

What the Hell Is Going on in My Night Class?

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Steve Roberts, dean of the Dixon School of Business at Atlantic Southeastern University, has to deal with a difficult situation. Several students have alleged that adjunct professor, Ben Caldwell, arrived at his weekly class under the influence of alcohol. Students claimed that Caldwell's speech was slurred, his behavior was erratic, and he berated students over the disposition of their mid-term exams, which were submitted the previous week. A couple of the female students reported that they felt unsafe in the class.

After gathering information and conducting several interviews with students, Roberts confronted Caldwell with the allegations. Caldwell denied everything, and insisted that he had nothing to drink before coming to class that evening. Before the class would meet again the following Thursday night, Roberts must decide how to handle this unusual situation.

INTRODUCTION

Paula Langdon was not happy. Langdon, a senior business administration major at Atlantic Southeastern University (AS-E) was sitting in her Thursday evening Systems Analysis class, a requirement for her major. Langdon would be graduating with honors in a few weeks, assuming that everything went smoothly in her final semester, though what was transpiring that evening, March 10, was anything but smooth. The professor, adjunct instructor Ben Caldwell, was behaving erratically, weaving around the classroom, slurring his speech, and loudly berating the students for reasons that were unclear. Students were exchanging quizzical glances; others began circulating text messages, speculating about Caldwell and his behavior. A few students were amused, others were annoyed and some, including Langdon, felt uncomfortable and even unsafe sitting in class that evening.

Steve Roberts, dean of AS-E's Dixon School of Business, was getting ready for bed several hours later. As was his habit, Roberts checked his schedule and e-mail messages, to see what was on his agenda the following day. His e-mail contained several messages, some with the subject line "BUSN 4600 class," others with more

colorful subject references, such as “Drunken Professor, Angry Students” and “Ruined Presentation by Drunk Professor.” Roberts had considerable experience as an administrator, but had never encountered anything of this nature. He could clearly see that the students wanted him to take action, and that he would have to resolve this situation quickly and decisively.

BACKGROUND

Atlantic Southeastern University was founded in 1917 as a church-affiliated liberal arts college for women, and became fully coed in 1987. The undergraduate business major was started in 1948, an evening MBA program began in 1980, and an executive MBA program was added in 1990. The business school was named for renowned local banker (and chairman of the college’s Board of trustees) Richard Dixon in March 1993, a result of a gift from one of Dixon’s former business associates. AS-E’s enrollment numbered about 2400 students, with slightly more than 20 percent studying business, the university’s largest undergraduate major. AS-E placed great emphasis on high-quality teaching, and its promotional materials consistently focused on the university’s low student-to-teacher ratio, small class sizes, and an intimate learning experience where the students would develop relationships with their professors, rather than just being another body in a large lecture hall.

STEVE ROBERTS

Steve Roberts had an extensive academic career, with his training in mathematics and statistics. Roberts spent his entire career in the Southeast, serving on the faculty of two large regional universities before moving into administration. He had sixteen years of experience as a business school dean before coming to AS-E in 2012. He had been dean of larger faculties in his other two positions, but was attracted by the small size and teaching-related mission of the Dixon School, and hoped to ultimately retire in the area. Roberts was well received by his faculty colleagues, who appreciated his experience and his positive attitude. Roberts, a self-professed “numbers guy,” was a collaborative decision-maker who liked to review all of the available data before making decisions.

MARK BAXTER

Mark Baxter, associate dean of the Dixon School, was Roberts’ “point man” in the Caldwell investigation, and was appraised of the situation early the next morning. Baxter had spent his entire career in private industry, primarily human resources, before coming to AS-E in 2003 to serve as director of graduate school admissions. Baxter was named associate dean prior to the 2013-14 academic year. Baxter had considerable experience dealing with employee situations during the human resources phase of his career, but had never dealt with traditional-age

undergraduate students. Also, since his prior position with AS-E was working in the graduate school, Baxter did not know any of the students who were making allegations about Ben Caldwell's classroom behavior.

BEN CALDWELL

Caldwell, whose primary occupation was with a large, regional public utility, had also worked as an adjunct instructor in the Dixon School for the last three years. Caldwell had two characteristics that made him attractive as an adjunct: he held a PhD, which was helpful for the school's continuing accreditation, and he was versatile, qualified to teach a variety of courses. His prior teaching evaluations had been good, with students frequently commenting that they enjoyed the "real world" approach that he brought to the classroom. In addition to teaching the Systems Analysis class, Caldwell was also teaching a few sessions in the Dixon School's Executive MBA program.

