

November 22, 2014

Dear Dean Holz:

My name is David Boonin. For the last four and half years, I have been the Associate Dean for Arts and Humanities at the University of Colorado and for the four years immediately before that, I was the Chair of the Department of Philosophy. Over this period of time, I have had numerous occasions to be involved in some capacity or other in cases in which a student had a complaint about his or her instructor. The subject of the complaints has varied enormously: unfair grades, inappropriate language in the classroom, failure to accommodate a disability, rudeness, failure to show up for office hours, and so on. But all of these cases have had one thing in common: in every single case in which I have been involved, the student complaint was brought, in confidence, directly to the instructor's immediate supervisor. This has been either because the student had the idea to go to the supervisor or because the student confided in some other university employee – typically an academic advisor or another instructor they had taken a course from – and that university employee had directed the student to take their complaint, in confidence, directly to the instructor's immediate supervisor. In my experience, this procedure has been essential to achieving a fair and reasonable resolution of the student's complaint because there are protocols in place that the instructor's supervisor is obligated to follow and these protocols ensure that both parties and any additional witnesses are given an opportunity to present relevant evidence to an impartial third party before any finding is made and before any potentially negative consequences follow.

Because achieving a fair and reasonable resolution of student complaints about their instructors is clearly essential to the successful functioning of a university, and because having such complaints brought in confidence to the instructor's immediate supervisor is essential to achieving a fair and reasonable resolution of such complaints, the following claim seems to me to be both important and uncontroversial: if a student relays such a complaint to a university employee, that employee has a professional obligation to advise the student to bring their concern, in confidence, to the instructor's immediate supervisor.

Now, I have no first-hand knowledge of the recent events that have taken place on your campus, but if the public reports that I have read are even minimally accurate, it appears that a member of your faculty, Professor John McAdams, heard a complaint that a student had about one of his instructors, a graduate student at your university named Cheryl Abbate. Rather than directing that student to take his concern in confidence to Ms. Abbate's immediate supervisor, Professor McAdams appears instead to have publicly broadcast a one-sided version of the events in question with strongly negative consequences for Ms. Abbate. If this is so, then it seems clear to me that Professor McAdams has behaved in a highly unprofessional manner.

If Professor McAdams were a member of the faculty in one of the departments that reports to me here at CU, this is what I would strongly advise the Dean to whom I report to do: (1) appoint an independent party to investigate the claim that Professor McAdams has behaved in an unprofessional manner and (2) personally reach out to Ms. Abbate, inform her that the matter is being investigated and taken seriously, and offer to meet with her in person if she had any questions or concerns. I am highly confident that the Dean that I work with would heed this advice.

Everything I have said to this point would be true even if Ms. Abbate had the same professional standing that Professor McAdams enjoys: that of being a tenured professor. But Ms. Abbate is a graduate student. And this means that, if Professor McAdams did what it appears that he did, then what he did was not just highly unprofessional but (and I apologize for the emotion-laden wording but I really can't think of any other way to convey my belief about the matter) truly loathsome. Research universities like the ones that you and I work for sometimes employ graduate students to teach undergraduates. Insofar as these graduate students are instructors, they have precisely the same obligations to their students that tenured faculty members have to their students. But insofar as these graduate students are also students – *our* students -- we have special obligations to them that we do not have to our tenured colleagues. In particular, we have special obligations to successfully train our graduate students and this is not an obligation that we have to our tenured colleagues. And in order to successfully train our graduate students to become effective teachers, we have to provide them with a comfortable, supportive and constructive environment within which they can learn from the mistakes that they will inevitably make as they get started down the path of becoming a professor. Because graduate students at the very outset of their careers are especially vulnerable in so many ways, it is particularly objectionable to treat them in the way that Professor McAdams has apparently treated Ms. Abbate.

In addition, and with all due respect to those who would deny that gender is an issue here, gender is an issue here. As you may well be aware, women are far less well represented in philosophy than in any of the other humanistic disciplines. In addition, there is a large cluster of related issues surrounding the status of women in the profession that currently constitutes one of the most pressing and highly visible problems that the field as a whole is confronting. If you are not familiar with these basic facts, I would suggest that you take a brief look at the following website as a first step:

<https://beingawomaninphilosophy.wordpress.com/>

Now picture a successful female undergraduate who is majoring in philosophy, perhaps here at my own institution, and who is considering the possibility of pursuing it as a career. She then reads a news story in which a female graduate student in philosophy, one who may or may not have made a mistake in her classroom, is publicly attacked by a tenured professor on the same campus in a way that leads to tremendous emotional distress for the graduate student and in which, at least as far as the public can tell, the university in question does absolutely nothing about it. I hope you can see that this would be likely to make a career in philosophy look considerably less attractive to the female undergraduate philosophy major who reads about it. I want to emphasize this point to make clear that the harmful consequences of Professor McAdams' behavior extend far beyond the boundaries of your own campus.

Finally, and in the interest of full disclosure, I should note that I have met and talked with Ms. Abbate on a couple of occasions. She has been a participant a few times at an annual ethics conference that my department sponsors here in Boulder. She and I have significantly overlapping philosophical interests and I enjoyed talking to her. I know that she made a highly positive impression not just on me but on several of my colleagues who also interacted with her at the conferences. I would like to think that I would still feel sufficiently motivated to write you this letter even if I had never met her, but to be honest, I doubt that that would be true. It's all too easy for people to ignore situations like this when they don't know any of the people involved.

Because that is so, and because I assume that Ms. Abbate is not a personal acquaintance of yours, I would like to conclude by proposing the following thought experiment: suppose that the target of Professor

McAdams' public attacks was a young woman trying to begin a career in a male-dominated field who you had met on a few occasions and with whom you had enjoyed talking. In this hypothetical version of the actual case at hand, what would you do in response to the reports that you have surely received about this situation? Would you appoint an independent party to investigate the claim that Professor McAdams has engaged in highly unprofessional conduct? Would you personally reach out to Ms. Abbate and inform her that you had done so, assure her that you were taking the matter seriously, and offer to meet with her in person if she had any questions or concerns? I strongly suspect that the answer to these questions is yes. If I am right about that, then I respectfully suggest that you consider what seems to me to be the inescapable conclusion: that this is precisely what you ought to do.

Thank you for considering my comments, and I would appreciate the courtesy of a brief response acknowledging receipt of this letter.

Sincerely,

David Boonin