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| **CASE STUDY LIBRARY** |

**Case Study 2.** **Power and Picnics Don’t Mix**

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| *Case Study 2 addresses:**“incident(s) involving people who bring money and prestige to an institution, e.g., a person that becomes “too big to fail.”*  A male tenured professor and society board member has brought in significant research funding and greatly enhanced the prestige of a university as an-up-and-coming program for women interested in computer science careers. He also writes and publishes historic-romance graphic novels, under a pen name, in his free time. The professor pressures his Black female graduate assistant/advisee to read one of his books, which has a racist and sexualized title and content, and discuss it at a picnic lunch. Despite the student raising her concerns with another faculty member in the department, when she meets her advisor for the picnic, he attempts to kiss and grope her. |

**Case Study 2. Volume I**

1. ***Facts and Scopes of Issues***
2. Facilitator Guide: Reflections
3. 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.

**1**

**Introduction**

Professor Little is a white, male identifying, tenured computer science professor at a mid-sized, public university. Dr. Little serves on the board of the American Association of Computer Scientists (AACS). Over the years -- given the demand for computer science professors– Dr. Little has had several visiting professorships at large research institutions and has received competitive offers for a tenured professorship. He was recently awarded a coveted “innovation” grant from a tech giant that would bring $2 million to upgrade the University’s computer research laboratory. Professors Little’s classes are extremely popular and he is in high demand as an academic advisor. He has a strict policy to write no more than three letters of recommendations per year for select graduate students seeking employment, or admission to a doctoral program.

Professor Little double majored as an undergraduate in computer science and creative writing. Creative writing is his passion, and he remains at the University in part because it generously allows him periodic breaks from classroom instruction. He uses this time to write best-selling, historic-romance, graphic novels under a pen name. One of his novels is soon to be released.

Maria, a Black, female-identifying graduate student, is one of Dr. Little’s advisees and works closely with him preparing computer labs for undergraduates. During one planning session, Maria noticed the publisher’s copy of Professor Little’s new book on his desk. The front cover contained a racist and sexually provocative title and image, so she awkwardly looked away. Professor Little noticed, and told Maria “Oh, I don’t read that stuff, I write it. That’s my pen name,” he noted laughing. Professor Little offered Maria the book and said, “I’d love to know your opinion as a Black woman.” The book, titled “My Master’s Slave,” tells a story, primarily through images, some sexually explicit, of a Black woman who acts as a submissive in a relationship with a white man.

Maria felt compelled to accept the book to remain in Dr. Little’s good gracesand because of the importance of receiving one of Professor Little’s coveted letters of recommendation. She felt very uncomfortable reading it, due to its sexual content and racist stereotyping, and she tried to avoid discussing the book with Professor Little--despite him frequently asking her whether she had any comments--by saying, “I’m still working on it.” Eventually, Professor Little sent Maria an email that read, “Maria, I am curious to know your thoughts on my book. Can we meet for lunch to discuss? I’ll bring a picnic and a bottle of wine and we can meet at Lookout Tree.” Lookout Tree is located in a secluded area that is a frequent spot for campus picnics but is also known as a place for romantic trysts.

**One – M**

**The Picnic**

**2**

Upon receiving this email, Maria became concerned and talked to Dr. Charles, an untenured, male identifying, computer science professor. Maria told Dr. Charles that she felt she was being pressured into a relationship, and that she believed Dr. Little had targeted her because she is a Black man. She did not want to be put in a position where she had to offend her advisor by rejecting his advances. She was hoping that, as a fellow faculty member, Dr. Charles could explain to Dr. Little that his picnic invitation was inappropriate and that he was making students uncomfortable by asking them to discuss his novels. Professor Charles considered speaking with Dr. Little, but was fearful of rocking the boat. He was going to be a co-principal investigator with Professor Little on the innovation grant which would solidify Dr. Charles’ opportunity to earn tenure. Instead, he reported Maria’s concerns to the chair of the department. The chair was also reluctant to confront Dr. Little because Dr. Little recruits many female candidates which had significantly raised the stature of the department as an excellent place for female, computer science majors. He is also close friends with Dr. Little. Nevertheless, the chair told Professor Charles that he would “take care of the situation.” He asked Professor Charles not to tell anyone else about the accusations. Professor Charles agreed, but he did let Maria know that the situation would be taken care of. The chair then visited Professor Little’s office and told him that, “Some people feel uncomfortable about the type of novels you write. You should try not to bring your hobby to work.” The chair also affirmed that everyone in the department was very excited about the innovation grant and that Dr. Little was highly valued by the University.

