

There has been much confusion and misunderstanding and worse since last Wednesday. I now have a good understanding of what happened on Wednesday, and as the days have passed, I can see the effect of these events on you (my students in the class) and my colleagues in the department. It is, in principle, simple to get everyone back on the same page: everyone must have a good understanding of what happened on Wednesday.

You are the victims of a process that in psychology is called “alienation.” Alienation is the process of telling person A that, while they did not know it until now, their friend B had done something bad, said something terrible, and so forth, there are many variations ranging from describing one action to approaching someone and saying they have all along not known the real truth of the entire life of friend B. It is called alienation because the information is not true, but if someone can convince person A it is, they now are alienated from B. Maybe A was best friends with B and is no longer. Maybe A hates B. Maybe A fears B. There are all sorts of possibilities. What is common is that what person A thinks is a revelation, the information that causes A to reject B, is false, and that the process can work only if B is not allowed to show up. This is key. Remember, A is being told something false about B, and it makes B feel bad. If B hears about this, B will show up with the truth, and A will get knowledge that confirms B has not changed and will not realize this was attempted alienation.

This happens in divorce. One parent pulls the kids away from the other and alienates them from B. It happens all too often, and there are way too many books upon it. These stories all show a general pattern: if alienation does work, it does not last, because while you can pull someone aside and reverse their beliefs with a lie, it is a lie, and eventually the truth shows up and the lie disappears. Kids that are driven from one parent eventually return.

Here is the situation. I am the victim of an alienation strategy. You are too. You are the ones someone is trying to alienate from me. I will tell you why, if I am permitted the chance, and if you want to listen, but I will not say here who wanted to alienate you. However see the above paragraph for a hint. The email you received at 12:22pm on Wednesday came from my mailbox, but was not sent by me. Again, if I am ever permitted to see you again, and this is why I am writing, because I may not be so permitted, I can prove it was not sent by me. It was sent by someone trying to hurt me, and they did not care that in doing so they were hurting you. The chances of what happened are so small, and the story so unlikely, when you hear it you will think this cannot happen. And that would be trouble for me. It would take hours and hours of context to explain. Fortunately for me, and here we have yet more probability, the person who sent that email made a mistake. I can show you I did not send it, and only someone else could have. And it won't take all that long. Between 30 and 60 seconds, more if you have questions.

Then I will do more. Again, only if permitted. I will tell each of you had a reaction that fell into one of two categories. The first I will call “confused.” The second “frightened.” There is lots of variation in each, and I'll ask you to see if you can find yourself in this

classification.. Then, I will tell you the one difference between those in one category and those in the other. Now you will know what your reaction was, and why it is different from someone near you. And then I will point out what you will just have realized: that you were not fully aware of why you reacted the way you did. Your reaction depended on beliefs you did not make explicit.

I can do all that in about 15 minutes, and we can discuss if you want. Assuming I am given the chance AND that you then want to hear me. I believe, knowing you, and knowing W&M students as I do, that you will then no longer be alienated from you. You will see me differently, but not more negatively. Some of you will think more of me. Some of you will just know more about me but not change your evaluation of me. Some of you might not like the new knowledge you have of me but the new knowledge will not drive you from me. This happens all the time. I had a friend that really did not like the Boy Scouts. Who knows why. This was in graduate school. He practically idolized a certain mentor we had. He was nearly perfect. After four years, he learned our mentor was an Eagle Scout, and I can assure you, everyone was surprised by this news, because he just did not fit the stereotype. I was a not very good Boy Scout who did not make Eagle Scout, but I do not hold that against the Boy Scouts, so for me this was just odd news. My friend did not like the information, it created what is called cognitive dissonance, and somehow in his mind he was able to turn the news into one more reason not to like the Boy Scouts. He had the negative information, but he did not think any more negatively about the mentor. Sometimes you get negative information about someone and think it's just not important.

