

Libby Brown

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Professor Libby Brown is concerned about her student, Brett Smith. The case is presented in three parts with additional information provided in the instructor's manual. Case A describes Libby's encounter with Brett in the classroom after he was physically assaulted by a friend. Libby, concerned by Brett's agitated appearance and his passing mention of suicide, is unsure of her responsibilities. Case B follows Libby as she attempts to resolve her concerns by speaking to her department chair. This particular case prompts Libby to decide whether or not she can choose to ignore her concerns. Case C, introduces one last issue for Libby regarding Brett. On the final day of class, Libby is confronted by Brett and a rather unusual classroom visitor – his snake. Case C prompts readers to think about how they might handle a similar classroom disturbance.

These cases are designed for use in graduate teaching assistant, adjunct and faculty training situations. They are also appropriate for graduate courses focusing on preparing students to teach. The issues discussed in these cases are also appropriate for use in generating communication and dialog between both faculty and student affairs professionals and graduate students in a joint training seminars designed to discuss student-centered issues from each of these perspectives

LIBBY BROWN – CASE A

As Brett walked out of the class, Libby Brown's heart sank. She knew she couldn't force him to the student counseling center. She just wished he'd taken her up on her offer to go there with him. She knew she'd done all she could, but one thing hit her as he walked out of the room. Why had he mentioned hurting himself?

THE UNIVERSITY

English 499 was the first course Libby Brown taught at Southwestern State. Southwestern was a large, public university. As a new instructor, she was selected to lead her department's 499 class. Similar to a reversed freshman orientation, E499 was designed for graduating seniors. They took the class during their final semester at the university and it was designed to assist them begin the transition away from the institution. The curriculum was arranged to serve as a catalyst for discussing and

preparing the class for life in “the real world.” Each week focused on a different progressive concept. Time was spent each class in discussion on various pertinent issues that arose as the students submitted their resumes for job openings and began interviewing.

LIBBY BROWN

Libby Brown was one of the few people in the English department eager to teach the class. With a background in student affairs, this course was a natural fit for her. She felt this class added to the development of the students beyond the institution, although many of her colleagues found it to be unscholarly and fluffy. She loved the conversations that grew out of the student’s thoughts on the “real world.” She also enjoyed helping them gain insight from the different experiences each of them had. It was these collective discussions that provided major opportunities for growth and introspection as they started preparing for careers. Since Libby was new to the faculty, she was eager to interact with as many students as possible to help her learn more about the population she would be teaching.

Although she was thrilled to be a part of this class, she had become concerned for one of the students in her class named Brett Smith. In fact, Brett had become a major concern for her. Something just wasn’t right with this student. He started out the class much like his fellow students, initially reserved in his communication but becoming more and more used to the active participation and listening that was crucial to the success of this kind of course. But today, listening was not an option for him. Libby could not get him to listen, let alone be quiet, for any of today’s class.

BRETT SMITH

Brett had been through a very rough semester. During spring break, he was attacked by his friend. The incident could have been fatal considering how hard his friend hit him in the head. The hits knocked Brett out, and he carried the bruises and scars from the fight for weeks after it happened.

In fact, he was still slightly bruised and noticeably disturbed two weeks after the incident when he returned to the classroom. Although class went relatively well, he was not his normal self. Every time Libby asked a question, even a rhetorical one, his hand flew into the air. Brett was an active class member before, but he wasn’t an over-achiever and he had never monopolized discussions. It became quickly apparent that she was not going to be able to get any input from a student other than him if she didn’t start calling on specific individuals. In fact, Libby pulled everything she could think of from her bag of tricks to try to shift attention back to the day’s discussion and away from him. She walked to opposite areas of the room, focused

her eye-contact away from him, and even joked, "Ok, Brett, that's great input. Now, let me hear what your classmates have to say." But nothing worked, Brett would not stop talking or interjecting, so Libby decided to quickly cover a few final thoughts and dismiss the class early.

