College Case Study
Disruptions: Ben

D·PREP SAFETY DIVISION

TRAINING OUTPOST

Case Details

Ben is a 45-year-old student of Hispanic heritage. In the early 90s, Ben was sentenced to 44 years in state prison following his convictions for various crimes, including kidnapping, forcible rape, forcible sexual penetration, battery, assault with a deadly weapon, false imprisonment, and attempted lewd and lascivious acts. He was released sometime after 2016 and placed on the sex offender registry. He briefly attended another college before transferring to your community college two years ago.

Ben has previously sought out support for his assignments at the on-campus tutoring center, and the staff there describes him as a bright student committed to acquiring the skills necessary for him to succeed. They say Ben has worked with many tutors over the past years, often beginning each session with a period of venting, where he expresses his frustrations at academic challenges, interpersonal conflicts, and other experiences that seem difficult for him to process. He speaks loudly and often raises concern or irritation from other students. The center encouraged connection to on-campus counseling services and other programs designed to support non-traditional students

A few weeks ago, Ben did poorly on an assignment related to the moon landing in class and got into an argument with the professor in class. He started yelling, and the professor asked him if she needed to call security. He decided to leave the class that day and then proceeded to drop the class. He threatened to report the professor for not respecting his opinion. Other students were involved telling him to leave the class as well and defending the professor's opinion.

Questions to Consider

- The case begins with a disclosure of the student's length of time spent in prison for a very serious crime. How do you see this factoring into the case? What would be your concerns related to either over-focusing on this background or ignoring it?
- Describe the threats in the case. Do they seem more transient or substantive in nature? Does Ben display affective or targeted violence?
- What additional information would be useful to obtain in this case?
- Make a list of the involved stakeholders in the case.
- What systems issues do you see to addressed in this case?
- Score the case on Pathways.
- Who would be best on the team to interview Ben through a violence risk assessment?
- What are some of the techniques they should be aware of when asking questions needed to score the VRA?

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The instructor says she had been giving Ben extra time to complete assignments and had referred him to academic support and accommodations for assistance. She mentions that he seems isolated from other students and has not made any close connections in class.

In the past week, Ben began increasing his demands on the tutoring staff and his loud behavior. This caused some staff to be frustrated and others to fear what he might do. They suggested he has difficulty managing his emotions, and while they have previously helped him, they are concerned things are getting worse. This was followed by a report from two of his other instructors regarding a meeting they had with Ben to address his behavior and performance in class. They tried again to refer him to mental health support and some of those other programs designed to assist non-traditional students. During this exchange, he told them, “he wasn’t one of those people,” and said firmly three times while pounding the desk, “I am mentally strong.” Ben was also physically sick during this time and missed several classes.

Another report came into the BIT/CARE team this week when a student in his class told Ben, “Sorry man, but you gotta let other people talk.” Ben complained about the students at the college being privileged and said that he had to leave so he didn’t get in trouble with the police. He talked to the professor about a time when he had taken on three police officers. The instructor shared that Ben had told her, “I am a man; I’m tough.” Ben then stated, “I know what you think, that I’m going to hurt someone. I’m not going to hurt anyone.”

While the instructors have shared with the BIT/CARE team that Ben had also had some good conversations with them about writing and had shared some of his incarceration history, they felt like things have changed drastically. They say Ben seems like a completely different person by displaying resentment, anger, and frustration. He has an ongoing conflict with another instructor and was initially assigned a female mentor who he described as “fake and a liar” and was now working with a male mentor.

Reports Shared

Email from Ben to VPSA

Sir, at this point I am trying to focus on school, and all of this has really been detrimental, and a very unusual treatment that I have been receiving. To make it very clear one more time, I alleged staff misconduct, discrimination, as well as harassment, and since I seem to be the victim of retaliation for what I alleged, I don’t have much to say, but that I am documenting everything and other than what I deem as retaliatory behavior and punishment that seems to be increasing, such as those documents and actions against me, for which I do not appreciate nor deserve, if this continues to interfere, while I am here, than I will be seeking legal representation in the future, regarding everything that has been going on since this incident, and let the courts figure it out for all of us, on principle alone.