Caldwell was teaching the Systems Analysis class for the first time, and it was hoped by the administration that he might become a regular instructor in that particular class. The Systems class had been added to the business major two years earlier, after one of the Dixon School's accrediting bodies had suggested that the business curriculum needed more content in information technology. The class quickly became a staffing challenge, as the course content did not match up well with the training of any of the full-time business faculty. Normally, there would be two sections of this upper-level class offered per semester, a day section to accommodate the traditional-age students, and an evening section, which would be largely populated by working adults completing undergraduate degrees in the university's evening/weekend program. Unfortunately, Caldwell was the only viable option to teach the class that semester, and he could only teach one evening section. Thus, scheduling was done on a priority basis, with the ultimate class roster consisting of a mixture of traditional age and adult students, many of whom were planning on graduating at the conclusion of the semester.

PAULA LANGDON

Paula Langdon came to AS-E as a freshman three years ago, and she was looking forward to her upcoming graduation. Langdon had enjoyed her years at the university, and had been active in her sorority and several other clubs. One of her academic highlights was being inducted into Beta Gamma Sigma, the international business honor society, the previous spring. Langdon was actively pursuing job opportunities, but was also considering graduate school.

Langdon had enjoyed virtually all her business classes, and appreciated the relationships she made with many of her professors, particularly the full-time faculty, who were "around" with greater frequency. After completing the first half

of the Systems class, Langdon did not consider it to be one of her favorites, as she felt that Ben Caldwell was too unstructured, and would occasionally veer off topic. Still, Langdon liked the current, real-world examples that Caldwell provided; on that March evening, Caldwell had scheduled a guest speaker, one of his colleagues at the public utility. As someone trying to determine her next steps, Langdon was looking forward to hearing the speaker discuss her position in her company, and the business climate in general.

MARCH 10

The class was supposed to feature a guest speaker, one of Caldwell's colleagues at the public utility, who was to discuss what it's like to be in the "real world" job market. However, before the speaker was even able to begin her presentation, Caldwell did not seem like himself. He was slurring his speech and couldn't walk straight. The students began to question whether or not their professor was under the influence of alcohol. He stood at the front of the class and berated the students for not submitting their take-home exams properly. The week before, the university was hit by an unexpected snowstorm, causing classes to be cancelled for several days, including the night of the mid-term exam. Caldwell had made the exam available on the campus website, along with directions on how to return the exam.

The students were incredibly confused when he asked about this exam because the class already completed and turned them in, and were now waiting on their mid-term grades. Several students asked Caldwell if he had received their specific exam, and each were told that he had received it. Students began questioning the status of their exams, and Caldwell got visibly angry and belittled some students saying, "I have a PhD and you athletes are trying to tell me you're right and I'm wrong?" He showed an inability to answer questions or communicate with his students, and the students sitting in the front row suggested that there might have been a smell of alcohol on his breath.

Two men also accompanied Caldwell and the guest speaker to class that night; the class was told only that they were "colleagues" of Caldwell. After the uncomfortable confrontation with the class, the two men abruptly pulled Caldwell out of the classroom into the hallway. At this point, the guest speaker began her presentation to try and bring some normalcy back into the situation. After being absent for forty minutes, Caldwell returned to class, sat in the front row, pulled out a bottle of water and loudly asked if anyone wanted a glass of water. He also stood in the back of the room and shouted at the speaker to talk louder even though none of the students had any trouble hearing her speak. Caldwell spent the rest of the lecture coming in and out of the classroom, occasionally interrupting with random comments, and otherwise being a distraction.

Throughout the night class, students tweeted about what was happening with their visibly impaired professor.



Text messages were being sent to students in and out of the classroom, statuses were being updated, and tweets were being retweeted. In less than twenty minutes, almost the entire senior class knew about the allegedly drunk professor in the Systems Analysis class, as well as the dean of the Dixon School (see Appendix A for examples of e-mails sent to the dean).

THE INVESTIGATION

Dean Roberts knew he had a serious problem on his hands. The class took place on Thursday night, so very little could be accomplished until Monday, though meetings were scheduled with several students. The situation was made even more difficult with the fact that the semester was a little more than halfway over, and finding a different professor to complete an already established class would be difficult. There was also the matter of the missing exams; Caldwell's grading criteria was based on class discussion, along with the mid-term and final exams. At this point, none of the students, most of whom were planning to graduate in May, had any idea of their grades in the class. Roberts also had the added complication of most of the Dixon School students finding out about the incident, due to social

media. Roberts had asked associate dean Mark Baxter to assist in the investigation, which would begin early Monday morning.