In the above paragraphs I have tried to illustrate that I know a lot of psychology, but actually it's psychiatry, and yes I know way more than you want to know. If you want, I will describe (not recite or explain) what I know, and why. And this part is interesting. I have never before mentioned to a class the depression I once had and recovered from, and no one on campus but you and three others know about my idea for a faculty-led initiative to prevent student suicide. Did that seem odd? Have you heard other faculty talking about mental health initiatives? It's good I told you that before, because when I explain roughly what I know and why, and then tell you I have done, for example, X Y Z, all sorts of apparently unconnected pieces will emerge. Z is the faculty-led initiative on mental health. You knew that. Then all this apparently arbitrary and disconnected information about me. And now you know why I not only did not and could not have written that email, but someone intending to cause alienation did, and you will know why I was able to explain the two categories of reaction and tell you that's why I knew you were relying on implicit beliefs you would never have known about if someone who did not have certain training did not come along and tell you.

I cannot tell you how sorry I am that you are innocent victims in this, and when I heard some (I was told many, maybe most) of you forwarded the email to your parents, I can tell you I can't tell you how sorry I am about that. You are here, you are not under threat, I am no danger, and even if I were, remember, you are not just any adults, you are at William & Mary. If a delusional professor showed up in the classroom, I tell you, I know

you, you would not run away screaming. You would rise to the occasion and get help, and not in a panic. You would reason it through. But remember, your parents are far away. If they think you are in danger, they know they are not here to protect you. I feel so awful about that. Please, not for me but for your parents, consider writing an email that tells them "I can handle this." Do NOT say "My professor is okay." That could make them worry more. Just reassure them you can handle it. Later on, you can tell them you fended off a psychotic IR professor. Or you can say it turned out the professor was okay, but the situation was very complicated and it took intelligence and courage to realize that. I hope you see how this works (sorry, more psychology). Just say now, "I can do this." Hang up the phone. Then tell them later how you did it, or make up a story how you did it, because the details don't matter. They will start to relax knowing you are safe even far from them. Do this now, and when the next crisis emerges, do it again, and pretty soon, and it will be sooner than you think, they will not be worrying about you at all. Soon after, it will be your turn to worry about them if you are not there to help. This is life.

The alienation intended for you has also alienated one or more faculty colleagues. They were bystanders, but think about it, they read the same email and assumed it was from me, and while a colleague who knows me might not be alienated, it depends on background knowledge. There is one colleague who saw the email, handed to him by someone else, and already had the information needed to understand it. He alerted me that my colleagues might be alienated. I won't describe other faculty reactions, except to say that one of my colleagues is far more alienated than you, though the alienation does not take the form of dislike. There is more than one way to drive people apart.

Let me be clear here. We are all a family. Do you remember the old days when we were not dealing with alienation, and had no reason to think that word even existed? Way back to last Tuesday? We were all on the same side. We still are. Now, as I am about to tell you, one or more colleagues has been so deeply affected that he does not want me to teach this course. He believed at one point that I should never ever be allowed in the same room with you, under any conditions, for any amount of time. This faculty member is a better person than me, a strong supporter, and he is not against me. Quite the contrary. He is in favor of me and wants to support me. Moreover, he wants to support you. However, he has been driven away from me, without knowing exactly why, and the support he wants to give you and me therefore might not really be helpful. In fact it might hurt me, but only for the short time because remember, I just need to provide information. And it might hurt you, and again, ultimately that is not a problem, but here we come up against the most important reality binding us all together: the academic calendar. We do not have weeks or even days to repair the alienation problem. We have tomorrow. And so we will handle it tomorrow, move it out of the way, and the class will proceed. I would like this to be your call. It is your class. If you want, we can confront this massive and interminably complex and apparently overwhelming problem tomorrow, and for the rest of our meeting talk about the paper and then, before you are gone, I will have given you only half a lecture and you will remember how boring this class is.

Here are the three options facing you:

- (1) You decide to give me a chance to explain, you offer me the favor of listening and considering what I have to say, and on that basis you consider my proposal that I continue to teach the course.
- (2) You decide to give me a chance to explain, you offer me the favor of listening and considering what I have to say, and on that basis you decide you would prefer that someone else teach the course.
- (3) You decide you would rather just drop this now, not think or hear about it anymore, and ask for someone to replace me.

Let me emphasize: the third option is not necessarily unfair to me. On Wednesday, I was held in a room across the street from Morton while you were in class. I did not get the chance to speak. On Friday, I showed up to talk to you and was more than surprised to learn you had been dismissed. I wanted the chance to speak. Remember, my view is the problem is simply you do not have certain information, and it is not much information, but it reveals that some things you believe are true in fact are not. I have told you that you will never know this unless I get a chance to show up and point this out. Indeed, if I never see you again, your thinking will never get better, but it could get worse, because the fact I am being held against my wishes somewhere or denied a chance to speak to you are mysterious and can reinforce the false beliefs.