Follow up Email to the VPSA

Sir, I can see you next week but I have no representation legally at this time, and all these allegations only occurred after I made a complaint verbally to many departments before my current instructor. I will want to record our conversation, nor will I answer to claims I can not defend against because they are alleged by those upon the same faculty that retaliates towards students when a student complains about discrimination. I will be there when we can make a proper appointment.

Email from the Tutoring Center

Ben’s demeanor has considerably changed for the better – he apologized to a staff member for his past behavior and noted that he needs to work toward better regulating his emotions while he is here. He also acknowledged that this was a place to get help with his writing assignments vs. a place to vent his frustrations.

BIT/CARE Note

I met with Ben's professors who shared he had opened up and shared that he had been previously incarcerated and had shown emotion when relating to certain topics of the class. Recently, however, he seems to be a completely different person by displaying resentment, anger, and frustration. Ben has spoken often about the difficulty he had with one of his instructors and is not able to control his talking in class. He was assigned a female mentor who is very friendly and enthusiastic and Ben called her fake and a liar. Ben was then assigned a male mentor. Ben has stated that he can look into a person's eyes and see their intentions. Ben has also stated that everyone is looking at him, judging him and that he can't trust people.

BIT/CARE Note

In one class, Ben was in a group setting and had taken over the conversation. As the group interaction was ending and Ben stopped speaking, a student within the group stated to Ben, "Sorry man, but you gotta let other people talk." Ben became upset and walked out of class. The instructor walked out of class after Ben and spoke to him at length. Ben stated to the professor that the kids are privileged, that he never had any support, that he lives alone, and that nobody understands or likes him. Ben told the professor that he had to leave so that he wouldn't get in trouble with the police and then went on to tell her a story about how he once took on three police officers. Ben also stated that he could take the student in class because "I am a man; I'm tough." Ben then stated, "I know what you think, that I'm going to hurt someone. I'm not going to hurt anyone." The instructor was able to redirect Ben's attention to his writing of stories, and Ben's demeanor changed, and he became engaged. Class ended, and one of the students in the earlier group walked up to Ben and the instructor and tried to intervene by telling Ben, "Love you, man." Ben got mad and stated to the instructor, "That's not love," and then left.

Several of Ben's instructors are concerned for his mental well-being. Ben had become sick during the semester and missed some classes. He has fallen behind in his classes and is not doing well academically. They do not want anybody to approach Ben about their conversations with me because they know that he will be upset with them and will not trust them. One professor is also concerned about a class on Fridays because it ends at 3:30 PM, and he often stays on to discuss things with her, and there is no one else around.

Faculty Report

Ben met with two of his instructors and shared that he has sacrificed everything for school. One of the instructors suggested that he join a group for those who are working on overcoming various academic challenges at the college. Ben became angry and stated that he was not one of those people. When the instructor suggested personal counseling, Ben reacted by pounding the desk and saying three times, "I'm mentally strong."

Behaviors indicated: Aggressive Behavior, Disturbing Writing or Discussion, Emotional Outbursts, Loner/few or no close friends, Obsessively Suspicious/Paranoid

Note from Tutoring Director

Several of our tutors have worked with Ben over the last year. He often begins each session with a period of venting, wherein he expresses his frustrations at academic challenges, interpersonal conflicts, and other experiences that seem difficult for him to process. As he vocalizes his struggles, Ben tends to raise his voice, and other staff and students have become alarmed or uncomfortable. One student shared that she couldn't hear her own conversation because Ben was speaking so loudly. Another time, a classified employee needed to ask Ben to lower his voice because she was trying to help a student and was struggling to focus.

While working with Ben, our tutors have shown him how to access mental health support services and additional support programs for non-traditional students.

I'm uncertain what kind of support Ben is currently receiving. I have observed, however, that his frustrations and his venting appear to be increasing, and there are times this semester when he has simply stopped in to share a lengthy monologue about his difficulties, at times disrupting staff members engaged in work tasks or taking too much time away from staff who are trying to help other students. We care about Ben, and we want to help him, but we believe that our staff is simply not professionally equipped to support him in the ways he so clearly needs.

