



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

A Student's Experience of Sexual Harassment from a Teaching Assistant

Author(s)

Anonymous

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Description

A letter describing a student's experience of sexual harassment by a teaching assistant.

Body

Dear Caroline,

This is an actual account of a situation that occurred at MIT to myself and two female friends. I thought you might find it interesting or could perhaps use it as a scenario for your class.

In the Spring of my sophomore year, I was taking a class at Sloan. The course had a final project that was to be developed by groups of two to five students. The students in the class were allowed to form their own groups and would attend recitations as a group. My group consisted of two female classmates, Ms. X and Ms. Y, who are both quite attractive. Our group was one of the smallest, and was also the only group that was solely female. We started attending recitations. During the first recitation I noticed that the recitation instructor seemed to be staring at me or

one of my two group members. While discussing the class material, he rarely looked away from where we were seated. I thought perhaps I imagined this, but my two friends said that they had felt the same way. At first it did not bother us, but later, in conjunction with other events, it became quite disturbing.

Our first real assignment was a proposal of our group project. We each were to do an individual proposal. We spent many hours researching and writing our proposals at library facilities around Boston and Cambridge. Since we knew several people in the class had not written their proposals until the night before, we felt that our proposals were well researched and written. To our dismay, we soon discovered that we had received the lowest grade on our proposals in our recitation. This could be true for one member of the group, but since the proposals were written and graded individually, we felt it odd that all three of us received the same low mark. Before this had happened, Ms. X had missed a couple of classes due to illness. Therefore, some of her assignments were late or overdue. It was at this point, I feel, that we really began to notice how our TA's treatment of us compared to his treatment of other groups. He spoke to us individually, at times when the other group members weren't present. He consistently gave my group member the lowest grades on every assignment. If the work deserved a low mark, we could have accepted this, but we knew it did not. Our belief was confirmed by the TA's next actions. He would schedule meetings with us to "discuss this assignment," and "see what we could do about this grade." The meetings he scheduled were always after normal hours and always in a secluded room that had big couches as seats.

During the first of these private meetings, which all groups were doing to discuss their project topic and which occurred before we had turned in any assignments, I was supposed to meet with him in my group, but Ms. X was unable to be there, so Ms. Y. and I met with him alone. He made use both feel very uncomfortable by staring at us and putting his chair in a position that was inches away from ours or sitting very closely next to us. He would lean forward and speak almost nose to nose with us. I thought perhaps, since he was not from the US, that it was just a cultural difference about speaking distance and personal space. But he spent approximately five minutes discussing our topic, which he approved, and 25 minutes asking us personal questions. After this initial private meeting, we both felt a bit awkward, because we were unsure if we were just imagining his treatment of us. After this meeting we always tried to get chairs with arms so that he could not sit so closely to us or touch us.

Because she had missed the group meeting, Ms. X had to meet with him alone. This was after she had been ill and had turned in an assignment late. He held the meeting in the same room with the big couches at 6:30 P.M.. He told Ms. X, (who has an impressive record as a professional writer) that her writing was substandard and ask if she "did not understand the assignment." Ms. X said that she felt that she had understood the assignment, but that she would be happy to rewrite it. The TA told her that that would not be acceptable because it would be too late, and then asked her "what can we do about this assignment?" She replied that since she would not be allowed to rewrite it, she really didn't know. He again asked her, in an insinuating tone, "what can you do to get a better grade on this assignment?" Ms. X, feeling very disturbed at this point, replied as she had the first time. He pushed this question several more times before he decided to give her time to think of something she could do. Immediately after this meeting with our TA, Ms. X called Ms. Y and myself (we lived in the same dorm suite) and told us how upset she was and how uncomfortable he made her feel. We discussed it, but agreed that it was too late to switch TA's.