In my view, it is only fair that I get at least a few minutes to speak. What if I'm right? But perhaps I am not stating my true beliefs. You have to make an assessment. Or maybe things are not so simple. You have to make a judgment: is it worth the risk to listen to me? We could put a limit. Say five minutes. I'm thinking: you actually know a lot about me, things like I seem to care about you and what is it with these astronauts and you are never sure just how bad a lecture might be and all that. If I am right, I think you will want to listen for five minutes.

My point here is: you are in no way whatsoever obligated to me. This next part is key.

HERE IS WHAT I ASK OF YOU

I want you to not think of me, my colleagues, college procedures, William & Mary history, or anything else but this: your interests. Stay focused on you. If this helps, remember that you are paying us, not the other way around, even though professors are paid to hope you think the opposite. This is not Professor Dessler's class. If I am replaced, it is not that professor's class. And the proof is right there. If you change the professor, it is still the same class, because it is your class. The name of your class might be "Professor Dessler 1pm section of 204." But that is just a label. Don't be fooled. It's not my class. It's yours, and I am just part of the label you use. If Professor Jones comes in, the label changes, but not the class.

This is really important. Professors are disagreeing over who should teach you. Remember, there is no malice here, indeed it is quite the opposite. Do not think people who disagree are enemies or are trying to hurt each other. In this case it is very much the opposite. We professors will be fine. I am currently the teacher of the class, and therefore I am now going to ask you to step forward and make the call. I will structure this so that you do not have to. I am creating only an opportunity. One way you can exercise your choice is to say, "You professors work it out and we will accept your decision."

It is often assumed that this is what students want, and right now I am in a discussion with professors where I see that decisions are being made with our input, and I do not see your input. Now I could be badly mistaken here. Perhaps you have given your input, my colleagues thought it would be hurtful for me to hear your judgment that you would prefer another teacher, and therefore you indeed already have decided, but it looks to me as if you are not involved at all. Here, I am the one who lacks information. I have heard claims such as: "the students believe this," "the class does not want this," "a number of students have concluded this," and in one case, "four students were terrorized." Again, I do very much apologize. That is the only concrete claim I have heard. And even that leaves me unsure. Is it so terrorized that the thought of my appearance causes fright? Or is it more a fear that the thought of me having control of the class is scary, maybe because you don't trust my grading, but not that you are afraid of my presence? Let me be clear: any emotional reaction is justified. As I will explain, implicit beliefs are at work here. I cannot and would never blame anyone for any negative reaction, no matter how severe. I would point out that every single person who is now terrorized, to whatever degree, has this in common: they have not heard me speak. That does not mean they are wrong to have the reaction they have.

Here is how we will proceed. It will sound at first like I am taking control. Read carefully. You will see that, in a sense I am, but only in order to yield control to you. You are being given various options, including the option of handing control back. When I say "you make the call," I am not forcing you to make the decision your professor are now debating. I am just checking with you and giving you the chance to give the input I believe you deserve, and we must offer you, because remember, you pay the tuition and this is your class. And that means I can make you do nothing. I will tell you what I am going to do, you will see the new situation, and you can act in various ways, or you can close the computer and go to sleep. Whatever you do, you are exercising the choice I believe you deserve and we must give you.

The key here is to set this up so that I do not favor any professors over others. I have my preference, but I cannot set up your freedom to control the class in a way that induces you to favor my position. This is important. As you will learn, I want you to accept my idea, of course. Otherwise I would have another idea. But equally I want you to not accept my idea until you have heard the others and made sure my idea is the best. If you hear my idea, and you say, "that is good," then wait and listen to the next idea, and realize it might be better.

