

Case Study

Respondent: Ty Alberts, Graduate Student, Computer Science

Complainant: Jason Helmick, Tenured Faculty, Civil and Environmental Engineering

Witness: Maria Jones, Non-University Affiliated, friend of Complainant

Statement from Jason Helmick

March 8, 2018

On October 12, 2017, I received an email from Ty Alberts, a new graduate student in the Computer Science program. He had read an article in the Daily Illini I had written about the experience of being an out faculty member in Engineering. He had some questions for me and asked if we could meet for coffee. I agreed, and we met at the Daily Byte the next day. Ty mentioned that he was starting his graduate program this year, after being recruited from UCLA, and had some concerns himself about being out in the college. I hesitate to say that, as I understand he is not out to his department, but the discussion may provide additional context for the complaint. Ty asked me about my experience, whether I'd received any fallout, the reason I had chosen to be out in the college/at work, and had some general questions about the community. This meeting was about a half hour long, and ended with a handshake, where he thanked me, and I wished him luck as a new student.

On October 30th, as I was leaving a class I teach, I saw Ty outside my classroom. He was standing looking at his phone, and seemed surprised to see me. I waved and started walking toward my office, and he caught up and followed. He asked me how I'd been, what I had been up to, how my weekend was. I provided some general information, mentioned a Krannert event I had gone to the prior week, but left my weekend vague. I had another student waiting outside my office, so I wished him well and went in to talk to the other student.

The event I mentioned was a weekly event at Krannert, something I regularly go to with a friend of mine, although I had not mentioned that to Ty. That Thursday, I was talking to my friend and I saw Ty. He walked over to say hello and mentioned after hearing me talk about the event, that he wanted to check it out. I introduced him to my friend Maria, and excused myself to go to the restroom. After I came back, Ty followed us as we went to sit down, and sat with us.

Over the next two weeks, I saw Ty in my building four or five more times, either near a classroom I was teaching in or in the hallway where my office is located. At first I had assumed he was there for a meeting with someone else in the building, but eventually it started to seem that he was there to see me. My course schedule and office hours are information that anyone has access to, so it would not have been difficult for him to figure out when I was in the building. The first week of November, I saw him at the Espresso Royale in Grainger where I generally get a cup of coffee between 9 and 9:15 every morning. At first it was only a couple of times, but soon I noticed he was there every morning too, at the same time, which struck me as odd as the building he would spend his time in had its own coffee shop. I had also seen him at every one of the Thursday Krannert events, where in the first few, he'd stop to say hi and chat, but soon started arriving at the same time and sitting with Maria and me each week.

In our early interactions, I had assumed since he was new that he was looking to meet and greet with faculty and suspected he may have been attempting to make new friends in town. I tend to keep my work and home life separate to maintain professionalism in the workplace. I attempted to make this clear without being rude. When he suggested a happy hour on a couple of occasions, I let him know I was unavailable. After seeing him at coffee and at the Krannert events I wanted to start to set some boundaries. There was not one specific thing I could point to, but I felt uneasy.

When the spring semester began, after some reflection, I altered where I went for coffee, and asked Maria if she'd mind if we could go out to dinner for the next few Thursdays. In February, Ty surprised me in my office,

mentioned he had not seen me in a while, and wanted to see how my break was. I was polite but vague, and asked about his break. He went into great detail about his trip back to California, but then mentioned coming back early to make sure he didn't miss any of the Thursday Krannert nights. He mentioned being disappointed at not seeing Maria or me at the events, and asked after her. I mentioned we just decided to vary it up. He pressed for more details, but I told him I had to go to another meeting. He made a strange face, but mentioned he had to run to grab something for a class, and left.

I had been going to Hammerhead Coffee north of University, and had switched my time to 8 a.m. On February 6, I saw Ty walk in as I was standing in line. He came over to stand with me, saying he had discovered this place over break. He asked when I made the switch from Espresso Royale. I didn't see him there the next day, but after that, I saw him there every morning for a week straight. Then on February 12, I received a text message from an unknown number. I asked who it was, and it was Ty. I asked how he got my number, and he told me it was from Maria. He asked me what I was up to, if I was interested in grabbing some dinner, and I told him I don't hang out with students outside of work as a general policy. He stated he understood that, but didn't think it applied to him as we hung out all the time after work at Krannert. I told him it did.

