

For Chairs: When one of Your Faculty Members is Dealing with Alcohol Abuse

Introduction:

As we all know, alcohol abuse does exist in the university environment. The stress and demands of academia make faculty uniquely vulnerable. The intent of this website is to assist you, as chair and the one ultimately responsible for your faculty, to be prepared to respond when a situation of alcohol abuse impacts your department. Acting proactively, in a humane, fair, and respectful way helps to avoid the kinds of situations that disrupt the working environment and educational process.

As denial is a hallmark of addiction, one cannot expect that the physically dependent faculty member will be able to self-diagnose. Generally people seek help because of pressure from family, work and the law. With that in mind, it may be up to you, the chair, to ultimately confront the individual faculty member whose drinking is impacting her or his work.

We have provided for you what we hope will be helpful information for dealing with a very difficult situation

How will I be able to be sure that drinking is the cause of the problems that are occurring with this faculty member at work?

The following behavior check list of some general indicators of abuse can be used as a guide.

1. **Absenteeism.** Regularly canceling, missing or arriving late to classes and meetings, especially at the beginning and end of the week.
2. **Consistent complaints from students** or on student evaluations that the faculty member regularly misses scheduled appointments or office hours, and is not prepared for class, and exhibits erratic behavior.
3. **High number of accidents** – on and off job.
4. **Poor work relationships.** Problems with colleagues; overly sensitive to work performance critiques; is often moody or displays obvious mood-swings.

5. **Difficulty concentrating and/or confusion.** Obvious loss of train-of-thought, reflected in class setting and with colleagues, work not being completed in a timely manner.
6. **Poor judgment.** Both in and out of the classroom. (i.e. inappropriate behavior with students, such as partying with students and making inappropriate passes, inappropriate discussion of grades.)
7. **Sporadic or obvious decline in work performance,** professional activity and growth - for example, not meeting deadlines, not completing projects.
8. **Frequently smells of alcohol during “work hours,”** slurs words, often intoxicated at university events.

Each of the above characteristics could be related to another mental health or personal issue, but when several of these appear together, then there is reason to consider the possibility that alcohol or other drugs may be involved. This is the time to begin documenting what you have observed. It does not help any one to ignore these behaviors.

Scenario:

Associate Professor Blue, previously punctual and rarely missing a class, has begun to regularly miss classes, especially his Monday morning classes. You have noticed in recent months that on several occasions, he has come back from lunch smelling heavily of alcohol. You have noticed that at department and college events where alcohol is served, Professor Blue has become intoxicated. It is common knowledge in the Department that Professor Blue is going through a particularly difficult time in his life; his partner of many years died suddenly of a heart attack the last year, and his elderly mother is becoming quite frail and he is responsible for her care. As Chair, you look back over his latest student evaluations and see they are considerably lower than in the previous semesters that he has taught at the university, with comments such as “often seems not to be prepared for class, cancels class often, but does not email his students even though he otherwise communicates regularly via email.”

In the above scenario, a number of behaviors mentioned might indicate that alcohol use is playing a role in Professor Blue’s declining performance.

If you suspect that one of your faculty members is experiencing difficulty with alcohol or other drugs, you can address the issue in a humane, fair, respectful and proactive way.

WHAT TO DO If you suspect that one of your faculty members is experiencing difficulty with alcohol or other drugs:

1. **Document.** It is essential that you document observable behaviors that indicate that substance abuse may be involved, including reports from colleagues and students. Make sure to document date, place, time, as well as the behavior; this information must be written and signed by the observer. Any meetings that you hold with the individual should be documented, with a copy to the faculty member.
2. **Protect Confidentiality.** Be mindful when gathering data and consulting to protect the confidentiality and dignity of the faculty member. Disclosure of the faculty member's name or identifying information should only be done on a need-to-know-basis.
3. **Consult.** Use the resources available to you on campus for information that is essential for you to have from your first meeting with this individual. Remember to document your first and any subsequent meetings. The following is a list of potential sources of information that you may or may not choose to employ, depending on the situation.
 - a. Consult with the appropriate administrator (college dean or University Librarian) to inform and discuss all possible options for faculty member and implications for the department and college.
 - b. Consult with Human Resources' Employee and Labor Relations to determine options re: treatment, health insurance, leaves (with / without pay), employee labor relations issues.
www.sfsu.edu/~hrwww
 - c. When appropriate, inform the Dean of Faculty Affairs.
4. **Make an appointment.** Be prepared for the meeting with your faculty member. Consult with the appropriate resources beforehand and have documented objective examples of performance problems at hand. It is essential to remain objective and to focus on objective examples and not suspicions. It is essential that the meeting be private, confidential and done face to face (not by phone or email). It is also important that the

faculty member not be under the influence at the time you meet.