I am the professor, and here is my first announcement:

- (1) Class tomorrow afternoon is canceled. Attendance is therefore not required. You do not have to come as a requirement of the class.
- (2) I will be in the classroom tomorrow at the regular class times, 1pm and 2pm. I am not there to teach the class. I am there to explain my view of our current situation, my assessment of where we stand, and how I think the class should proceed.
- (3) Now that you do not have conflict with another class, that is your own, because it has been cancelled, you are welcome to come to Morton 38 if you would like. It is entirely optional. This is not our class in our classroom. This is a room with someone who wants to make a proposal to you about how the class should proceed when it resumes on Monday, and there are empty chairs, and you are welcome to listen. It is not class, but a discussion about how the class should be run for the rest of the semester.
- (4) If you do show up on time and want to listen to what I have to say, I will make my proposal and recommendation, and then request that you not decide whether to accept that proposal until you have heard another view. I will tell you that you might as well stay a little longer now that you are there. More specifically, I will make two requests: (1) consider my proposal, (2) but not before hearing another view that gives you another option.
- (5) I will leave at least 15 minutes at the end of the period for the other view. There is only one, or rather one category, with different variants, and what they all have in common is that I am no longer the teacher. I am not giving myself more time to present my proposal. We both get about 15 minutes. But remember, I have an additional task that the next speaker does not: I need to explain what has happened. Since this started, remember, I have not had a chance to speak to you. The next speaker you will see has had two chances. He has already made his contribution to the context, and I am only saying I need to have mine. Then we are even, and then we have equal time to make our cases.

That is it. You will now know the two options professors are discussing, and you will know that you have given me a chance to tell you why we are in this fix. The session, which is just an informal meeting and not a class, is now over.

You might be worrying this will be a high-pressure situation, but it will not be, because even if you make your decision there, you will not be asked to reveal it, at least in my proposal. My idea is for me to speak and leave, and you can say thanks if you want and I will certainly thank you, and then the next faculty member will speak and you will thank each other and that is it. No one will ask you, "What is your decision?" at this session. We speak, We leave. You listen, You leave. There is no pressure.

The final step is making a decision. This will be done, I propose, on Monday evening, via Survey Monkey, which is the only survey instrument available to us for free that

guarantees absolute confidentiality. Whatever you vote will not be known, and if you do not vote, that will not be known either as long as one person votes. You are protected.

If I am given the chance to speak tomorrow, I will outline the course plan, the paper assignment, the series of topics, and I will say that we impose no new conditions. New conditions might be: station a police officer at the door. Make sure no email sent to you is not vetted by IT. Make sure I copy a faculty member in on any communication I write you. I do not think we need new conditions, because they are not needed, and can do no good. Indeed they could do harm because their presence indicates either you need help you did not need before, or I need help I did not need before. I do not think that is true, and we are underestimating ourselves to think we cannot just drop the topic and move on under the same conditions as before.

One option you will have will be to vote for this proposal. Another option is to say that you want me to teach the second half of the course with the course plan identified, but only under new conditions that you say you need and the department accepts. You can also say you will accept conditions that the department and I agree on, for example if the department says they want a condition that I know we don't need but I can live with. You can also say you will accept me as teacher with my plan but only under conditions the department believe are necessary, even if I do not.

If you vote for the second option: Professor Dessler as teacher but with new conditions—there will be a comment box for you to specify either particular conditions or general rules (“any condition the department wants,” for example, meaning you are empowering my colleagues to set conditions and telling me you will take the course if I accept them, whether or not I want them).

The final option will be what is outlined to you by the speaker after me, which is the proposal to proceed with another instructor.

Now, the final key step. Class has been canceled. You need not show up or do anything at all. Just plan to attend Wednesday, and finish the course with whatever the vote has decided. This is very important: if you do not want to see me, do not show up. Remember that class has been canceled. If someone shows up before me and say class has been canceled, which usually means he or she expects you to leave, tell him you are not there for class. Point out you have chosen to show up. Class was canceled on Friday because it was assumed some people there did not want to see me. The point of canceling was to protect you from me. I didn't like that, because I am not sure you all wanted that protection. Maybe you did, I do not know, the point is, I do not think it is right for a professor to decide without your permission that you need protection from me, or that you really don't want to see me. I say, you decide. If you need protection, don't want to see me, or whatever, don't show up. There is no class, and since the purpose is to decide

whether I continue, one way to show that is to not show up and then cast your vote accordingly when you get the survey. If you have decided you prefer someone else no matter what, that is fair, and indeed, let me repeat, that is your right, and I am telling you to insist on your rights.

