



Case Study

The recently-appointed Department Head (a white man) of a science department nationally known for its excellence in research, is facing a challenging situation. A highly-prestigious endowed chair in the department has come open. A full professor, one of the department's most prominent researchers (a Black woman), with whom the department Head has maintained a good relationship of long-standing, has made it clear to him that she expects to be appointed to this endowed Chair, and that if she is not, she will file formal charges of racism and sexism against the department.

The appointment process for departmental endowed chairs is as follows. A committee of senior full professors nominates two candidates to the Head. The Head then submits that nomination, with his own independent evaluation of the two candidates, to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. The Dean then makes the final decision on the appointment in consultation with the Head; but the final decision rests with the Dean. Endowed Chairs are held for a three-year term, but can be renewed.

The Head has just been informed by the committee chair that the committee is not recommending the Black woman professor for the endowed chair due to her poor record of mentoring and teaching. Although she has won numerous research awards and brought substantial funding to the department, her mentoring record is subpar, with as many as half of her postdoctoral students quitting her lab within a year or two. She also has a reputation for mistreating her PhD students, yelling at them and berating them publicly for mistakes in the laboratory, and expecting them to work more than their contractually-limited number of hours per week (graduate research assistants and post-docs are unionized at this university). Her undergraduate student teaching evaluations are low; her graduate student teaching evaluations are better, but still significantly below the departmental median. She has also been heard many times telling junior faculty that the only thing the university cares about is research, and that they should therefore prioritize their research over their teaching obligations. This advice runs counter to the University's publicly-stated commitment to providing high-quality education to all of its students.

The Black woman professor has a national reputation, and so charges of racism and sexism in the selection process will undoubtedly garner national attention at a time when the department and the entire university are attempting to recruit larger cohorts of underrepresented students into their PhD programs, especially in the natural sciences. She also has a good deal of support within the department. So far, the departmental committee's recommendations are a secret; but if they become public, the department is likely to split into two camps, leading to further resentment and erosion of trust within the department and perhaps between the department and the Dean's Office.

How should the department head proceed?