

***Take the Train Where You Want It to Go:
Strategies for Success in Hostile Work Environments***

Andi Stepnick and Kris De Welde¹

Ever been harassed by a colleague or boss, had students threaten you, or been told by your dean that you “don’t fit” and, therefore, your contract won’t be renewed? These are just some of the experiences shared by SWS members at the 2007 mid-winter meetings in *Take the Train Where You Want It to Go: Strategies for Success in Hostile Work Environments*. As organizers of this workshop, we hoped to generate effective approaches for managing workplace hostility. Our primary goal was to examine how strategies for managing such scenarios could contribute to institutional change. A second goal was to continue SWS efforts to “break the culture of silence” regarding workplace hostility and other issues faced by women in academia—particularly those that are perceived to be “personal problems.” Lastly, we hoped to help SWS members who were dealing with such environments by brainstorming on individual strategies and institutional transformation.

These workshops continue efforts by the Feminist Transformation of the Academy (FTA), an ad-hoc committee that started the sessions in 2005. FTA will continue this tradition with a session at the 2008 winter meetings called, “*You Think It’s Just You?*” The discussion won’t be limited to our meetings, however. An ongoing column in Network News will provide continued means to discuss these issues. Our focus is on hostile experiences within the academy. Soon, we will re-open our “call for experiences,” which will serve as the anonymous cases we will present in this column. We will present advice on three levels: interpersonal, institutional, and extra-institutional. Suggestions for action (or sometimes inaction) will come from seasoned SWS members. The first series of columns will draw from the work of the “*Take the Train Where You Want It to Go*” Session. We want to thank workshop participants and those who shared their experiences and advice.

FTA was created as an ad hoc committee with a specific purpose. Since then, new projects have been added to its agenda, and its mission – to identify and research structural and cultural issues facing women in higher education and disseminate strategies and resources to transform the academy—has been refined. With that, FTA has requested recognition as a standing committee. Attendees at the business meeting in New York City (2007) voted in support of the committee’s proposal.ⁱ A new title and a refined mission is under discussion, and will be unveiled at the 2008 winter meetings in Las Vegas. Our accomplishments as FTA have included well-attended “Disrupting the Culture of Silence” sessions at SWS meetings, a report, position paper, and two articles on gender and teaching evaluations,ⁱⁱ and the “Report Card on Gender- and Women-Friendly Sociology Departments”ⁱⁱⁱ. Our ongoing work will include an updated website with resources for navigating hostile work environments, continuing sessions at SWS meetings, a plan for wider dissemination of SWS work to other academic women’s

¹ Thanks to Abby Ferber for her editorial suggestions and assistance.

organizations, and this column. We welcome your feedback on how to make this column work for you!

SWS Case Study

Next, we'd like to share with you one of the case studies from our workshop. Since the focus of the FTA is on creating change at the university level, we explored and have summarized some suggestions on the kinds of action to take within departments and institutions for individuals to navigate similar situations, or ideally, prevent cases like this from developing. However, structural and cultural change takes a long time; thus, we'll share some recommendations that may enable individuals to cope in similar situations.

Meet Professor Jones

I am a 35 year old Assistant Professor on my first tenure track job at a small state university in the south -- SSU. Before joining SSU, I gained 2 years of teaching experience in graduate school and one year as a visiting professor at a private liberal arts university. I've consistently earned excellent teaching evaluations and won a teaching award. I've always felt respected and welcomed. I've never doubted my ability to make a contribution to my department, university, and students. But, things are going badly here.

Let me give you a little background. I interviewed with and was hired by part of SSU's history-sociology department. Over the course of the summer before I started, the university re-structured and sociology merged with another department.

I was assigned an official mentor -- Professor Brown, the chair of my department. She seemed friendly enough and I was hopeful that she could show me the lay of the land. Before moving, I contacted her to see about shipping about my office materials directly to the office. I'd done this at my last job as it was convenient and physically easier. She told me there was nowhere to house the materials as the Sociology offices were not yet built. So, I asked if I could store my boxes in someone's office since folks might be away for the summer. My chair said that such an arrangement wasn't really "appropriate." She sounded irritated with me for asking and I got a sick feeling in my stomach. (I now consider this red flag #1.)

Then, when I was getting ready for the semester's start, our office manager told me that my syllabi were too long to copy. I told her that they included all the assignment directions for the year and that I wouldn't need additional copying that term. But to no avail. Again, I tried to go with the flow. I cut out the assignments—saving them for later—and printed shortened syllabi. (Looking back, I consider this red flag #2).