Under this arrangement, we know everyone is safe, not because a professor has decided how to ensure your safety—what if you did not feel in danger on Friday but wanted to see me?—but because you have. I must emphasize here, and this is what is driving this message, that I have no idea of student reactions on Friday except that, before class, four students expressed negative reactions and class was dismissed. I am wondering what the other 67 thought. Again, it may be I am in the dark because colleagues want to protect me. Maybe four representatives of the class expressed negative reactions on behalf of everyone. I just do not know.

Now, remember, I need to be fair to all professor views, so now we must include them, and here is where you come in. I request that you write a brief email, tonight, as soon as possible, immediately if you can, to the Department Chair, Professor John McGlennon, and let him know whether you wish me to have the opportunity to speak. Note that you are not saying, if you wish that I have a chance to speak, that you will listen. The only thing you need to tell him is whether you want me to have the chance to go to Morton 38 at he appointed class times and talk to whoever shows up.

If you do want me to speak, please consider writing an email that says the following three things:

- (1) That you would like me to have the opportunity to speak as outlined here tomorrow.
- (2) That if I ask him to provide me with assistance in getting to the classroom on time, that he provide it as he would provide any ordinary faculty member asking for similar assistance
- (3) That I be permitted to talk to you alone, with no other faculty members present.

Of course there are numerous permutations. Remember: you pay the tuition. You can say just (1). You may say (i) but say you prefer I show I can get there without assistance. You can say (i) but that you DO want another faculty member present.

And of course you can simply say you do not want this to happen at all.

Or you can say whatever you want in response to this email. You can give whatever reaction or recommendation you desire.

Or you may remain silent.

If you do have anything to say, then send it to Professor McGlennon. If you want me to know too, you can copy me in, or write another email with the same information in other words, or whatever.

Do not write only me. I am making the proposal remember. This is what I get. If I make the proposal, I do not get to count the votes.

Two more things:

- (1) If you do want me to speak, and don't mind telling me, then when you tell Prof McGlennon, I would appreciate it if you tell me too. He has the votes, not me, and this is optional. Don't do it if it makes you uncomfortable. The only reason I ask is I would like to know what to anticipate as soon as possible. Prof McGlennon will have to wait a while, maybe until tomorrow morning, to tally the votes. If you are willing to share with me your desire to hear me speak tonight, that will tell me to prepare to speak. If no one writes, I will understand that I am not going to speak, and then I can turn my attention to turning the class over to the next professor. In that case you can still meet in Room 38 tomorrow, but not to consider alternative proposals. Instead it will be to hear how the class will proceed in a new way.
- (2) If a significant number of students indicate they are willing to hear me speak only if someone else is present, I may elect to not show up. This is not because I cannot make my proposal with someone else present. It is because I will then realize I am starting with a vote of no confidence, so to speak. In that case, I will suggest that a new professor be brought in. It will not be that my feelings are hurt. No, this is not about me remember. This is entirely about you. No outcome here will hurt my feelings. The problem with a vote of no confidence, so to speak, means that energy must be devoted in class (in some for or another) to building up confidence, and we can't afford that. Or rather, you can't. You need a class where all energy is focused on learning IR. A week ago you had enough confidence in me to let me speak without a monitor. If you do not now, again, I do not mind, don't worry about me. I am worried only about you. I will put it this way: I have a good course plan, I think, but it will not work unless we have the same level of mutual confidence as before. We must be focused 100% on IR.

I have chosen to pass the ball to you, and this is my unilateral decision, and I make my proposal in the belief that if I can simply talk to you I can show you this is no big deal. A friend of mine advising me pointed out the irony, before I started writing, that proceeding this way would require a long email, and it is easy to think that if the email is long, the problem must be big. And indeed that is ironic, and I hope you can resist that conclusion. Because the reverse is the opposite, and you can see that if you review the content of the email carefully. The email is long only because I am outlining a decision procedure none of us has ever seen. I have no model to draw on, so everything must be explained from scratch, and that takes many words. But look at the procedure I am proposing. Nothing could be simpler. Come to Morton 38 if you want for an hour. Listen. Then respond to a

one-question survey. The email is long, but that's irrelevant. There could be no simpler procedure. This indicates the problem is not big, and indeed I think you will see it is not big at all, and all you need is a few facts to see that.

Please write Prof McGlennon. His email is:

jjmcgl@wm.edu

If you wish, please also tell me if you support my chance to appear. Again, this is not because I want to hear you support me. I just want to plan.

Thank you.

Prof Dessler