

Case #15: Melanie Wong

Professor Melanie Wong, chairperson of the Mathematics Department, arrived early for the department meeting. She walked into the modern conference room with tall, tinted windows that overlooked the tree-lined central quadrangle of the West Coast campus where she worked. She sat down at the head of the table, opened a brown leather folder, and looked closely at the letter she had received that week from the local chapter of AWIS (American Women in Science).

“We urge you to ensure,” the letter read, “that your department looks toward the future by emphasizing the accomplishments of women scholars, addressing significant issues pertaining to women, and including research done by women in your curricula.”

Melanie closed her folder and waited as her colleagues entered the room. She greeted them as they joined her at the table. Her department was composed of many idiosyncratic faculty. Luckily, Melanie’s personal relations skills were excellent. She had managed to forge the department into a somewhat cohesive group by listening to what people wanted and taking the initiative when it was appropriate.

This meeting went well. There were no major business items on the agenda. Melanie waited until the “Other Business” portion of the meeting before she took out the letter.

It took courage for Melanie to speak up for the principles of AWIS. She had relied heavily on the organization when she was an undergraduate and a younger professor, and now, she felt, she owed that community something in return. After all, it wasn’t easy for a woman to become a math professor, even in the twenty-first century.

“Recently,” Melanie began, choosing her words with care, “I received a letter from an organization that provides support for women in science and math. Women who major in mathematics as undergraduates tend not to persist into higher levels of education. This occurs despite the fact that women often achieve high scores in math on standardized tests and perform very well as math majors. American Women In Science, the group which sent me the letter, believes that an increasing emphasis on women scholars’ achievements and on issues relevant to women can encourage women to participate more in math and science and to eventually become faculty. They are asking us to be a part of this effort by including female mathematicians’ work in our course material. I would like to hear from you as to what you think about this, and what you could do in your courses to make this happen.”

“I think it sounds fine,” said Bernard Frank, the youngest member of the faculty. “I don’t mind changing my course a bit – I’d probably ask my graduate students to find a few female mathematicians to profile. It shouldn’t be too much trouble.”

Ross Kosovich, his senior by thirty years, shifted in his chair and furrowed his brow. “This is all very well,” Ross said, “But mathematics is a gender-neutral subject. Of course, women have contributed to mathematics, but to single them out seems biased.”

Another senior mathematician, Alfred Beauregard, spoke up. “The letter is well-intentioned, and I believe that we should all make an effort towards mentoring female students,” said Alfred. “But to skew the curriculum, as this organization suggests, is a disturbing proposition.” Many of the other professors nodded in agreement.