As the students started collecting their things, Brett made his way towards her and asked if she knew why he'd been absent. Since what she'd heard was through another student, she said no. Libby knew it was important to get the truth, or at least Brett's side of the truth, rather than trusting what could have been exaggeration. Brett quickly began explaining the events the attack. As he spoke about it and his time in the hospital, Libby noticed Brett's hands started clinching into fists. His voice quivered, rising and falling. And as he spoke, he became more and more visibly agitated. As Brett's voice and gestures became more and more unstable, Libby began to feel very uneasy. She realized that Brett was talking and gesturing in an unnatural way – he was not in control of his behavior. She also realized they were alone in the closed classroom and began to feel even more uneasy. Once she realized the extent of the attack and how upset he remained, she knew he needed to have some help in recovering from the trauma of the past few weeks. She asked if he had reported the accident.

"Oh, yes. Since I had to go to the hospital for a brain scan, the police took a report that night and I got him locked up. I'm going to file a complaint on campus too, because I don't know what'll happen if I actually end up face to face with him again. I've got friends. I could have him ruined with a call. My dad's got a lawyer. I'm going to take him down one way or another."

As Brett continued to talk about the attack and his plans for a legal case, Libby started thinking about his words and behavior. Ruin him? Take him down? This kid is one step away from exploding, she thought to herself. Heck, I wouldn't be surprised if he attacked him in the hallway if he saw this guy. I don't really feel comfortable being here alone with him. He's too angry. He's not in control of his emotions right now.

"Brett," she said. "You've been through a lot recently. Have you talked to anyone else about this?"

"You mean, like a shrink?" he asked.

"Well, sort of. I was thinking more along the lines of the student counseling center. It's free and it's a great place for you to vent some of your experience and anger."

“Oh, I don’t need that. The anger keeps me going. No, I’m ok. It’s not like I’m going to hurt myself. I mean, I’ve thought about suicide, but that’s not for me. I’m too much like my dad. He told me that he’d thought about it when he was young.”

As Brett continued to talk, Libby realized even more how important it was for him to visit the counseling center. Why did he bring up hurting himself? That wasn’t something he or I had ever talked about that.

“Look, Brett. I’m not saying that you’re not ok, or that you don’t have a right to be angry. Clearly, something terrible has happened to you. I just think it’s important that you share your thoughts with someone who can help you use what you’re feeling in a positive way. In fact, I’m happy to go with you. We can walk over there right now if you’d like, and I’ll help you find someone you’d feel comfortable talking to. Why don’t we head over there now?”

“No really, I’m fine. But, I do appreciate you listening to me. I’ve gotta go. I’ll see you soon.”

As Brett walked out of the class, Libby’s heart sank. She knew she couldn’t force him to the clinic, she just wished he’d taken her up on her offer to go with him. She knew she’d done all she could, but one thing haunted her. Why had he mentioned hurting himself out of the blue? And, more importantly, what should I do?

LIBBY BROWN – CASE B

Professor Libby Brown just couldn’t get the encounter with Brett out of her head as she started collecting her belongings after he left the classroom. One exchange haunted her.

“It’s not like I’m going to hurt myself. I mean, I’ve thought about suicide, but that’s not for me.”

To pay for graduate school, Libby worked for the housing department. It was a natural transition for her. As an undergraduate, she loved working as a resident assistant (RA). In fact, it wasn’t until she learned assistant hall directors were full-time graduate students that she even began thinking about going to graduate school. It was a no-brainer for her. She loved working with students, and who wouldn’t pursue an opportunity to keep doing what she loved, and earns a graduate degree at the same time!

It was during this time as an assistant hall director, and later as a professional hall

director, that Libby learned about the alarming number of students who contemplated and/or attempted suicide. A major component of her training, and later the training she helped design for RAs, discussed student suicide. She knew how important it was to pay attention when a student mentioned hurting himself – even if he played it off as a joke. It was also important to realize that students didn't just bring up suicide for no reason. Even if he was just testing boundaries, there was something different about Brett. Their conversation was not normal and she was worried about him.

