

THE CASE OF PROFESSOR OLIVIA MCABEE

Kendell Spillman
Charleston Southern

Lauren Kuhn
Medical University of South Carolina

Professor Olivia McAbee is a young adjunct working in the English departments of two state colleges. She assigned a poetry project to her literature class. The students were required to work in groups and meet with the instructor prior to their classroom presentations. When one group fell short of expectations, Professor McAbee was left questioning whether she and the students involved had handled the situation correctly.

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The next group presentation was to be made by three male students: one veteran—Bob Grierson--and two traditional students—Tyler Roberts and Parker Norris.

“Are you ready?” Professor McAbee asked. The students squirmed in their seats and then slowly made their way to the front of the class, never meeting their instructor’s gaze.

Three minutes into the presentation, Professor McAbee shouted “All right, that’s enough. You can sit down now that you’ve all looked foolish in front of the class. I’m too upset for class to continue today...”

BACKGROUND

Professor Olivia McAbee was a young adjunct who had taught at the college level for two years following her graduation from a Master’s program in English Literature. She was teaching two general education seminars and an introductory literature class at a small liberal arts college. She taught three introductory level courses at one campus and two introductory courses at the other. Although she found teaching rewarding, she sometimes felt overwhelmed from commuting to two different buildings every weekday, and having a workload of five classes, with different syllabi and lesson plans. She also was required to provide office hours for

both campuses; however, one campus provided adjuncts with office spaces while the other did not. She had to use the campus library for meeting with students, which was sometimes inconvenient.

So far this semester, she had not faced any academic or disciplinary issues. She felt that her consistent work ethic, her teaching methodology, and her friendly yet professional demeanor with her students naturally incurred success. For her literature class, Professor McAbee had assigned a poetry project. Each student signed up for one of the poems listed on a sheet of paper; no more than three students were assigned to a poem of their choosing. Then the students would read the poem, collaborate as a group to discuss their presentation ideas, and teach the poem to the class.

Professor McAbee had requested to meet with each group in advance to ensure that they had read and understood the poem and were prepared to present it. Although students could still present regardless, as the project constituted a percentage of their final grade, failure to schedule a meeting and follow through would result in a reduced grade for the assignment. She had already shown the class the rubric she would be using as an assessment tool, so they had known in advance what she was expecting from them.

THE DECLINE

On one particular day, she had scheduled a meeting with a student group after class. She had noticed, however, that Tyler and Parker had been absent that day, and after class had ended, she approached Bob, who happened to be the oldest student, and asked, "Is your group still meeting with me in the library at 3 PM today?"

Bob shook his head as he retrieved his backpack from the floor. "I can't be there; I have a job interview. Besides," he motioned at the other desks. "You noticed Tyler and Parker weren't here today."

"I did notice. Do you know the reason for their absences?"

Bob shrugged. "Tyler emailed me that he was sick and I don't know about Parker. I'm not their keeper."

Professor McAbee felt confused and disoriented. She had given each group optional times to meet, and Bob Grierson, Tyler Roberts, and Parker Norris, had selected this time a week in advance. She had reminded the students in the email she circulated last week to notify her if they needed to change their appointment for any reason. A job interview and an illness were certainly sufficient reasons to warrant a scheduling change, but she was disappointed that the students had not

taken the initiative to contact her. She dutifully recorded class absences to monitor student attendance and assist the school in retaining students. The absence policy, which she made certain to highlight in each of her syllabi, clearly outlined expectations of a student should he or she miss class for any reason. Tyler and Parker were college freshmen, and Professor McAbee was aware that many freshmen did not take class attendance seriously, to the detriment of their grades.

She reminded herself that at least Bob had attended class and spoken with her that day. He was one of her best students, always in attendance and a frequent participant in class discussions. The consensus amongst the departments she worked for was that veterans were dedicated students and excelled in their classes, providing gravitas with their life experiences and level of insight. Although Professor McAbee had only taught for two years, she had already had several veterans in her classes, and each had been a positive experience. Bob was at least a model student in terms of academic performance; however, he would occasionally display a condescending and dismissive attitude towards her expertise during a lecture. She would seethe silently, but dismiss her feelings to avoid conflict and to retain professional conduct. Despite her personal feelings, she felt certain that he would follow through with the project, even if it meant that he couldn't rely upon the other group members. She had already planned to assign individual grades to students if their group demonstrated a lack of collaborative effort.

“Well, I will email them to remind them of their responsibility to the group project. Please keep in touch with me and let me know when you can all meet with me. It will need to occur before the end of this week.”

“Ok,” Bob replied before heading out the door.

Professor McAbee headed to the library to host her office hours and accomplish some grading. By the end of her office hours, she had forgotten her concerns regarding the poetry group, and proceeded with the rest of her day.

The following day in her office at the other campus, Professor McAbee sent an email to the absent poetry group, making certain to include a “read receipt”:

“Bob, Tyler and Parker,

This is a final reminder that you need to meet with me prior to presenting your poetry project next week. Please let me know which time and day this week you have available to meet with me. My syllabus already states my office hours and the times I am available on your campus, so use that as a guide.

