

## Conflict at Pierce College

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### Abstract

This case was written for use in courses in higher education leadership. It is particularly useful for examining the environment in which decisions are made in higher education institutions. In the case, a young administrator is confronted with an ethical dilemma. She initially receives the support of her superiors in handling the situation, but after she acts she discovers that this support has eroded. The case illustrates the importance of coalition-building as well as the necessity of understanding institutional politics. The case also provides an opportunity to examine and discuss ethics in higher education administration.

### Case Narrative

Pierce College is a private liberal arts college with a student population of 1300. Located in a small, Midwestern town, Pierce's gothic architecture compliments its hilltop setting. The town's population is made up largely of Pierce faculty and staff, and consists of a post office, hotel, two pubs, and a gas station. There are no stoplights, and the nearest supermarket is 15 miles away. Pierce's students are, for the most part, upper middle-class, politically and socially conservative, and white. Fraternities dominate the social life, despite recent attempts by the college to reduce their influence.

In mid-summer, a new Director of Student Activities arrived at Pierce. Kate Green was 24 years old, had worked two years as a Residence Hall Director at another private liberal arts college, and was excited to leap to a mid-level administrative position. Kate's office was in Lloyd Commons, the student center, with windows looking out over rolling hills. Her responsibilities ranged from supervising over 80 student clubs and their budgets to planning campus-wide events. She advised Activities Board, the branch of student government that organized campus-wide events, and conducted workshops for student leaders. Kate's office budget was small for similar institutions, but was a significant part of the Student Affairs budget. Her office employed two work-study students, a game room coordinator, and an administrative assistant, Virginia, whom she shared with the college Chaplain.

When Kate arrived at Pierce, she met briefly with her predecessor, Renee, a carefree woman who spent her tenure at Pierce challenging the college's conservative nature. Renee told Kate that she had been hired because she was similar to Renee in that way. She also informed Kate that one person on the search committee had opposed her appointment. This was Steve, the college Chaplain, with whom Kate would share office space. Renee told Kate she suspected that Virginia did not work a full 40-hour week, and that Virginia and Steve had a formal agreement regarding this. Renee suggested keeping a record of Virginia's hours and reminding Steve that as Virginia's co-supervisor, Kate should also sign her timecard. Kate's immediate supervisor, Chris, the Associate Dean of Students, also cautioned her about the difficulties of working with Steve, whom she described as lazy, temperamental, and bossy. The Dean of Students, Frank, informed Kate that he was trying to eliminate Steve's job. Although the college had given up its religious affiliation years before, the Chaplain remained as a figurehead. Steve had been Chaplain for over ten years.

For the first few months, Kate was too busy learning the ropes to pay much attention to Steve and Virginia. Steve clearly set his own schedule. While Kate's job required her to stay on campus past 10:00 several nights a week and often until 2:00 or 3:00 AM on weekends, Steve's days did not start until 10:00 AM and often ended just after lunch. Following Renee's advice, Kate logged Virginia's hours. Virginia also often worked short days, and spent much of her time studying for her upcoming CPA exam. She informed Kate that she did not type, and that Steve's projects took priority. When they hired two work-study students, Virginia said that supervising them was not in her job description and Kate would have to communicate with them directly concerning their work.

Early in October, Kate attended a budget meeting in preparation for writing her new budget. The tone was grim. Budgets across campus were frozen and everyone was encouraged to cut their budgets. Kate learned that most of the college's operating budget came directly from tuition and fees. As a young professional working to pay off student loans, Kate took this to heart. She began to think of herself as an employee of Pierce students, which shaped her work ethic and her approach to the following situation in her office.

One Friday, shortly after the budget meeting, Kate was alone in the office. Steve and Virginia had both gone for the day by the time the mail arrived. In an intercampus envelope addressed to Student Activities/Chaplain, Kate discovered Virginia's time card for the previous month. Only after seeing that only Steve had signed the card, did Kate recall Renee's advice to make sure she co-signed. She compared the hours recorded on the card with her log, and found several discrepancies. Some days Kate noted her as absent, Virginia reported a full eight hours. Kate was shocked and angry. In the four weeks accounted for on the card, Virginia had been paid for over 20 hours she had not worked. Thinking of one student whose parents had a second mortgage on their home so she could attend college at Pierce, Kate's outrage grew. She called the payroll office. Comparing their records with hers, Kate found a difference of over 100 hours in the three months she had been at Pierce. Kate put the time card back in the envelope, placed it in Steve's box and went home for the weekend.

On Monday, Kate could hardly look at Virginia or Steve. She sought out Chris for advice. She was out sick, so Kate checked in with Frank. He was furious. Kate thought he would call Personnel himself and take over the situation, but as a proponent of empowering employees to deal with their own difficulties, he told her to handle the situation. Whatever she decided to do he would support. Kate said she would take her records to Personnel and examine the discrepancies. She thought an appropriate solution would be for Virginia to make up the hours, unpaid. Although it seemed unfair that Steve would not be reprimanded for signing Virginia's card, Kate and Frank agreed there was not much hope of proving that Steve was aware of their inaccuracy since he was in the office so little himself.

Kate's appointment with Personnel was Wednesday. In Lloyd Commons with Steve and Virginia, she silently fumed. She was angry with them for stealing from Pierce students, yet did not have the courage to confront either of them directly. Kate desperately wanted to talk to Chris but her illness was serious and she had not returned to work.

At Personnel, the records were compared and discrepancies confirmed. They agreed that Virginia should pay back the unearned money (over \$1000). Kate knew this would create a hardship for Virginia, but was indignant about her lack of ethics. She queried Personnel about Steve's consequences. They said he would be reprimanded and that her signature would be required on

Virginia's time card in the future. Personnel would deliver letters to Steve and Virginia on Friday. Kate knew that both of them planned to take Friday off, and focused her energy on how she would deal with Monday.

