



SOCIETIES CONSORTIUM ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN STEMM

An initiative to advance *professional and ethical conduct, climate & culture*

CASE STUDY LIBRARY

Case Study 4. The Distressing Annual Meeting

Case Study 4 addresses: incidents at conferences; incidents during conferences, but off-site; incidents involving people who are too big to fail; and incidents involving structural inequity, i.e., a combination of structural/cultural/institutional barriers that create the inequity.”

A biracial, gender non-conforming, recent Ph.D. applying for a university fellowship attends a society annual meeting, arranged by the society’s in-coming President, who is also chair of the department offering the fellowship, to vet leading candidates. The Ph.D experiences microaggressions and bias—comments/questions that are dismissive, demeaning, stereotyped, “old-school,” and inattentive to identity needs.

Case Study 4. Volume I

- I. ***Facts and Scopes of Issues***
- II. Facilitator Guide: Reflections
- III. Facilitator Guide: Analysis

Overview – Facts and Scopes of Issues

The facts and scope of issues detail the events that took place during the case study. They invite the learner to consider the facts and events from a variety of perspectives, with a lens of empathy and reduced defensiveness, and to identify actions that might have prevented or mitigated the associated harms.

Introduction

Meet Dr. Smart. Tyler Smart, is a 30-year-old, recent PhD graduate who is bi-racial, whose preferred pronouns are “they/them,” and who is on a short list for a post-doctoral fellowship to be awarded by the Department of Civil Engineering (C-Eng. Department) at Tech University (TU). Dr. Smart has always wanted to be a scientist. Both of their parents have graduate degrees; their father, who is Black, has a PhD in transportation engineering. Dr. Smart (Junior) didn’t identify to themselves as a girl or a boy and was an “outsider,” even to the “nerds,” in high school. For many years, they were bullied for being a “weirdo,” and “tom boy.” In college, Dr. Smart spent considerable time privately exploring their gender-identity and facing anxiety about being “outed,” while maintaining a 4.0 average in their classes.

Dr. Smart’s parents have grown to support Dr. Smart’s non-binary identity. But, as a black scientist— always having been the “only one” and having to perform better than everyone else to be recognized as “good enough”—Dr. Smart’s father counseled them against coming out publicly. When Dr. Smart joined the student chapter of Out in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (oSTEM) and came out in their first year of graduate studies, they were one of only two people of color in their graduate department and the only person who was gender non-conforming. While Dr. Smart generally dresses in conservative, male clothing, they are often addressed by colleagues as she instead of they and are sometimes asked “are you a woman or a man”—even when they choose to wear a name badge with their pronouns.

With the support of other gender non-binary scientists, Dr. Smart gained confidence and developed their communication skills. They earned their PhD and gained recognition and stellar recommendations from their Ph.D. program advisor and the research director of the civil engineering company that funds the research project addressed in their dissertation – the effective management of water resources in predominantly Black neighborhoods. Dr. Smart aspires to advance a diverse work force judged on the merit of their work—and seeks recognition that new perspectives born of diverse experiences is meritorious and, in fact, critical to avoid stagnation of science.

What happened at the conference?

TU’s C-Eng. Department Chair, Professor King, a 63-year-old, white, straight male, is also the president-elect of the American Civil Engineering Association (ACEA). Professor King made plans to vet the TU C-Eng. top fellowship prospects, including Dr. Smart, by arranging and having TU pay for them to attend ACEA’s annual conference where they’d meet (and he’d get input from) prominent people in the field. Dr. Smart didn’t know what to expect, as is typical for anyone in a new professional experience, but they had also previously been avoided by colleagues uncomfortable with their non-conforming gender identity and knew that some venues were unsafe for them. At the same time, they were encouraged by ACEA’s well-publicized mission to advance a vibrant and diverse community for excellence in engineering fields, and excited to network at a society meeting, knowing that society contacts provide job opportunities, and that advancement

in the field depends on relationships with senior engineering faculty. Dr. Smart's anticipatory excitement dissipated during the meeting, however, and they wrote in their journal about the experience.

Day One – Morning (*excerpted from Dr. Smart's Journal*)

I met with Professor King and Dr. Crow, ACEA's Chief Research Officer, another white male, after the opening plenary. After introducing myself and asking a few questions about the plenary, Dr. Crow asked me about my graduate school research. He said he knows my dissertation chair, Professor Powers, who is well respected for "high quality research." He remarked, "It's interesting that Powers was your dissertation chair. He must have wanted to try something different." Professor King then shared that TU's C-Eng. Department's search for a post-doctoral fellow who'd be "the right fit" had lasted more than nine months. When I asked what the right fit would be, he said, "Our postdocs work very closely with each other, the Department's faculty, and colleagues in ACEA activities. We just know the right person when we see him."