As she started towards the classroom door, Libby realized that her exchange with Brett needed to be discussed with someone else. As an administrator, she learned the importance of documenting incidents with students and following university protocols. Although there hadn't been any training on suicide protocol during her departmental or university training at Southwestern State, she knew she needed to report the conversation to her department chair. Walking towards his office, she remembered the legal seminar she attended as a hall director. There had been some serious lawsuits against universities and their staffs because suicide warnings had gone ignored. Libby couldn't live with herself if something happened to Brett. She also realized that if she kept the conversation to herself, and God-forbid something happened to him, then she and Southwestern State could be held liable for not trying to help him.

Libby was pleased to see Professor Stewart's door open when she walked into the departmental office. Stewart was a seasoned faculty member at Southwestern State. He had worked here for many years, and had been integral in helping her learn about the school and its students. In fact, she had worked closely with Professor Stewart to prepare her syllabus and curriculum for E499. She knew he would know exactly how she should proceed following her conversation with Brett.

"Libby, how's your day going?" said Stewart when she stuck her head in his office door.

"Well, it was going pretty well. But something just happened that I'd like to get your input on. Do you have a minute?"

"Sure, always a minute for you. Have a seat. What's going on?"

Libby recounted the events of the day. She told how Brett had brought up suicide and how she had offered to walk with him to the student counseling center. Stewart listened and nodded as she spoke. When she finished, she looked up at him expectantly.

“Ok. What’s the problem? Sounds like you did everything right.” said Stewart.

“Well, at my old institution, there was a protocol if a student ever mentioned suicide to a staff or faculty member. We were supposed to document the incident and forward it on to supervision and administration.” said Libby. “Is there a similar process here?”

Professor Stewart paused at this question. He seemed to think for a minute before he responded.

“Well, I’m sure there is. But I don’t think it’s that big of a deal. So he mentioned suicide, so what. I’d say give it week and see what happens. No reason to create something out of nothing.”

Libby was surprised. She looked back at Professor Stewart to see if he was serious.

“Are you sure?” she said. “I mean, this could be a big deal if something happened to him. Isn’t there someone else we should notify about this?”

Professor Stewart looked somewhat amused at this point. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “Seriously, just give it a week.”

Libby thanked him for his time and started back to her office. She was stunned. Professor Stewart had acknowledged that Brett’s behavior was unnatural and something was probably going on with him. He also admitted that she was right about there probably being a suicide protocol at Southwestern. But he didn’t think it was a big deal.

Something about his decision just didn’t sit right with Libby, and she was still haunted by her interaction with Brett. I don’t think Professor Stewart is right about this, she thought to herself. What should I do? Do I risk going around him? He is a senior faculty member. Is this going to stir up trouble for me? But what if I don’t do anything and Brett does something irrational. Can I live with that? What do I do now?

LIBBY BROWN – CASE C

I haven’t seen this guy in four weeks and he shows up on the last day of class – with a snake no less! – and expects to do his presentation like nothing’s wrong.

Several weeks had passed since Brett's last day in Professor Brown's E499 class. The last day she had seen him in the classroom was the day he returned following the events of spring break. It was surprising to her that he had returned at all. Following his disruptive classroom behavior and brief mention of suicide, Libby had met with Dr. Stewart to discuss what university protocol required her to do. She was surprised when Dr. Stewart had simply told her to "wait a week" after she shared with him her concerns about Brett's state of mind. After she left his office, she went back to her desk and debated whether she truly needed to drop the conversation from her thoughts or if she needed to keep going until she found a solution that put her mind at ease.

Later that afternoon, Libby realized that she couldn't live with Dr. Stewart's advice and decided to meet with the student services liaison, Judith, within her department. She was relieved that Judith was also concerned about Brett's remarks. Judith confirmed her uneasiness and asked Libby to write down what she remembered of the conversation between her and Brett, and email it to her. Judith said that she would check on how to proceed from there and get back to her.

