

Problems, Pitfalls, Booby Traps, & Surprises Handling Challenging Situations

1. When you give back a quiz, a student raises his hand and challenges your grading. Other students quickly agree.
2. A student shows up for the first time during the third week of class and immediately begins to dominate discussion. You ask him to hold his tongue but he replies that he can speak all he wants.
3. A student received Ds all semester and never came to your office hours. At the semester's end, the student files a complaint against you for bias.
4. You catch a student plagiarizing. The student claims not to know what plagiarism is. You receive a threatening phone call from the student's parents.
5. A student regularly corrects you during class and lectures you about how you could do your job better.
6. A student has a seizure during class.
7. You fall behind in grading and students complain to your faculty member about the delay.
8. A student regularly brings her or his child to class.
9. You put your foot in your mouth. You say something that you wish you hadn't.
10. You are a grader. You inform the professor that the mean grade is 80. The professor asks you to lower the grades 10 percent.
11. Some of your students complain about your accent and claim they can't understand you.
12. Your students invite you to a party. Should you go?
13. A student in your class is struggling with some serious personal issues and asks you to meet with her/him off campus.



Graduate School of
Arts & Sciences
Teaching Center

302 Philosophy Hall

Advancing Teaching and Learning

The Teaching Center is the go-to place for practical advice about teaching. We can help you to:

- Successfully market your teaching
- Deal with anxiety, challenges to your authority, and other classroom issues
- Design scintillating, substantive lectures and lead stimulating, successful discussions and labs
- Respond appropriately to shy, withdrawn, or disruptive students
- Use technology more effectively

The Teaching Center offers:

- Weekly workshops
- Individual consultations
- Certification in pedagogy
- Tip sheets
- Resources on teaching, job searches, and publishing
- Feedback and helpful advice on your teaching

We also work collaboratively to improve public education through community and school partnerships.

To arrange a one-on-one consultation, contact:

Steven Mintz
smintz@columbia.edu
212-854-1066

14. You are a TA in a class dealing with sensitive topics. After grading the first set of assignments, a student accused you of bias.
15. A student who speaks knowledgeably in class fails your first exam. The student says that she/he blanks out during exam situations.
16. A student calls you at home on the weekend. You have only given out your email address and office number.
17. A student in your lab section appears to have a crush on you. You have similar feelings.
18. You assign group work. A group includes a do-it-all, an always right, a seldom seen, a non-speaker.

Mentor-Student Relations

Scenario 1:

A pregnant female grad student overhears her mentor lamenting how much promise she had and how she is throwing away her chances for an academic career.

What issues does the scenario raise?

What could you do in this situation?

What might be the fallout from the students' response?

Scenario 2:

Your initial research went smoothly but has recently encountered problems and delay. You are concerned that your mentor now questions your ability.

What issues does the scenario raise?

What could you do in this situation?

What might be the fallout from your response?

Scenario 3:

You ask members of your dissertation committee for recommendations. One says: "I don't know you well enough to write a recommendation." The other says: "I'm too busy." What do you do?

What issues does the scenario raise?

What could you do in this situation?

What might be the fallout from your response?

Scenario 4:

You want to switch advisers. Your current adviser has paid for your studies. What do you do?

What issues does the scenario raise?

What could you do in this situation?

What might be the fallout from your response?

Scenario 5:

Your mentor addresses his Ph.D. students as "Gentlemen." He seems less interested in your work than in those of his male graduate students. You'd change advisers but there is no one else in this area.

What issues does the scenario raise?

What could you do in this situation?

What might be the fallout from your response?

Scenario 6:

Your senior professor, who is married, asks you out to dinner, alone.

What issues does the scenario raise?

What could you do in this situation?

What might be the fallout from your response?

Classroom Management

Scenario 1:

In group work, two female students do most of the work and feel that others are getting credit for their efforts.

What could you do in this situation?

Should you tell students how to work in a group; let the group work it out; eliminate group projects; rotate group members?

What might be the fallout from your response?

Scenario 2:

A deaf student has a sign language interpreter. But the interpreter has a limited vocabulary in your discipline and is not doing an effective job of conveying information.

What issues does the scenario raise?

What could you do in this situation?

What might be the fallout from your response?

Scenario 3:

A student makes a bigoted remark in your classroom and other students respond by laughing.

What issues does the scenario raise?

What could you do in this situation?

What might be the fallout from your response?

Scenario 4:

During class, several students converse among themselves in a language that you don't understand and begin to laugh.

What issues does the scenario raise?

What could you do in this situation?

What might be the fallout from your response?

The Scenario 5:

You introduce a "hot button" issue in your classroom and bitter arguments break out and you are accused of propagandizing your students.

What issues does the scenario raise?

What could you do in this situation?

What might be the fallout from your response?

The Scenario 6:

A group project goes bad. The students fail to get along and begin squabbling.

What issues does the scenario raise?
What could you do in this situation?
What might be the fallout from your response?

Diversity Issues

Scenario 1:

You believe that coverage in your course should be more inclusive, for example, by including the accomplishments of female researchers. Your fellow TAs and professor say that the subject is gender-neutral.

What issues does the scenario raise?
What could you do in this situation?
What might be the fallout from your response?

Scenario 2:

A student makes a bigoted remark in your classroom and other students laugh.

What issues does the scenario raise?
What could you do in this situation?
What might be the fallout from your response?

Advising Issues

Scenario 1:

You meet with a student who is performing poorly in your class. The student accuses you of being arrogant and having excessively high expectations.

What issues does the scenario raise?
What could you do in this situation?
What might be the fallout from your response?

Scenario 2:

A student disputes a grade and tells you that he is on academic probation and can't afford to get less than a "B."

What issues does the scenario raise?
What could you do in this situation?
What might be the fallout from your response?

Scenario 3:

A student tells you that one of her professors made a comment in class that she perceived as racist. The student says that she does not feel welcomed at Columbia.

What issues does the scenario raise?
What could you do in this situation?
What might be the fallout from your response?