Although I was finishing my dissertation in my first year, I became an active university citizen. I participated in Women's History Month. I co-advised the sociology club, served as a faculty representative for the Student Government Association, and was a co-advisor for a service organization. I created a departmental newsletter at the request of

my chair (though it was never published). Although my students weren't as well-prepared as those at past universities, I liked many of them. My teaching evaluations remained good. I worked a lot, often 80 hours a week. I felt good about how things were going, but then things took a turn for the worse!

In early October of my first term, I received an announcement about a teaching program during the upcoming summer. Each state university would select a faculty member to attend. Due to a departmental system where memos routed from person to person, I received the notice the night before applications were due. However, I was interested, so I stayed into the night to complete it. I left the application for my chair and sent an email that I'd be happy to discuss it when I was out of classes the next day if she'd like. Since there was still a little time left to apply, I also left a note for the office manager asking if she could make copies of the memo for the faculty who hadn't gotten it yet. (Faculty didn't have copy codes or I would have done it myself!)

The next day, my chair called me into her office to say that I had not behaved collegially by leaving the memo for the office manager to distribute. She told me that I should have *personally* gone to each faculty member to notify them of the impending deadline. I explained that I was trying to be efficient since I had only gotten the memo the previous evening. I'm not one to pass the buck, but my morning classes would have prevented me from contacting anyone until mid-day—thereby giving them just hours to apply. Plus, I'd been in such a whirlwind I didn't even know everyone yet. Nevertheless, my chair said I should apologize to my colleagues for my behavior! I was shocked. When I was ultimately chosen as one of SSU's finalists for the teaching program, the taste was bittersweet. And, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was very wrong in my department.

More things began to strengthen my suspicions. My chair often reminded me of “areas for improvement” such my poor handwriting on copy requests. (Granted, it is pretty bad.) I was told I didn't communicate well with the office manager although I'd never had communication problems in the nonprofit and corporate worlds. I began typing my copy requests and I took the office manager to lunch, asked her for feedback, and I promised to “do better.” Things just didn't flow the way they normally did. I sought advice from a well-trusted academic who told me to “kill them with kindness.” I tried to do that and continued to establish a group of friends across campus, but it always felt a little “chilly” on my hall.

That spring, during annual evaluations, my chair told me that I ranked in the bottom 1/3 of my colleagues. I was told my teaching wasn't up to par and that I needed to “readjust” to SSU's ways of doing things. I was surprised since my teaching evaluations *seemed* good—and were comparable to my prior two teaching experiences (low to mid 4s on a 5 point scale). My chair said that in light of others' excellence, I would need to improve. I feel called to teach and wanted to be a *great* teacher so I was ok with trying to improve, but the experience left me feeling belittled and disconnected.

In the fall of my 2nd year, things went from bad to worse. One of my colleagues told me that my chair was committing “character assassination” against me across campus. He wouldn’t give me details but said he disagreed with what he’d heard. Students in my gender class told me that some of the (male) students on campus had put a swastika on our classroom door before I’d arrive – a pathetic code for Feminazi. I increasingly began to dread going to work. I started playing “Accentuate the Positive” repeatedly on my commute but it didn’t help much.

Then, the bomb hit. My chair said my contract was not going to be renewed because I “didn’t fit in.” Trusted colleagues suggested that I get my files from the Vice President’s office. I was unhinged at the information there—things I had never been told and almost all of it false. My chair said that I “hated male students” but also “flirted with them.” I was accused of stealing office supplies and of being “disingenuous” about things such as my membership in an honor society or my participation in sociology club. Yet, I *was* a member of that honor society and have membership papers to prove it. Likewise, I organized the sociology club’s food drive, attended meetings/took notes, and so on. I even had photos that show me there! And, I found out from a source in the teaching center that my teaching evaluations actually ranked in the top 15% of the university. As is her manner, my chair told me all of this bad news in a “sweet” tone (which I read as patronizing and passive aggressive). She also said that I had no legal grounds to fight this decision. I just feel sick.

What Can We Learn From This Case Study?

This case likely has less to do with this individual than with the dynamics and culture of this department/university. At the workshop, we examined a range of interpersonal, institutional, and extra-institutional strategies to deal with this situation.

