

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

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As another academic year closes, many of us settle into a different rhythm whereby we swear to a “productive and relaxing” summer; not at all an oxymoron. We consider (and report) what we’ve accomplished in the past year and where we fell short. We look forward to another year with new intentions and goals. For many of us, this is done in a context that is hostile, vindictive, intimidating, demoralizing, or downright awful. And yet, we persist, we survive, or we leave and flourish elsewhere. Though our many strategies of navigating these environments help us cope with our immediate situations, they also have the power to also transform institutions. We can sometimes “take the train” where *we* want it to go!

The Committee for Academic Justice (CAJ), formerly the Feminist Transformation of the Academy Taskforce, is SWS’s newest committee. As stated in our mission statement, the CAJ is charged with collecting data on the issues facing women in higher education, coordinating and communicating with other organizations to address these issues, and organizing information on best practices for creating a just academy. Our accomplishments thus far (detailed in the Winter 2007 *Network News*), have contributed to a robust agenda for academic justice. Current projects include:

- Collecting information on academic policies and practices regarding recognized gender issues in the academy, such as university policies on sexual harassment, domestic partnership, parental leave, the tenure clock, part-time tenure tracks.
- Conducting liaison work with other organizations addressing gender and women in higher education (including American Association of University Professors’ Committee on the Status of Women; American Association of Colleges and Universities’ *On Campus with Women* project; Women in Higher Education; and the National Women’s Studies Association).
- When appropriate, coordinating our activities with other SWS committees, including Social Action, Career Development, Discrimination, and Publications.
- Offering a space at mid-winter and summer meetings to discuss issues pertinent to hostile environments and social or academic justice.
- Providing this ongoing column, that highlights hostile experiences of SWS members within academia along with advice offered by experienced members.

### **Update on Professor Smith**

Our previous column (Winter 2007) described Professor Smith’s experience at a small teaching-oriented state university (SSU). While at SSU, Professor Smith finished her dissertation, consistently earned good teaching evaluations, did a lot of service, and developed many good friendships and partnerships. Yet, her chair forced her out after just two years claiming Professor Smith was a “poor departmental fit.” After a difficult year fighting to keep her job, Professor Smith left for a private teaching-oriented university. In just days, Professor Smith knew she’d made a good move. She says, “Leaving SSU was the best thing that could have happened! I’ve found real community here and the level of intellectual curiosity among the faculty and students is inspiring. I also receive monetary support for books, films, speakers, and travel which have allowed me grow and become more creative as a professor.” Within just three years, Professor Smith faculty and students selected her to receive the university’s highest teaching honor. She also became chair of her department. As chair, she’s created two new curricular tracks and seen majors increase nearly 450%. Professor Smith has implemented service learning into her courses, working with

the homeless and working poor in her area. She's also begun co-teaching an innovative course at a local prison which several students called "the best academic experience of my life." Professor Smith says that she never would have been able to establish such programs if it weren't for the support of her colleagues and university administration. Her case is a reminder that sometimes the best thing you can do, should you find yourself in a hostile environment, is to get out!

## **SWS Case Study (#2)**

The following case study emerged from our "Take the Train Where You Want It to Go: Strategies for Success in Hostile Work Environments" workshop at the 2007 mid-winter meetings. Following the next case, we've summarized the suggestions generated by workshop participants on the kinds of actions that can be taken within departments and institutions, as well as outside one's institution. The ultimate goal of the CAJ is transforming the academy into a place where hostile workplaces rarely occur. However, to persist and make institutional changes we also need to address the ways that individuals can cope with such situations.

### **Meet Professor Jones**

Dr. Jones is a 35 year-old Assistant Professor at a small liberal arts college in the South, Small College USA (SCUSA). Before joining SCUSA, Dr. Jones had extensive teaching experience as a graduate student. Her teaching evaluations were consistently high, she was very engaged with the departmental culture (evidenced by participation on a number of committees and campus events), and she received awards for her commitment to diversity and feminist scholarship. Though she was apprehensive about joining a department where she was the only woman, she was elated at the thought of close interactions with students. Off she went.

