

It is Wednesday morning of the eleventh week of the spring semester. On arriving at his office Richard Sundberg, Chair of the Chemistry Department at State U gets a jolt. One hundred and thirty of two hundred students in State U's second semester intro chemistry course have signed a petition calling for the immediate removal of the course instructor, Harry Hardgrade. The petition accuses him of an inability to teach new information, and a willful academic demoralization of students.

As the Chair of the Chemistry Department, how should Sundberg respond to the petition?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: The large number of signatures on the petition is highly unusual. For this reason Sundberg should notify the Dean of his division, and discuss the matter with him or her. The petition, though unusual, however, is not, in itself, sufficient reason to remove Hardgrade on the spot. Sundberg's responsibility to the students is to assure that the chemistry course is educationally beneficial. This means he has to do a fast, but complete and accurate review of the situation (Sundberg may not be able to do anything else for a few days and nights.) Before launching into the investigation, however, Sundberg must notify Hardgrade of the situation, get his initial response, and inform him that he will have an opportunity to respond to the results of the investigation. Upon completing the investigation, including the subsequent meeting with Hardgrade, Sundberg should confer again with his Dean, and also with the tenured members of the Chemistry Department. If Sundberg concludes that Hardgrade has serious problems as a teacher, but which are correctable, he should work with Hardgrade to try to improve the situation. This would be much less disruptive to the educational process for the students than bringing in a new teacher. Sundberg should remove Hardgrade only if he concludes that his performance in the course is both unacceptable and irremediable.

Case from the February 24, 1996 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1996.