Embracing a commitment to social justice, women faculty may find themselves wanting to fight a decision like this, but workshop participants agreed that the best course of action is to get out of there! In a case like this, filing complaints against your chair may only get you labeled a “trouble maker” and usually will not produce any change. Moreover, when push comes to shove you—a new faculty member with no track record at this institution—are likely to lose to your chair. Similarly, a lawsuit would be too hard to prove and will only drain you of your time, money, and joy. While we like the idea of battling against injustice, fighting a losing battle won’t advance the war.

Take the Train Where You Want It to Go participants recommended that this individual focus on applying for other jobs, post docs, Fulbright scholarships, research jobs, and other opportunities that will use and develop her skills and make her more marketable. While many of us love our students and have a passion for teaching, new faculty should be warned against spending too much time developing institution-specific capital by doing things such as counseling students and developing courses. Institutional change might include a good mentoring program that would advise junior faculty to participate in activities that have transferable payoff such as networking and publishing. (There may

be a way to do both—by doing research about teaching for submission to *Teaching Sociology* or similar journals.)

Workshop participants identified numerous institutional mechanisms that can be put in place to prevent this kind of hostile environment. For SWS members who might find themselves in a similar situation, we offer the following suggestions for action at the extra-institutional, institutional, and individual levels. For senior faculty, some of the following advice can be helpful in creating a supportive culture for struggling or new faculty.

ACTION	Individual	Institutional	Extra-institutional
Trust your gut	Notice any red flags along the way. Minute things that bother you may tell you something—or they might not. Talk to other people in your network. What’s normative for your institution? Document things as they happen just in case.		
Assemble documents	Begin by putting <i>official rebuttals in your personnel file</i> . First, exercise your right to copy your file. Then, document everything that you disagree with.	Officially submit your documents to whoever is appropriate (faculty ombudsperson or Vice President for Academic Affairs (VPAA). Again, don’t think about using this file to sue. Your goal here is defensive and protective.	
Go formal		Talk to the head of your Affirmative Action or ombuds office. Make an official complaint and have your chair’s behavior documented. Again, you’re trying to help establish a pattern of behavior that will help protect future faculty.	Consider speaking with members of the SWS Discrimination Committee, the AAUW, or the AAUP.
Make your mark		When you have another job (contract in hand) and are leaving, request an <i>exit interview</i> with	

		<p>the President or VPAA. Bring your documents. (Hopefully you've been keeping notes.) Also give her/him a copy of the official rebuttal that's in your personnel file and be sure that they know it's there. Formally suggest that the university adopt a better system of accountability. It is the university that has failed here, not you.</p>	
Protect your sanity	<p>Establish a network, particularly with senior women outside your department. Start or join a women's faculty book/dinner/walking club. You might also start a group for new faculty that meets once a month for lunch or dinner. They are a great way to share experiences as new faculty while having some fun (e.g., pay day dinners). Plus, you'll build a cross-discipline network that will serve you well in the future.</p>	<p>Don't forget to reach across departments and colleges to other faculty who may be even more isolated than you!</p>	<p>Attend an SWS "Disrupting the Culture of Silence" session</p>
Get support	<p>If you don't have a formal mentoring program where you are, wait until you get to know people a bit. Then, ask a person that you admire and "click" with if they will mentor you during the upcoming year. Have specific goals in mind (e.g., publishing, teaching) but also meet regularly to talk about issues as they come up.</p>		<p>Consider outside mentor through the SWS Professional-Needs Mentor Program (See http://www.socwomen.org/index.php?ss=6)</p>
Give 'em hell!			<p>After getting tenure or securing another job, consider writing the AAUP'S Committee on the Employment and Status of Women (http://www.aaup.org/AAUP) about your experiences. Ask them to pay attention to that university.</p>

Disrupt the Culture of Silence!			Consider joining the FTA to help foster understanding about the issues women in academia face. The FTA is working to go beyond the SWS into other women’s professional organizations. For more information contact Abby Ferber at aferber@uccs.edu .
--	--	--	---

What do you think about our advice? If you have suggestions, want to disagree with us, or have a “hostile experience” to share, write to: [stepnicka@mail.belmont.edu](mailto: stepnicka@mail.belmont.edu) or [kdewelde@fgcu.edu](mailto: kdewelde@fgcu.edu) Stay tuned for our next column including an update about the SWS member described in this case study.

ⁱ One more official vote remains for us to receive full committee standing.

ⁱⁱ Work completed by Kelley Massoni, Joey Sprague, Heather Laube and Abby Ferber.

ⁱⁱⁱ Work completed by Sharon Hays and Barbara Risman.