SCUSA had approximately 2100 students. The administration of the college was unique in that none had ever taught in either higher education or K-12 classrooms. Since the college opened in the late 1960s, there had been 2 presidents; both male, and both very conservative. There had only been one woman Dean in the college's short history.

Dr. Jones quickly immersed herself in the college. She was approached by students almost immediately to be their faculty sponsor for a proposed gay-straight alliance on campus. Though she agreed, the administration blocked the group from forming claiming that there was no need for the "club" and that there were enough other clubs for students to join. Dr. Jones also organized a badly needed sexual assault/harassment awareness set of events for "sexual assault awareness" month. This effort, though not blocked, was manipulated by the administration who requested that she "tone it down." She was asked to make the event about wellness in general so as to protect the image of the college. She agreed, and widened the focus to include healthy relationships, nutrition information, and information about STDs and STIs. The administration stepped in again and demanded that no condoms be distributed during the event because that would make it appear as though SCUSA promoted sexual activity (or so the Dean argued). Though Jones received verbal support from her department and other colleagues, only one other faculty attended part of the event. In fact, the only other faculty or administrative presence at the entire event was the Assistant Dean, who appeared to be a "scout," coming into the event space, and leaving after only a few minutes. He did this three to four times, presumably making sure all rules were being followed. After this, Jones was identified as THE feminist on campus (and she was told this by her colleagues).

Towards the end of her second year there, the college administration became aware that Jones' (married) chair "Stan," was dating several women students. This information came to them via different channels all at once. A quiet "investigation" ensued over the course of a few days, ending when Stan tendered his

resignation. All faculty and students involved were told by the Dean not to speak about the incident. Silenced faculty were fearful for the loss of their jobs, and silenced students were fearful of failing grades and unequal treatment in Stan's classes as well as by other faculty who might sympathize with him. They were also afraid to be ostracized by their peers, which can happen when myths about teacher-student relationships take hold (e.g., she seduced him, he is innocent). Of course, people still talked, although mostly in whispers, in hiding, or off campus. As students and faculty pieced together what they knew, it was evident that Stan had been preying on women for years, apparently running a few students off campus because of his aggressive pursuit of them.

The SCUSA Psychology program had a *Group Counseling* course for senior Psychology majors in which the professor invites or chooses students to participate. At the beginning of the semester in which Stan was exposed, one of the students who had been aggressively approached by Stan disclosed his advances and their budding relationship as part of a class discussion. The professor of this class, "Gary," made the students swear not to speak with anyone about the disclosure, and twisted the concept of confidentiality in real world counseling to justify keeping the student's experiences a secret. Gary also did not come forward with this information, but instead used the student as a "case study" for the class, asking her weekly about Stan and their involvement. Gary also apparently actively encouraged students in his class (almost always entirely women) to talk about sex and sexual issues during the class, whether relevant or not. According to a few students, Gary told them frequently that because he had been at the college for upwards of 25 years that the administration could and would do nothing to him regardless of what he did. This neutralized many students' concerns over his actions, though he did not convince them all. One *Group Counseling* student boldly approached the Dean after hearing for weeks about Stan's sexual advances towards her peer. She did this despite Gary's threats that she would fail the class if she defied the confidentiality agreement. (This was one of the ways Stan was ultimately exposed.) She had to drop the class in the last three weeks of the semester, effectively losing her ability to graduate with honors.

After hearing that Stan had been "busted," another of the *Group Counseling* students went to Prof. Jones, told her everything, and begged her not to say anything for fear of her grade. She considered dropping the class and breaking the silence, but she would not have graduated that semester and would have lost her financial aid. Gary was reprimanded, but never sanctioned.<sup>1</sup>

All the while, no one on campus was supposed to speak about ANY of this. Dr. Jones experienced tremendous pressure from other colleagues who had turned to her for support and for action – after all, she's "the feminist activist on campus," and should presumably know what to do. Increasingly, she felt as though she was expected to act on these situations. Though some faculty talked to each other about what was happening, many were talking to *only* to Dr. Jones. Students, for similar reasons, filtered through her office daily wanting to understand how the professors they trusted so deeply could betray them in this way. Dr. Jones, fed up with the workload (a separate issue), the lack of administrative support of students or faculty, and the sexual harassment fiasco, considered resigning.

