

Case #12: Frank Taylor

Frank Taylor was a full professor in the Biology Department at Metropolitan University. In his earlier days, he had thought of himself as something of a rebel, but now he was basking in the comfortable role of elder statesman. Many faculty and students sought his advice. His classroom interactions were highly professional, and he encouraged students to visit him during office hours.

One day, two students, Audrey Blanton and Jenny O'Neill, stopped by Taylor's office. After some casual conversation, Audrey began talking about a problem she was having with an assignment in Professor George Castor's genetics class. She asked Taylor to help her with the assignment. Instead, he tried to guide her with some questions and suggested that she work on the problem by herself. If she was still stuck, he said, she should seek help from Professor Castor.

Audrey seemed uncomfortable with this suggestion. She said that she had recently gone to see Castor in his office about this homework problem. During their conversation, Castor had asked her for a date.

"He used those words, 'a date'?" Taylor asked.

"Well, he asked me if I would have dinner with him that evening," Audrey replied. "And he implied that, if I did, there would be no more trouble with my grade in the course or in any other course I took with him."

"What do you mean by implied? What exactly did he say?" Taylor's enjoyment of the visit had quickly evaporated.

"I can't remember his exact words. I was too shook up to think straight. I told him that I worked nights. I wanted to cut the conversation as short as possible and just get out of there. I didn't want to make him mad ... I need his grade and recommendation to go to grad school," she continued despondently.

Before Taylor could respond, Jenny spoke up. She, too, had been 'propositioned,' as she called it, by Professor Castor.

"I turned him down flat," she said, "and I made it clear that I wouldn't be interested – ever! I must say, to give the beast his due, he never bothered me again after that. And I got my 'A.' I worked for it."

The faculty member in question, George Castor, had an international reputation for stellar research. At the time that he had come up for tenure, one of his students had had charged him with sexual harassment. In spite of this, the department had decided to recommend the promising researcher with an understanding on Castor's part that sexual harassment constituted unacceptable behavior. Taylor was polite to Castor but not particularly cordial with him.

Although Taylor felt he had a professional duty to respond, he understood the power structure at Metropolitan. His department chair, Thadwell Stevens II, had the motto: "To abstain from action is to acquire merit." Stevens believed that faculty members were always right. Taylor was certain that, were he to tell Stevens of these accusations, Stevens would find a way to turn the situation against him. Stevens thought that women lacked the ability to succeed in science. And the provost and president would insist that the problem be addressed by the chair and dean.