When Kate arrived at the office on Monday, Virginia's desk was cleared. There was a note from her in Kate's box. In the letter Virginia stated that she could not work with someone who falsely accused her of fraud, so she was quitting. She wrote that she and Steve had an arrangement, which worked for both of them, and that Kate's interference had destroyed that. Kate wondered how Virginia had known about the impending action.

Minutes later, Steve stormed in. He was red in the face, clearly furious. He also knew about the situation, although his letter from Personnel was unopened in his box. Steve alluded to a beneficial arrangement between himself and Virginia, but said he would deny it if confronted by Personnel. He berated Kate for not confronting him personally. He said he had known since the moment they met that she was nothing but a troublemaker with no respect for "the way things were done" at Pierce. He informed Kate that he was close friends with the college President and that he would personally see that she never fit into the Pierce community. In fact, he yelled, he had spent the weekend gathering his support. He had lost his friend and personal assistant. How would he get all of his work done? If it was the last thing he did, he told Kate, he would make every day she remained at Pierce miserable.

Kate had prepared herself for anger but not for this personal attack. She was already unsure of her decision to come to Pierce. While she believed she was competent, and students seemed to agree, Kate personally regretted coming to such a small town. Kate told Steve she was embarrassed to hear such spiteful things from a college chaplain and that he would see that she had plenty of support for her actions. Nearly in tears, Kate walked out of the office.

At the Student Affairs Office everyone seemed to already know what had happened. Steve had stopped there before coming to Lloyd. Chris, back from her illness, took Kate aside and asked her why she had taken Steve on. Chris re-emphasized Steve's comments about his relationship with the President. Kate did not care whom he was friends with; in her eyes, he and Virginia had stolen from Pierce and its students. Chris said it would take a lot of work to patch up the political mess Kate had created.

Kate left Chris's office and sought out Frank for his promised support. She told him about Steve's threats and he was not surprised. Steve had asked him to fire her. Kate was aghast. Wasn't Steve the one who should be fired? Frank said, "No," and told Kate he wished she had handled things differently. After all, Steve was a very close friend of the President. Kate's actions would have ramifications for the entire Student Affairs area. Focusing on the wrongs committed by Steve and Virginia, Kate could not understand why a college with serious financial difficulties would not be pleased to have this situation resolved. Although by quitting Virginia had avoided repayment, at least she would not continue to receive unearned pay. Frank said the amount of money involved was hardly worth the problems created. Kate asked Frank if he thought she would be able to work in the same space as Steve after his threats and he replied that this was now her problem to resolve.

Kate walked back to Lloyd, stunned by how things had turned out. She realized she had been wrong in not talking directly to Steve, but still believed her motivations were right. She wondered what had happened in the week since first meeting with Frank that caused him to turn on her. She

knew that Steve was right; she had “slit her throat” as far as ever fitting in at Pierce. What should Kate have done differently? How could she have filled her ethical duty without placing her success in jeopardy? What had happened to the coalition of support Kate thought she had built?

## Teaching Notes

This case was written for use in courses in higher education leadership. It is particularly useful for examining the environment in which decisions are made in higher education institutions. In the case, a young administrator is confronted with an ethical dilemma. She initially receives the support of her superiors in handling the situation, but after she acts she discovers that this support has eroded. The case illustrates the importance of coalition-building as well as the necessity of understanding institutional politics. The case also provides an opportunity to examine and discuss ethics in higher education administration.

## Discussion Topics

### Reframing Organizations

Use Bolman and Deal’s (1997) four frames to understand the institutional context in which Kate acted. Identify the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic elements that are incorporated in the case. Examine Kate’s actions and determine which frame was her primary influence. Suggest ways that an awareness of Bolman and Deal’s frames might have helped Kate act in a way that would result in a better outcome.

### Models of Higher Education

Use Birnbaum’s (1988) models for higher education institutions to better understand the context of Pierce College. Determine whether Pierce’s structure is collegial, bureaucratic, political, or anarchical. Consider how this structure impacts individual and institutional decision-making as well as the avenues of support available to Kate. Identify ways in which the structure serves Pierce’s interests or acts as a deterrent to the effective functioning of the institution.

### Institutional Politics and Power

Moore (2000) discusses the impact of institutional politics on decision making. Identify how power, motivation and expectations, and self-serving versus productive behavior played into this case. Consider how political elements that are particular to higher education institutions (i.e., goal diffusion, uncertainty of means, dual control, structural uniqueness, organizational culture) framed both Kate’s actions and the responses of other institutional players. Morgan’s (1986) conception of interests, conflict, and power is also useful for examining the events of the case. Consider how diverging interests led to conflict and the use of power and political behaviors to resolve the differences. French and Raven’s (1959) bases of power is another interesting way to look at the case, considering what types of power each of the players have and how they use it.

### Ethics

The case presents an opportunity to view an ethical dilemma in a higher education setting and to discuss the ethical responsibilities of individual actors within an institution. Use ethical guidelines for practice, such as the American College

Personnel Association's Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards (1992), to determine whether Kate's actions were justified or if she committed ethical errors in her own decisions. The case outlines a situation in which the motivations and ethics of players at different organizational levels can be examined.

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## Biographical Statement

Amy A. Bergerson is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy at the University of Utah. Her research focuses on the experiences of students in higher education, with a focus on how race, class, gender impact these experiences.

## Eric Descriptors

Politics

Higher Education

Organizational Conflict

Leadership