At SCUSA, there was no ombudsperson and no human resources department (other than the insurance and payroll processors). There was also no explicit sexual harassment or assault policy beyond the "don't do it" paragraph in the faculty handbook. By resigning, Dr. Jones would be in a unique opportunity to go public, but the students who had been victimized would be exposed, and Dr. Jones feared a slander lawsuit from Stan and Gary (the Dean led her to believe it was a distinct possibility).

### **What Can We Learn From This Case Study?**

At our workshop, we explored a number of interpersonal, institutional, and extra-institutional strategies to manage the issues Professor Jones was dealing with. With a commitment to feminism and social justice, many of us find ourselves compelled to fight those institutions that hinder equality, but workshop participants – from graduate students to tenured professors – agreed that the best course of action was for

Dr. Jones to *get out of there!* As stated in our last column, “While we like the idea of battling against injustice, fighting a losing battle won’t advance the war.” This particular institution is seemingly already hostile to her progressive ideas, and does not seem bound to confront their mistakes. And yet, some participants argued that she should stay, that these types of situations happen everywhere. If Jones’ commitment to feminism is sincere, she should see that the violations are not repeated. The consensus was that to reach one of these decisions, Jones would need to explore her priorities. She needed to determine the ordering of her main concerns: herself, her career, the students, the college, and “walking the talk” of feminism/social justice.

Additionally, workshop participants made a number of suggestions that would be useful for Professor Jones, and others facing similar situations and in similar contexts. Advice addressed three dimensions, individual, institutional and extra-institutional, each focused on fostering a more supportive culture for all women in the academy.

<b>ACTION</b>	<b>Individual</b>	<b>Institutional</b>	<b>Extra-institutional</b>
<b>Document everything!</b>	Make notes on everything that has happened so far, as detailed an accurate as possible. Continue documenting everything.	When you are ready to report, go up the administrative structure so that no one can claim ignorance.	
<b>Become a whistleblower</b>	Make noise! Let the administration know why you refuse to be silent about the issues. Do not shy away from conversations with others about this. You have much to offer as a feminist sociologist. Use email with caution.	Contact the college ombudsperson and explore options for formal reporting, or mediation. (Note, SCUSA did not have such an office).	Contact the Human Relations Commission & request for them to complete an initial evaluation of the situation at SCUSA. <sup>2</sup>
<b>Create an alternative campus climate</b>	Create and circulate “Safe Zone” policy and stickers. Continue discussions about sexual harassment, bullying, rape – and aim to be as forthright as you are able.	Create a “Faculty Women’s Caucus:” social engagements that are coupled with political agendas that come out of sharing experiences; creating allies (including men).  Write a new sexual harassment policy with a team from across the campus, and ask that it be considered as formal policy.	Create a support system among students, include parents. Face the problem as a group.  Bring in speakers from other campuses on these issues – create community!
<b>Sue!</b>			Sue the university for hostile environment. Caution: this has

			ramifications: it can be costly, it will require a major time investment, your career may be at stake, and there will be personal costs.
<b>Get support</b>	Talk to others who will validate your mixed feelings – other SWSers, former advisors, non-academic friends who will have some perspective.  Perhaps a professional counselor or therapist would be useful in sorting out your experience at SCUSA.	Establish a campus network, particularly with other supportive individuals outside your department.	Actively participate in an SWS “Disrupting the Culture of Silence” session.
<b>Disrupt the Culture of Silence!</b>			Consider joining the CAJ to help foster understanding about the issues women in academia face. The CAJ is working to network with other women’s professional organizations. For more information contact Abby Ferber at <a href="mailto:aferber@uccs.edu">aferber@uccs.edu</a> .

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

<sup>1</sup> Information about the content and structure of Gary’s class only surfaced as students got word that others had talked about what went on in their weekly sessions.

<sup>2</sup> Human Relations Commissions are city- and/or state-specific.