Having still not gotten a response from Maria, Professor Little stopped her after class and said, “Did you get my email about having lunch?” Maria, assuming the chair had spoken to Professor Little, agreed to meet for the picnic but suggested an alternate location in a more public space. They met there later in the week. Dr. Little brought a picnic basket and poured them both wine that he had packed. They discussed a research project, but eventually, Dr. Little asked Maria about his novel, particularly if there were any scenes in the book that she enjoyed. He had moved closer to Maria and attempted to kiss her. Maria was anxious not to offend Dr. Little but moved away saying, “You’re a very attractive man, but I don’t think a relationship with my faculty advisor is a good idea.” Dr. Little moved closer again saying, “It will be our little secret,” and he reached for her crotch. Maria quickly excused herself saying she was sorry but she had a class to attend.

**3**

**The Fallout from the Incident**

Maria again went to Professor Charles for assistance with what had become a very difficult situation. Upon realizing that the chair did not “take care of the situation” as promised, Professor Charles went to the college president and relayed Maria’s account of the picnic. He also encouraged Maria to file a Title IX complaint, a race based equal opportunity complaint, and to share her story publicly in the school newspaper. Maria took his advice, but wrote the newspaper story anonymously and without mentioning the gender of the parties involved. She wanted to protect herself, and she also feared that others would not accept that a female student was the subject of sexual harassment by a professor.

With the story going public, the school initiated an investigation limited to sexual harassment. After many stalled efforts, the University determined who was involved and also learned of rumors that other female students had been subject to unwanted sexual attention from Dr. Little. It resolved the investigation, however, with an inconclusive finding due to the fact that there were differing accounts of what had happened between Maria and Dr. Little. There were no witnesses to the events. Professor Little denied pressuring Maria to read or discuss his novel, though he acknowledged that he offered Maria the copy on his desk, but only if she was interested. He acknowledged that he was interested in a relationship with his advisee, but that she misconstrued any pressure on his part. Dr. Little adamantly denied making sexual advances. Other students were unwilling to come forward with their stories. The racist title and content of the book were not addressed by the University.

It had taken 18 months for the University to complete its investigation, during which time Dr. Little was permitted to continue with all of his University work. Despite its inconclusive finding, given the controversy the allegations caused on campus, and the bad judgement demonstrated in pursuing a student, Professor Little was asked to consider resigning. He agreed and immediately secured a position at another institution. Professor Little was still able to conduct most of the work under the innovation grant during the time the University took to conduct the investigation. However, Professor Charles was told that since he was hesitant about Professor Little’s ability to conduct himself acceptably in his faculty role, Dr. Charles would be removed as a co-principal investigator from the grant, to ensure that he felt safe and comfortable at work. Maria felt compelled to seek out a new advisor.

**4**

**AACS’ Response**

AACS heard through the grapevine that an investigation had been initiated once the incident was shared in the school newspaper. The President of the society met with the full board, including Professor Little, and discussed what should be done to address the allegations against their fellow board member. Professor Little explained that he was innocent and should not have any action taken against him. The racial harassment was not addressed. In an effort to allow the investigation to proceed without further complications, the board allowed him to remain in his position pending the outcome.

After the investigation was completed and he resigned from her home institution, the board, without Professor Little’s input, decided to remove him from the society. They told Dr. Little that even though he was not found responsible for any misconduct, they were concerned about the allegations and the impact on AACS of the public nature of the allegations against a board member of the organization. They notified the membership by placing a notice on the members only website that said “We thank Dr. Little for his outstanding service to AACS. At this time, Dr. Little will no longer be a member of AACS.” They declined all requests for comment about why he no longer served as a member of the organization.