

**North Carolina State University**  
**Department of Mathematics**  
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**The situation, part 1**

One weekend in the middle of your first semester as a graduate student you come in the department during the day. It's pretty quiet. As you walk in the hallway, you overhear the following coming from a grad student office:

— This student who is usually very quiet in my problem session and never comes to office hours came to complain to me after class yesterday.

You recognize that voice as the voice of another TA in your course. You listen for more:

— What was the student complaining about?

— Well that student didn't do well in the first midterm. See here: few explanations or steps are shown, so that's a lot of points off.

— That seems like a correct answer...

— Sure, but students have to show their steps. The student asked me why they lost so many points for not writing down "trivial steps". The student was very upset.

— I can see how some students might think this was not a difficult question. Have others complained?

— No, but I think that's the only one who did this, at least in my problem session.

— That seems strange, let's look at this other student's work...

— Oh yes that one is a great student!

— Hm, seems like your "great student" is not showing many steps either.

— Oh sure, but they know what they are doing.

— How do you know they know?

— This student speaks up a lot in the problem session, and they're doing great in the course.

~ Inspired by a true story.

**Questions for reflection**

1. Why might a student be "very upset" about losing points on their midterm?
2. List a few feelings and emotions that the following people might have in this situation: the quiet student, the two TAs you are overhearing, and yourself.
3. What are some factors that may contribute to the situation between the TA and the quiet student having developed that way, as opposed to that with the "great student"?
4. What would you do, if anything? What are some barriers to action? What can we do to bring down those barriers?
5. Would your previous answers change if the setting was different, such as a graduate student complaining about a professor's grading? Would your answers change depending on "your" position: graduate student, post-doc, faculty, etc?

Please do NOT turn over until instructed to do so!

## **The situation, part 2**

The next week, a student whom you've seen regularly at your office hours and with whom you are developing a good working relationship comes to your office hours again. The student stays after others are gone, and reveals to you his fear that his TA may be racially biased. You're not sure what is the race or ethnicity of this student, but you imagine he probably identifies as a person of color. After talking to the student more, you realize he is probably the "quiet student" you overheard these TAs talk about over the weekend.

## **Questions for reflection**

1. Why would the quiet student think their TA is racially biased?
2. Go back to the reflection questions from the previous page and answer them again.

## **Additional questions, for parts 1 and 2**

1. Did you assume the gender, race or other characteristics of the various people in the situation, when those characteristics were not stated? Why would that be?
2. What if the quiet student, instead of being a male of color, was a female of color, or a white female? Or a white male? Or had another gender identity than male or female? Or was a student with a disability? Or a student who had some difficulties expressing themselves in English? Or with a learning disability?
3. Have you witnessed racism, sexism or other forms of oppression in a school setting?
4. Do you know where you or your students can go to receive support and/or complain about issues with unfair grading or discrimination?

## **Resources for you and your students**

- Your department's graduate studies coordinator or administrator.
- Your department's student groups, graduate student representative, etc.
- Your university's office for diversity and inclusion or for BGLTQ life or for intercultural relations, or related student groups. Your university's Title IX office or women's center.
- An employee or graduate student union representative.
- Your university's ombudsperson.
- Your university's health services, in particular mental health counseling.
- Your university's office for accessible education.
- Various religious chaplains or related student groups on campus.
- Others?