Roberts and Baxter each interviewed several of the students on Monday and Tuesday (see Appendix B for Baxter's notes from two of the interviews). While the students differed slightly in their recollections of the events of the previous Thursday's class, clear trends emerged from the interviews. The students all felt that Caldwell was intoxicated, and that his behavior was much different that night, compared to the rest of the semester. The female students tended to feel uncomfortable while Caldwell was in the classroom, and some left while Caldwell was out of the classroom, afraid that he might be confrontational if they stayed until the end of class. The students generally commended the guest speaker for her efforts, as she managed to be informative and stay on point, despite Caldwell's occasional interruptions. Roberts had hoped to interview the guest speaker, but was unable to make contact with her during the investigation.

Baxter also spoke with the director of the school's executive MBA program, to see if those students had expressed any concerns about Caldwell during his sessions with that students group. The director noted that some of the students had complained of similar behavior by Caldwell during one of their Saturday morning sessions (that program met all day Friday one week, all day Saturday the next week, with four faculty rotating sessions each day). Students in that program tend to be more seasoned business professionals, so they tended to be more disappointed in his behavior, and did not express any safety concerns.

Steve Roberts chose not to contact Caldwell until he "had all the information lined up." Roberts actually hoped that Caldwell would have reached out to him, but that had not happened, and Roberts finally contacted Caldwell by phone late Tuesday afternoon. Roberts began the conversation by noting in detail the allegations made by the students, then asked Caldwell to give his side of the events. Caldwell responded with complete surprise, denying that he had anything to drink prior to class or that his behavior was anything but typical that night. Caldwell insisted it would be "business as usual" when he met the class Thursday evening.

After speaking with Caldwell, Roberts finished up by speaking with a member of the faculty who was also a practicing attorney, and also spoke with a member of the university's human resources staff. He realized it was time to make his decision, and determined that he had three options. The first was to allow Caldwell to return to class and respond to the students concerns in his own way. He would presumably return the exams, and the class could move forward without loss of continuity. A second option was to let Caldwell return to the class, but with a member of the administration, likely Mark Baxter, joining him in the class. The two would confront the student allegations, and Baxter would explain that his presence was to

insure a safe learning environment, and that he would be sitting in on the remainder of the semester's classes. The third option was to dismiss Caldwell immediately, and have another professor come in and finish out the course. Roberts had spoken to one of the full-time faculty, who said that he could finish the course if necessary, though it would be challenging as he already had a full roster of classes. The "clean break" from Caldwell would likely please some of the students, but it would be very unclear how to handle the grading of the class.

Roberts decided that he would place another call to Caldwell first thing Wednesday morning to rectify the situation in the best way possible.

APPENDIX A

Email from Paula Langdon

My name is Paula Langdon and I am a Business Major in my senior year here at AS-E. I am currently a student in the Thursday night Systems Analysis course. Unfortunately, tonight circumstances arose that require your immediate attention.

Professor Ben Caldwell was visibly intoxicated in class tonight. He was obviously slurring his speech and could not even walk straight. Fortunately, we had a guest speaker but she began only after he had inappropriately berated the class for supposedly not submitting a take-home exam (even though everyone claimed that they had). When we asked him to expound, he refused to and we were left not knowing whose exams he claims he did not receive. Almost the entire class raised their hands to ask him if he had received theirs, including myself, to which he replied "yes" to every single one of us. One student pointed out that this didn't add up because he claimed that only a third of us submitted it. He was not making any sense and was unwilling to communicate with us.

In addition to his slurred speech and stumbling, the students sitting in the front row could smell the alcohol on his breath. The entire class was visibly uncomfortable and it was apparent that the guest speaker was aware of his condition as she was regarding him quite gingerly. At the beginning of class, there were also two visitors who were friends of his who were jovial with him initially but then left abruptly and pulled him into the hallway. At this point, the guest speaker began her presentation. Professor Caldwell came in and out of the classroom several times and interrupted her presentation with random comments.

During the break, I left the classroom with a couple other students as I felt extremely uncomfortable. While he did not do anything physical, he was not demonstrating a sound mind and was quite disrespectful at times. I have never experienced anything like this with another faculty member at AS-E and usually feel very safe and comfortable in all of my classes. Honestly, I do not feel comfortable having him as a professor if he is going to behave in this way. Unfortunately, this class is required for graduation in May and there are no other times it is offered. I know that several other students are planning on emailing you of their concern as well. I trust that you will resolve this situation so that we will once again feel comfortable in this learning environment.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or comments.

Best,
Paula Langdon

Email from Student B

My name is Student B and I am a senior Business Major at AS-E. I am currently a student in the Thursday 6pm Systems Analysis course. Unfortunately, tonight a situation occurred that needs immediate attention.