Day One – Lunch

I started feeling more relaxed at my lunch with current TU C-Eng. Department postdocs, Jane, a white woman, and John, a white man—who are also ACEA early career peer reviewers. They seemed very interested in my research. However, after I shared the outcomes and my expectations for further research, John asked me if I'd ever done any substantive work. I found this shocking, after my overview, and because among recent doctorates, my research has been noticed for its potential in the field. I stated that my research is clearly substantive, but that I'm open to doing different types of research in the future. He then proceeded to explain to me the tenets of "quantitative research," as reflected in ACEA's reviewer orientation, which matched all the elements of my dissertation. I decided not to push the issue, however, as I might be working with John in the future if I were selected for the fellowship. After lunch, as Jane and I walked to the next session, she said John is "old school" and works with a professor who is a "dinosaur," but they're "harmless." Then, she touched my hair and commented, "I love what POCs can do with their hair." I was taken aback and pushed my hair behind my ears. Jane said she wished her hair could be styled into "different exotic, cool" styles.

Day One – Drinks in Lobby After the Meeting

I met with the head of the ACEA Directorate for Civil Engineering, Dr. Head, and the volunteer chair of the ACEA Annual Meeting Program Committee, Professor Vol, who is also tenured in the TU C-Eng. Department – both are white and male. I introduced myself and shared that my pronouns are they/them; Dr. Head and Professor Vol did not share their pronouns and kept referring to me as she/her. After exchanging pleasantries, I expressed my admiration of ACEA's leadership in providing early career peer review training opportunities. No one responded, but Professor Vol asked me if I was married. He warned me the TU C-Eng. Department expects 110% commitment by postdocs, and in addition to fellowship research, postdocs are expected to attend dinners, lectures, and events in the evenings and on weekends to assist senior faculty. Dr. Head added that taking on ACEA peer review responsibilities on top of all that requires "superman" intellect and time management. I noticeably cringed at the "superman" comment. He then asked if I took a

break before continuing my graduate studies to help with family difficulties because there was an unexplained gap between my undergraduate and graduate studies. Before I could explain that I attended a renowned writer-in-residence program to work on a novel about a gender-exploring teen, he expressed admiration for women of color for their loyalty to their families. While Dr. Head and Professor Vol asked me questions about my research. Each time I tried to explain my methodology they cut me off or turned the conversation to their work. Professor Vol also mused out loud that it wasn't clear where my research would "fit" in the usual annual meeting program. At that point, Professor Vol invited me back to his hotel room to continue discussing whether there might be a place for me to present at a future meeting. Dr. Head then said, "you continue talking," and excused himself to attend another gathering. I felt uncomfortable with Dr. Vol's invitation, and unsure whether this is where serious research conversations happened at society meetings. It would certainly be helpful to my career if I presented my research at an annual meeting. Ultimately, while conflicted, I declined as it had been a very long day and my discomfort prevailed.

Day Two – In Between Morning Meetings

I asked at the registration table about a gender-neutral restroom. The ACEA staff looked at me and said, "I'm sorry, this conference center doesn't do that. You can use the girl's room down the hall."

Day Two – Lunch and Meeting with Professor and Students

I ate in the crowded hotel lobby café with Professor King, as well as TU's Associate C-Eng. Department Head, a Hispanic cis-gender man. Out of the blue, he asked me if I would be comfortable serving as a mentor for the Black students in ACEA's student section. I looked a little shocked, as I do not identify as Black. Apparently, Professor King thought I didn't understand the question because he then shared that ACEA has a history of racial unrest due to the paucity of Black students and faculty in engineering who often feel alienated during ACEA activities. Professor King noted the one Black graduate student in TU's C-Eng. Department would also appreciate me as a mentor. I felt that serving as a mentor might be a prerequisite for my selection as a postdoc and having opportunities in ACEA, so I reservedly said, "Um, ok. Sure." Professor King laughed as he warned, "Get ready to have all the women and students of color knocking at your door."

During a networking session at the conference, I finally met with TU C-Eng. Department Distinguished Professor Grant, who is a leader of a subspecialty program at TU C-Eng. in my field—water engineering research. He introduced me to a group of his students and expressed great interest in my research and its applicability to his work. I felt honored. But then he said, "Dr. Smart, is young and fresh out of graduate school, but she has done some very interesting research that will help Black people." I shared that my pronouns are they/them. I also explained my research focuses on data from predominantly Black neighborhoods because engineering solutions in an area of heightened challenge would have major impact society-wide.

Several students checked their phones frequently throughout, and one student asked, "Does this count as real research?" Another student suggested the people in marginalized neighborhoods are responsible for their inadequate water resources despite my research demonstrating purposeful structural inequities prevent access to sufficient clean water. Professor Grant was silent. At the end of the lunch, Professor Grant patted me on the back and said, "Tough crowd. These kids, and our field, take no prisoners." I was upset that Professor Grant did not correct the students or use their questions as a teachable moment. He then asked me if I'd join a panel discussion he was organizing at ACEA's next meeting on the impact of the election of Kamala Harris on ecological studies. None of my research concerns ecological studies or political science; however, I told him I would participate.