

Case #5: Martin Hernandez

Martin Hernandez, Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Industrial Engineering, stood up to greet Angela Johnson when she entered his office. She was wearing a dark brown dress that almost matched her complexion and carried a black briefcase on one shoulder.

Martin's desk was empty except for one file – Angela's academic record. He was surprised to find that Angela's performance was not outstanding. When she had taken a course with him, she had done very well. But now, he found that she had received a number of B's in important subjects. Perhaps this interview would explain the discrepancy. Angela was leaving the industrial engineering program; in fact, she was dropping out of graduate school.

"Have a seat," Martin gestured to a chair across from his desk. He liked to adopt an informal style with students. "So, let's talk about why you're leaving the program. Frankly, I'm surprised to see you go. You always struck me as a bright student."

Angela shifted in her seat and gazed out the window briefly. Then she looked back at Martin. "Do you want the official answer or the real one?"

"The real one, I should hope," said Martin, with some concern. "If there's any problem in our department, I want to know about it."

"Well, it's a long list," said Angela, with some hesitation. "To begin with, my advisor, Larry Hofstedt, told me that I would have to take lower-level courses because my preparation at a historically black institution was not up to par. I found out that none of the other students had to do this. I also had a series of very discouraging in-class experiences. I was hoping for rapport with the faculty, but none of my professors ever called on me or asked me to answer a question."

"Did you raise your hand?" Martin asked.

"I did, but they seemed surprised whenever I participated," replied Angela. "I was even accused of cheating once when I got an 'A' on an exam. And my grades tended to be lower than average, even though I worked just as hard as my peers. Also, I was always left out of social events with the other students in the department. It's hard to be black around here, Professor Hernandez. It's very isolating."

Martin was disturbed by Angela's remarks. "Angela, if this is true, this is a serious problem. We certainly don't want to have a discriminatory environment on campus. We have many international students, and none of them have complained about this type of treatment. I'm Latin American, myself, and I have never noticed this kind of behavior before. Would you be willing to document what happened?"

Angela shook her head. "I don't think it would help, Professor Hernandez," she replied. "I'm leaving, and maybe in a few decades things will change... but I'm not going to stay around and be treated this way. I'm going to work in industry for a while, I think. There are some progressive companies that have good diversity policies. I'll be more welcome there." She stood up to leave the room. "I did the best I could," she said, quietly, as she picked up her briefcase.

Martin escorted her to the door. "Take care, Angela. Good luck," he said.