***Earlier this week, Ben came in to make an appointment but was unable to do so due to emotional distress. Usually, Ben comes in to rant about the emotional turmoil that he has repressed and needs to let out. In this particular incident, he started talking about the unfairness of missing a week of school due to illness. He said he communicated with his professor because he missed two quizzes. His instructor told him that she drops the two lowest graded quizzes. He became upset because the missing quizzes and other assignments dropped his letter grade. From his speech, I came to the impression that he believed that he should have gotten extended time or had the quizzes and assignments waived because of his illness. Due to his dismay regarding the incident, he began to say that his instructor reminded him of another female teacher at the college. He then proceeds to tell me that he thinks that his instructor is a narcissist. When he said that, I sensed misogynist undertones. My colleague next to me asked him, "Have you checked the syllabus?" He said he did and that he realized that his professor was by the book and prioritized policy.

Another colleague came over to the front desk because she seemed alarmed by Ben's behavior. At this point, Ben seemed visibly upset, agitated, and angry. When Ben becomes impassioned, he starts raising his voice. I told him that life is unfair and the world can be unfair and unjust. By that point, he seemed shocked by my statement. It seemed like I triggered him. He then said, "Fine. I'll handle it myself." He then proceeded to walk angrily out of our office. My colleague then asked if I was okay, and I stated that I was. I told her that it was normal for Ben to come to our office to vent.

Ben has used our staff as an emotional outlet to process his heaviness on several occasions. We have offered support, validation, and a safe place, but at other times, it feels emotionally daunting and depleting to staff and tutors. On occasion, I have felt uncomfortable or unsafe around Ben due to the way he expresses himself when he feels impassioned. I am concerned that his behavior has only worsened.

Faculty Report Related to Debate in Class

The background of his confrontation is this: In our discussion of Galileo and his having been confined to house arrest by the Church for his heliocentric model of the solar system, I ask students to write about a current conspiracy theory of their choice and cite sources with real data that debunk the theory. Ben submitted an essay supporting the conspiracy theory which claims that astronauts never went to the moon and that it was all faked. I gave him a zero because he did just the opposite of the point of the assignment - he supported the conspiracy theory instead of citing sources that debunked it. He cited some recent articles that claim the moon landings were faked but did not refer at all to the huge body of research on the moon, did not cite any space agency (NASA or others), or any reputable source. I stated clearly in my comments that he could resubmit the assignment and restore his credit if he would write about something that is real.

I gave a short break today, and during that break, Ben came up to the front of the room and started arguing with me in front of the class. I tried to tell him that the assignment was intended to have students look at real data and form opinions based on that data. Ben accused me of not respecting his opinion. I said opinions in science need to be based on data. He tried to claim that my generation believes in NASA, but his generation does not (though he is much older than the other students in the class).

I was afraid he would get violent because he started yelling at me, so I asked if I needed to call security, whereupon he decided to leave. He said he would drop the class and report me for not respecting his opinion. Some of the other students started telling him to just leave if he did not like the class, to stop disrupting the class, and finally, he left.

I am reporting this right after my class in case this student decides to report me or get violent. I feel he might be a danger to myself or others.

It might be helpful if another professor or security person came to my class on Wednesday to see if Ben shows up and just be present for a while.

Just to note: I have been giving Ben much more time to submit assignments on Canvas than anyone else. He claims he has accommodations; I don't have a letter for him, though he definitely should. I was going to contact accommodation services to see about getting a tutor to sit with him in class, but I did not because I don't have an accommodation letter for him.

I cannot say whether Ben has these issues outside of class, but within class, he is reluctant to work with a partner or group on any of the in-class activities, and the other students do not seem comfortable working with him. Certainly, after his outburst in class, I doubt any of the students will feel comfortable working with him in the future if he does not drop the class.

All the students who were present heard him argue with me that the moon landings were a hoax and that his generation does not 'believe in NASA.' By openly supporting a conspiracy theory, going against the assignment, which was to choose a conspiracy theory to debunk and cite reputable sources, and being highly aggressive with me, I think none of the students will feel comfortable working with him going forward.