Case Study:
A group of students came to you with a concern about a full-time non-tenure-track faculty member in your department. This faculty member’s assignment includes teaching the introductory English course sequence. The students were concerned by the instructor’s portrayal one day in class of the Pope as homophobic and felt the instructor made other anti-gay and anti-Catholic remarks in the context of her religious beliefs. The students wanted the situation addressed immediately, preferably with the instructor not continuing to teach the introductory sequence the following quarter. How would you proceed?

Follow-up Question 1: Suppose, upon gathering additional information, you find this is the third situation that has occurred in the past several years for this instructor. Does this change your response?

Follow-up Question 2: Suppose, upon gathering additional information, you find that one of the main accusers has failed the course previously. Does this change your response?

Follow-up Question 3: Suppose instead that this was an instructor teaching an introductory physics sequence. Does this change your response?
Notes from group discussion:

- Encourage direct contact with instructor and assist students if necessary, coaching them on how to proceed respectfully.
- Be sure to get information from the students. Ask the students to put what they heard in the context of the classroom discussion. Depending on the situation and the concerns raised, meet individually or in a group setting. If in a group setting, ask each student to speak to the issue at hand to see where the concerns lie and if they are similar.
- Ask students to return to you (the Department Chair) with how the meeting with the professor went (if they are comfortable meeting with the professor). If they don’t wish to meet, then be sure to let them know you will work on the issue and get back to them. Do they need to remain anonymous?
- Talk to the professor, one-on-one, and listen. Ask for the professor’s perspective on how the topic was being presented. Could the topic be presented differently and still achieve the same academic goal/learning outcome? Sometimes a slight change in wording makes all the difference. This is particularly important if the issue arises repeatedly.
- When having the initial conversation with students and the faculty member, look for places where you can ask more questions to help illuminate viewpoints and perspectives (gathering information and placing it in context).
- Depending on the situation, either the professor or the students may be walking into a hostile environment during the next class. It is important to talk with the professor on how this could be addressed.
- If it is early enough in the quarter, go through the previously mentioned steps and ask the students to come back after several weeks to see if/how the situation has been addressed.
- Underlying all of these points is the importance of documenting what you did so you can demonstrate you have been taking action.
- In the end, be sure to follow-up with the students and the faculty member to ensure the situation has been resolved.
- It is important to remain a neutral, third party during discussions. Take information in and do not make assumptions. The problem exists whether you support the faculty member or not; whether if the issue is real or perceived. The department chair needs to be a listener to both sides with the goal of helping both groups resolve the situation and move forward.
- Important to ensure students and faculty feel supported and heard (to the extent possible).
- When in doubt, consult the “Starting Points: A Guide for Chairs” and call!
- Peer evaluations may assist with observing how presentations are given. Alternatively, having the faculty member guest lecture in your class may be helpful in observing the interactions that can occur.

What if this occurred on multiple occasions?
- Conversation with faculty member; possibly bring the situation to the department’s personnel committee. Be sure to talk with the Dean so they are not out of the loop.
- When talking to the faculty member, try to ask questions that provide their rationale for presenting the material in a particular way that creates difficult situations. To help facilitate an honest discussion and protect academic freedom, it is important not to
impose your views. Ask the department how it feels about the topic being presented in the particular course.

- There could be situations where academic freedom may not apply; expressing one’s opinion and being derogatory are different issues.

What if the student leading the effort failed the course several times previously?
- Ask the other students how they feel about the concern.

Would the situation change if it were a T/TT faculty rather than a NTT faculty member?
- Not so much since it is ultimately about the Department.

Suppose this is the first example of poor judgment in a particular class. Does it follow a trend observed in other areas? If so, a discussion with the faculty member may help.
Summary

- Defuse the situation.
- Gather Information (listen, document, and place information in the context of individual’s perspective).
- Act and Follow-up.

We cannot afford to do nothing.