~Professor McAbee.”

A few hours later, she checked her inbox. Although she received confirmation that each of the students had received and read the email, none of them sent her a reply until later that evening when she arrived home. Bob, the only one of the students to respond, emailed her the following:

“I never heard from Tyler and Parker, and I’m unable to meet with you this week anyway due to work responsibilities.”

“I can’t believe these students,” Professor McAbee thought to herself. Her concerns returned full force, with the added fear that the group would show up to class unprepared and unable to accomplish the assignment requirements. She did not want Bob to take on the full weight of the group’s project, as that was unfair to him. She understood that he was a husband and father and worked full-time in addition to being a full-time student. However, she could only give him so many allowances. Although he was older than the professor was, she was still the authority figure in the classroom. Bob’s curt email, which lacked a greeting, acknowledgment of her professional title, and a salutation, showed a lack of professional courtesy and respect to their hierarchical classroom roles. She did not like admonishing students for what seemed like petty and trivial concerns, but this response stirred in her a reminder of what his classroom behavior was sometimes like.

“Please let me know if Tyler and Parker do get in touch with you before the end of this week, and also if you have any questions about the project,” she replied in a follow-up email.

Bob never responded to her second email, but since she had assigned a read receipt to it, she knew he had read it. Although it irked her that he did not respond, she assumed that, based on his independent work ethic and his reliability in the classroom, he had managed to resolve the scheduling conflict with his group. Besides, she had her other classes to tend to, and the dual campus responsibilities consumed her time.

THE PROBLEM MAGNIFIED

In the beginning, she was satisfied with the first two groups that had presented. One group had used a power-point presentation to share the poet’s background, explicate the poem’s meaning, and provide a brief context concerning the literary movement that encompassed the poem and its author. The other had used a t-shirt color-coding theme, with each color representing an alternate meaning for a poem

that had dual interpretations. Their presentations displayed a high level of effort and preparedness that served as a positive model for the class.

Professor McAbee applauded with the other students following the last group's presentation.

The next presentation was to be made by an all-male group consisting of one veteran—Bob Grierson--and two traditional students—Tyler Roberts and Parker Norris. “Are you ready?” she asked them. They squirmed in their seats, refused to meet her gaze, and muttered an inaudible reply. “Well, stand up, please. It’s your turn to present,” she coaxed.

They fumbled their way to the front of the classroom with the poetry anthology in hand and turned to face the class.

“Well, you all know what this poem is and who wrote it,” Bob began. “It’s an interesting poem.”

Tyler and Parker nodded and stood next to him with uncomfortable smiles pasted on their faces.

“Yeah, great poem. Really enjoyed reading it,” Parker added.

Professor McAbee, seated amongst the students, frowned at their lack of preparedness. It was clear they had not done any work and were wasting class time.

“All right, that’s enough. You can sit down now that you’ve all looked foolish in front of the class,” she snapped. “I’m too upset for class to continue for today; you can all leave now that you’ve seen what happens when you’re unprepared and don’t take your work seriously.”

She was disappointed with them for many reasons: the lack of accountability, communication, initiative, and respect, not to mention the poor morale in front of the class after a previously successful class period of presentations.

Then disaster had struck, and her temper had overcome her. She had never yelled at a student before that day, and was shocked at how she had taken personal offense to these students’ careless attitudes. She also had never had a group of students who were unprepared for a group assignment. Although Tyler and Parker were not the strongest students in class, their behavior was mild mannered, and up until then, had submitted assigned work on the due date.

THE ENCOUNTER

Tyler and Parker both turned red with embarrassment after her outburst. With their tails tucked between their legs, they started to pack and leave with the rest of the students, who remained quiet from the tense environment. Bob, however, did not follow suit. He approached the professor, his face equally red with anger.

“I have to speak up about this! I get that we weren’t prepared, but you didn’t have to rub it in our faces! I’ve got a family to support and a job to work at, and a full course-load! Plus, I’ve been meeting with my doctor at the VA hospital to schedule a surgery! I didn’t have time to do the assignment, and besides, this class is at the bottom of my priority list! I don’t know about Parker, but it’s not Tyler’s fault he was sick! None of us deserved this attitude from you! I want to meet with the department chair about this!”

Professor McAbee stood up to level with him. “I’m sorry if I embarrassed you, but your group disappointed me by not following through with an assignment and for letting the class down! You could have responded to my emails, which confirmed read receipts; I even gave you several opportunities to reschedule if you needed, but you never followed through. Whose fault is that?”

“Everything’s in hindsight!” he retorted. “I deserve a second chance for what you put us through today! I’ve served my country and I’ve endured a lot to get here!”

“I’ll think about it,” she replied in a softer voice, tired of engaging in an argument with him.

“Good,” he replied, heading to the door with his backpack in tow.

“Did you still want to speak with the department chair?” she asked him.

He looked sheepish at the question, after being satisfied with subduing her authority in order to bolster his chances of a higher grade. “Uh, well, if you still want to.”

“I’ll contact Dr. Samuels and let you know,” Professor McAbee said. She dreaded having to meet with her boss. So many concerns were flooding her mind.