After documenting and discussing the situation further with Judith, Libby felt much more at ease knowing that she had documented the situation. A few days after her meeting with Judith, Libby received a memo from the student affairs office at Southwestern State. The memo, copied to all of Brett's professors, notified her that Brett was undergoing health concerns. It asked for faculty cooperation to help him complete the semester in spite of his continuing absences. What a relief, she thought to herself. At least Brett is going to get some help for all that he's been through.

Over the next few weeks, Libby learned that Brett had been present in some of her colleagues' classes, although he never returned to her E499 class. Instead, he sent some emails with his assignments attached. Although this wasn't an ideal situation, based on what she had heard from other faculty in the department, Brett was truly in no shape to be in classes. In light of all he had been through, Libby felt that his completion of his assignments was positive progress for him.

As the end of the semester approached, Brett approached in the hallway one afternoon regarding the final project for E499 – a 10 minute presentation.

"Hey, Professor!" Brett said. "Got a minute?"

"Sure, Brett. How are you doing?" Libby replied.

“Oh, I’m great! The semester is almost over and I’ve got awesome things lined up for the summer. I appreciate you understanding my absences. You’ve been really great to me. And your class has helped me a lot. I’ve lined up a great job thanks to you. I’m going to be working at a music studio in Los Angeles. It’s a happening place – a lot of celebrities and major talent visit it. I can’t wait to tell the class about it. Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do for your class – talk about our future? I met the owner through one of my connections here in town. Yeah, I can’t wait to tell y’all about it. When do you want me to present?”

As Brett spoke, his eyes seemed to travel around the hall darting from place to place and his speech was very fast. Libby wondered why he was so excited, and how a 22-year-old undergraduate had connections with music studio in LA. She felt taken aback by his enthusiasm. It was like he was operating on fast forward while the world kept moving at its normal pace.

“Well, Brett,” Libby began. “I’m not sure when you are supposed to present. Everyone signed up for a date early in the semester. I think you were you in class on that day, weren’t you? Why don’t we each look at the original presentation schedule? I don’t have it with me, but I’ve posted it to our class Web site. Look and see if you’re on it. If not, email me your preference date. More importantly, how are you doing? Are you feeling better? You seem to be on the move. Have things calmed down for you?”

“Oh, yeah, everything’s awesome!” Brett said. I can’t believe how well life is working out for me. I’ve got big plans but I’ve gotta go. I’ll tell you all about it in my presentation. Thanks again for all of your help this semester.”

Like a flash, Brett was gone and Libby watched him rush down the hall in stunned silence. Yet again, Libby was left feeling like something was seriously wrong with Brett. He just didn’t act right. He seemed to speed through words like he did down the hall. What is going on with him?

Brett was scheduled to present during the last week of class, but when his day arrived he was a no-show. Libby went on with the rest of the presentations and assumed that Brett simply decided to fall back on his other assignments for his grade in the class. He could still make a passing grade without his presentation.

On the final day of class, Libby quickly learned that Brett had not decided to simply forgo the assignment. Shuffling about the room, Libby was enjoying chatting with her students as she set up the laptop projector for the remaining PowerPoint presentations.

The room was filled with energy. Students were loudly talking about graduation and parties and Libby's spirits were buoyed by their excitement. A palpable hush fell on the room and Libby turned to see what was wrong. Brett was making his way to his normal seat in the center of the room. He was dressed in a jacket and tie and he smiled at Libby as he took his seat. It seemed like there was nothing unusual about it, until Libby realized the reason the class had gotten so quiet. Brett was carrying a live snake at his side.

A snake. A snake in my classroom. How in the world did he get it in the building? I haven't seen this guy in four weeks and he shows up on the last day of class – with a snake no less! – and expects to do his presentation like nothing's wrong. Well, now how am I supposed to deal with this?