both among his supporters and among those who supported the university's decision.

"It would have been understandable if the students had spontaneously chosen to express their support," the dean added. "But the fact is that our disgruntled professor stage-managed the entire event, even to the extent of helping to paint protest signs."

I witnessed a different situation in which a professor was determined to destroy a rival in his department. He lobbied graduate students to avoid taking his rival's courses, and constantly told students stories about the rival's lack of support and sympathy for graduate students and his general unfitness to serve on the graduate faculty. Before long, the rival was unable to attract graduate students to his courses and was relegated to teaching undergraduates, despite the fact that he was a gifted graduate teacher. "It's unfair," the victimized professor told me. "If [the professor who engineered the attack] had a problem with me, he should have come and talked to me about it. Instead, I woke up one morning and found that the damage was done—all based on lies and innuendo!"

An extreme form of misuse of students for personal or political objectives is to enlist them to participate in academe's newest, and clearly its lowest, level of uncollegiality: mobbing. This is the practice of savaging a faculty member in a no-holds-barred onslaught from multiple colleagues. Deans and department heads are reporting increased incidents in which faculty members have conscripted students to help in mobbing a professor. "It's a new nadir for the academy," one senior professor told me. "If we as a professoriate lose our collegiality, we lose our soul."

Perhaps equally reprehensible is organizing students to support your favorite political cause, whether in local or national politics. One research university was engaged in an impassioned debate over the ethics of animal research being conducted on the campus. A group of faculty members vehemently opposed all use of live animals in university research projects. Three of those professors organized a protest rally to be held, not on the campus, but on the steps of City Hall in the municipality where the institution was located.

While the organizers invited all faculty and staff members to participate, they concentrated on students, urging entire courses to

descend on City Hall at the appointed hour. In several cases (and in direct violation of university policy), students were offered extra credit in their courses if they participated in the protest, regardless of the relevance of the course's subject matter to the issue of utilizing live animals in university research projects. The organizers were most interested in turning out large numbers of people and apparently had little regard for their own students.

Such efforts to "instrumentalize" students, to cast them as pawns in a political drama, are unprofessional and inappropriate on any number of levels. First, faculty members who use their students like that have lost sight of the fact that the power differential between students and professors makes the relationship inherently unequal. Our students may well be adults, but when a faculty member—especially one they respect—urges them to join a cause, they are in a precarious situation; their consent to participate can never be purely one of free will.

That unequal power relationship is not unlike that in romantic relationships between a student and faculty member. They both may be consenting adults, but the difference in power between them attenuates the student's ability to say "no" without complications.

So using students to aid in your own pet causes is deeply demeaning to students because it infantilizes them. It positions them as incapable of independent thought and asks them to act on behalf of "the one who knows better"—their surrogate parent, the professor.

What's more, that phenomenon is, in effect, a form of anti-intellectualism: careful consideration of the facts, reasoned debate, and a search for understanding and "the truth" are all sidelined in exchange for uninformed heated exchange and anonymity shielded by blogs and student surrogates.

It is, as well, an act of intellectual cowardice: When you hide behind your students, you never have to own up to your actions and positions given the cloak of anonymity they provide.

Interpersonal relationships can be difficult in any workplace, but we in academe supposedly have an advantage over those in other workplaces: We all have committed ourselves to the life of the mind, to careful investigation of facts, to faith in rational disputation, to critical thinking, to argumentation based on facts and evidence, and to collegiality. Deploying students as our surrogate warriors violates everything we stand for as a professoriate.

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