From this point on, he would try and arrange this "private meeting" with him on an individual basis and make leading inquiries about how we could better our grades. We had decided that none of us would meet with him alone. He kept giving us low grades, and would want to "meet to discuss" an assignment with him. We asked around and it seemed we were the only ones getting this special treatment. Finally, Ms. X was forced to meet with him again. When she showed up, he told her he forgot that he had a prior arrangement, and rescheduled the appointment for 6:30 P.M. on the day before spring break, which was a time that Sloan was very deserted. I'd also like to note that his office hours always ended at 4:00 P.M. and his meetings always occurred at times when the area we met in was very deserted. He also told Ms. X that he expected her to have thought of what she could do about her grades. Ms. X immediately called us and told us about this and wanted us to go with her. Before this occurred, we would receive telephone calls and messages from our TA at 7:00 in the morning. He would call if we missed recitation, which we did more often now since we felt uncomfortable being anywhere near him. He would call us about insignificant things.

Because of this, we felt that we had to change recitations. To do this, we had to meet with the professor. We realized that even though we felt that we were being single out and sexually harassed, we really didn't have any substantial proof. There

were many occurrences that I haven't related here. We told our professor how we felt and the things that had happened. I'd like to note that our professor was one of the best instructor that I've have had, and we felt at ease, or as much at ease as we could, discussing this with him. He agreed that we did have reason to change recitation and was upset because our TA had been with him for several years and was married. We did not present this as "Our TA is sexually harassing us," because we did not want to bias our professor's reaction to what we told him. However, he did feel that we were being sexually harassed. He immediately changed our recitation instructor and told us that something would be done about this. He also told us that our TA had a good past history and that he had a bright future. It was up to us if we wanted to bring our TA before the school's harassment board. Our professor ended up having a discussion with all the TA's about what sexual harassment is and had each of them discuss it with their recitations.

All this happened (and our assignments were re-graded by our new TA, who was not supposed to know why he was doing this), a few weeks after spring break. About two weeks later, both Ms. X and I received calls before 7:30 A.M. from our old TA. He said he had some old assignments of ours and that we could pick them up from him. He also kept asking us why we changed recitations. After his repeated questions and offers to re-grading our assignments, he said to me, (this is a quote) "If you return to my class, you will have A's." I had told him we had changed recitations due to a time conflict and I now told him to give our assignments to our new TA. Both Ms. X and myself were very upset.

I never told my professor about the last conversation that I had with the TA where he offered us guaranteed A's. Ms. X ended up dropping the class because she could not deal with this anymore. Ms. Y and I finished the class and both received good grades, ones that we had earned. We still don't know if we should have reported him to the harassment board. We discussed it at the time and decided not to for several reasons. I believe the harassment board had just been established at that time. Frankly, part of the reason we didn't want to take official action is because we knew that it would hurt our academic career at MIT. We thought we would be branded by non-sympathetic faculty and students. We were aware that our new TA thought that we were just complaining because of the grades we received, and we were afraid that others of the community would think the same thing too. (Our new TA had discussed it with a close friend of ours, who was also our 2nd TA's roommate, and who didn't know that our TA was talking about us at the time.) I am concerned that

our first TA may do something like this to other female students. As Ms. X said at the time, what if the women he did this to were not as strong-willed and were more submissive than she was. We did find out that a number of his past female students also felt very uncomfortable around him.

I really don't know what more to write about this. I haven't thought about this in a while, but one of the articles I read reminded me of it. This is a somewhat sketchy version of it. If you would like to discuss it further, I am very willing to do so. I didn't use my two friends names because I am unsure how they feel about this at the moment.

- What actions, other than those she took, were open to this student (and her two friends)?
- What discouraged her from taking those actions?
- Consider the professor's action. Did he fulfill the duties of a complaint handler?

Notes

This is a case written by a student after reviewing materials on harassment. It is exactly as the student wrote it, except that I have removed a few details about one of her friends that might prove identifying.

- Caroline Whitbeck

Date: August 23, 1991.

Contributor(s)

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