My professor, Ben Caldwell, was visibly and obviously intoxicated tonight. He attempted to instruct the course and could not help slurring his speech and stumbling about the classroom. He talked in circles and made absolutely no sense. The students in the front row could smell the alcohol on his breath and the entire class was visibly uncomfortable.

There were two visitors or guests in the classroom who left abruptly and pulled him into the hallway. Luckily, we had a guest speaker tonight who began her presentation. Frequently Caldwell would come in and out of the room and say random comments and interrupt her speech. When the speaker gave us a break, I left the room with few students and departed campus immediately. I have never felt that unsafe in a classroom at AS-E before. I felt unsafe because obviously Caldwell was not in the right state of mind, but his demeanor in general is somewhat odd, and I just had a gut feeling that something was off and I needed to leave. Apparently, he returned to the class at the end but I was not about to stay - being a single young female I needed to get to a safe place.

To be quite honest, I do not feel at all comfortable returning to his class as a student. Unfortunately, this class is required for graduation in May and there are no other times offered. I know you will be hearing from at least one or two other students regarding the incident tonight. I trust that you will find a solution that will make us comfortable returning to that learning environment.

Please feel free to contact me with any specific questions or comments.

Best regards,
Student B

APPENDIX B

Discussion with Paula Langdon, student in the Systems Analysis class

This was a follow-up discussion with Paula Langdon following receipt of an email from her issuing a complaint regarding Ben Caldwell, adjunct faculty for the Systems Analysis class.

Langdon and other students were deeply concerned regarding a class session in the past week. Mr. Caldwell had come to class exhibiting slurred speech. She could not understand him, he could not walk straight, and he was stumbling around at the front of the class. He was quite feisty and was ranting to the class, making rude comments. He had only received one third of their exams, and he put the students in one of two categories – either he had an exam from them or he had no exam from them. He commented that those who had not turned in exams were too lazy to open their inboxes. He said this would be an indication of failure to come in their careers. Members of the class tried to explain to him that he had not received the exams due to a network outage versus his assumptions of their laziness. Several class members were concerned that he would keep them in those “categories” for the rest of the semester, and they would not know about it. Class members asked whose exams had been received and who’s had not – his response was that he was not required to tell them in front the class - you are accountable he said.

There was a guest speaker for the class that evening, a colleague of Caldwell’s at his company. The speaker said at this point “do you want to take a seat?” to Caldwell. There were other guests of Caldwell’s there - they got up and left while he was talking about the exam. They left and then came back in. The speaker started and Caldwell kept making remarks to the speaker to speak up even though students had no issue hearing her.

Langdon stated that she felt quite uncomfortable and awkward and had never experienced anything like this at AS-E. She was fearful due to unpredictability of Caldwell’s behavior in the class. He was louder than normal. He was gone from the class for 20 to 30 minutes while the guest speaker was there. She stated specifically that she was worried about his personal safety, if he was driving that evening, and talked to campus police about the situation. She stated that she and another student talked to campus security. Because of her concerns for her own safety she left during the class break around 7:15. She stated that she would feel very uncomfortable going back to the class.

She stated she had nothing against him personally but did not appreciate his cynical, harsh comments.

Regarding her comments about his personal safety she stated that if he were a friend she would not let him drive and would not want him to be seen in a professional setting.

Discussion with Student B, student in the Systems Analysis class

Student B was one of several students expressing concern via email or in person regarding the behavior of Caldwell, adjunct faculty for the Systems Analysis class. She was very open and forthright in discussing the situation and her concerns.

She mentioned the exam issue that occurred at the first of the class on who had completed/turned in the exam and who did not. She said that Caldwell stated that he put them all into categories – those who will make it in the business world and those who won't, and that he had sent email last night addressed to those he said did not complete and turn in the exam. She confirmed the demeanor described by Paula Langdon.

Once he had finished berating the class on the exam, he introduced his friends in class and the guest speaker. He was quite expansive in introducing his friends and the guest speaker, more so than would find necessary, taking 15 minutes of class time to do this. In introducing the speaker he kept referring to her as a real expert and went on and on, basically stating the same thing over and over. He had slurred speech, and was unsteady and erratic in his behavior and remarks.

Some students stated that they smelled alcohol and were making glass-tipping gestures to classmates and sending text messages about this back-and-forth. His "friend guests" appeared to realize what was happening and pulled him out of the classroom. He was gone for a long time – one student left the class to go to the restroom and did not see him anywhere.

The speaker finished the class and Caldwell came back in the end of her presentation.

The girls in the class tend to sit together and were very uncomfortable.