Tina Scanlon

Tina Scanlon is an assistant professor in journalism. She teaches a course in news writing for undergraduates.

She usually arrives in class a few minutes early so she can set up her materials, answer student questions, etc. She felt she had good rapport with her students.

As she was setting up her PowerPoint one day before class, several students were already there. Some were sitting in their desks, reading the newspaper, while others were gathered together in the middle of the room, talking and laughing. She smiled because she wanted her students to form a community, so she liked seeing this kind of social interaction. She overheard part of the discussion and realized they were talking about current events. That pleased her even more.

As she continued to listen, however, she grew concerned. The students were talking about a story they’d seen on the local television news about a crime in a predominantly African-American neighborhood nearby. Two students began to impersonate some of the local people interviewed for the story. Tina grew more and more uncomfortable as the impersonation became what she considered to be a parody built on negative stereotypes. The others in the group laughed, encouraging the two students to continue their performance.

Melanie Wong

Melanie Wong, chair of the Mathematics Department, opened the department meeting by sharing a letter she had received that week from the local chapter of AWIS (American Women in Science). 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.

Melanie began, choosing her words with care, “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. AWIS 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 specifically 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. “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, 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. To skew the curriculum, as this organization suggests, is a disturbing proposition.” Many of the other professors nodded in agreement.

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