You will need to prepare for each meeting in a way that is appropriate for the task at hand. The nature of the meeting depends on your judgment of the level of severity of the problem. You may have concerns that warrant a meeting with your faculty member, but no behavioral problems have been documented. This may be a situation where the individual is not performing to her/his previous level but there is no egregious behavior that suggests a course of action that would necessitate disciplinary intervention.

Or, it may be a meeting that is in response to documented behaviors that require more serious intervention where consequences may be imposed.

It is important to remain respectful and non-judgmental even though you may be angry or frustrated with the individual or situation at the time you meet with the faculty member. Avoid threats of discipline.

Should you experience resistance from your faculty member, The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention offers *Tips for Overcoming Barriers* that may arise when you address your employee's performance problems. (See below)

Document, with a file memo and a copy to the faculty member, any agreements that were made between you and the faculty member in this meeting.

5. **Utilize Human Resources.** The SFSU Office of Human Resources, Safety and Risk Management is dedicated to providing guidance and support to faculty, staff and administrators seeking assistance with substance abuse issues in the workplace. The kinds of assistance you can obtain from HR include: benefits, disability, and leaves of absence; employee and labor relations; employment and classification (in the event that you need to hire temporary staff).
6. **Consider the impact on the Department.** A faculty member who may be on reduced load or even on medical leave for a semester while seeking treatment, or when she or he returns to the department after treatment. Issues involving differential workload, confidentiality, and effect on the RTP process, for example, must be thought through and

addressed. This is a time to use the resources that are available to you.

7. **Consider the faculty member's rights.** The Disability Programs and Resource Center is available to work with the faculty member *who is in recovery* with appropriate accommodations in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.
8. **Use the supports available to you on campus.** Counseling and Psychological Services' Faculty and Staff Services can provide consultation regarding ways to approach the faculty member, how to enhance communication with her/him, and assistance in assessing the impact of an incident on your students, where appropriate.
9. **Take care of yourself.** We recognize that confronting a faculty member and colleague can be an extremely stressful situation. Counseling and Psychological Services can provide support for you during this difficult process. In addition, the Counseling and Psychological Services website provides tips for dealing with stress.

References:

"Addressing Faculty Alcoholism," Thomas N. Ruggieri,
Faculty Staff Assistance Program University of Maryland at College
Park <http://www.health.umd.edu/fsap/abuse.htm>

" Substance Abuse and Supervisory Intervention"
University of Colorado at Boulder
Faculty and Staff Assistance Program
<http://www.colorado.edu/studentaffairs/fsap/substanceabuse.html>

"The Drug Free Workplace, A Guide for Supervisors and Managers"
Department of Health and Human Services
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services
Division of Workplace Programs,
<http://www.workplace.samhsa.gov/WPWorkit/supermgrs.html>

Tips for Overcoming Barriers

In order to diminish the following barriers, it is important not to meet with the faculty member when she or he is intoxicated. Additionally, an intoxicated individual may not remember either having a meeting or the content of the meeting. Similarly, the person may be more reactive when under the influence.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services' Division of Workplace Programs offers these tips for overcoming barriers that may arise when you address your employee's performance problems.

- **Denial:** S/he denies there's a problem, and insists that you or another employee are out to get him/her. *Suggested response:* Stay calm. Keep at hand documentation of the employee's job performance or conduct, remain focused on performance issues, even though they may want to talk about personal issues that are causing the performance issues.
- **Threats:** The employee threatens to see a lawyer, make a scene at work, quit immediately. *Suggested response:* Remind the employee that he/she may do whatever they choose; however, your own responsibility as supervisor is to uphold the university's policy and find a solution to mutually benefit the organization and the employee. If you think you are losing objectivity or need help to resolve a conflict, consult with the appropriate administrator for your unit (i.e. your college dean).
- **Rationalization:** The employee makes excuses in order to avoid the real issue: "If this job weren't so stressful, I wouldn't be making so many mistakes...." Avoid letting the excuses distract you; stay focused on work performance.
- **Angry Outburst:** The employee gets angry, cries, yells or screams. Don't react. Give the employee time to cool down, then continue where you left off. If necessary, reschedule the meeting.