I called Maria, who stated that after the second or third Krannert Thursday, Ty had asked for her number to text her a funny article he saw that related to her work. She didn't think anything of it, so she gave it to him. Earlier that night, around 5:30, he had texted her that he had found something of mine I had left at the coffee shop and asked if she could send him my number, as he had lost it. I hadn't left anything at the coffee shop and I had never given him my number.

I then texted him that I felt uncomfortable that he had my phone number and asked that he please delete it and not text anymore. He asked if I offended him, and I said I wanted to end our communication. After that, I blocked the number.

On February 14, I went into work, and saw a gift bag hanging on a door handle. Inside were two gift cards, one for Espresso Royale and one for Hammerhead Coffee, with a post-it that just said "Sorry." I did not feel comfortable using them, so I left them on a table in the student lounge with a note indicating it was free for the taking. I did not want to email Ty as I had already asked him not to communicate. I did take pictures first though.

A week later, he stopped by my office hours, and asked if I liked the gift. I told him that it was inappropriate and he needed to respect my boundaries and stop communicating. Ty's face got red, he raised his voice and called me "ungrateful" and "a dick," and said he was just trying to be my friend. I told him he needed to leave and respect my wishes to end communication.

I did not want to call the police, but I do feel this behavior is extremely inappropriate, and I'm extremely nervous arriving and leaving work now. He does not seem to be respecting my wishes that he maintain his distance and I want no more contact with him. I am not certain if he is romantically interested or if he is focused on me for other reasons. Given this level of unprofessionalism, I am worried about his stability.

I want Ty to cease any and all communication with me and do not want to be his mentor.

✧ What questions, if any, do you have for Jason at this time?

Assuming a formal investigation was initiated at the request of the complainant:

✧ Based on the information provided, would these allegations, if true, constitute a violation of the Sexual Misconduct Policy? If so, which section(s)?

Statement from Ty Alberts

March 23, 2018

I started taking graduate classes at Illinois in Fall 2017. I had a few major universities to choose from after my research at UCLA, and chose Illinois for the reputation of the Computer Science program. I was a little hesitant, as I had never lived in the Midwest, but ultimately made the move for this prestigious program opportunity. I didn't know anyone, but I was reading the student newspaper and saw an article about a professor who was out in Engineering, and admired his bravery and thought he sounded like the kind of person I wanted to be friends with, or at the least have a conversation with. So I sent him a message, and invited him out for coffee.

The building I have classes in and where his office is share a courtyard, so I would see him occasionally. He mentioned an event that sounded like a good way to meet new people, so I started going to the Krannert Thursday night series. I started hanging out with Jason and his friend Maria at those events, and we had a great time. I stopped by his office on occasion in between classes, or after dropping something off to another professor in his building (I can't recall exactly what dates or what professors, but I know that was something I did on occasion in the Fall).

He seems to think I was following him to where he gets coffee, but we happened to have the same open period and I was on the hunt for a good place. I had been dropping off a book at Grainger when I saw him at the coffee shop that first morning, and decided to try it. I thought morning coffee would be a good way to bond with a new friend, and someone I had started thinking I would like to have as a mentor. He seemed polite and friendly, and I had done some reading on his publications, and I greatly admired his work. I honestly thought our morning coffee ritual was a normal way to make friends. I was meeting him and Maria every Thursday, and it was nice to have started a social life in a new town.

I had made the switch to Hammerhead coffee since I had not seen Jason for a while, and he wasn't going to his usual spots. I had been disappointed, and saw from Jason's class schedule that he was in class from 9-11, so I assumed he'd been getting coffee earlier. I waited at Espresso a few days hoping to continue our coffee chats, which I enjoyed, but Jason wasn't there. On my way into campus one day, I saw Jason on the street heading into Hammerhead Coffee. I had tried that place once when the campus was closed, just to get some class work done, so I used that excuse to try to build the relationship again as I still hoped for Jason to be a mentor and a friend. At my previous university, it was not uncommon for professors to join grad students for the occasional happy hour and there was a lot of comradery. Jason shares more of my views than some of the other professors, and I felt we would be great friends if Jason would see that. I understood why he might be hesitant based on the struggles he wrote about in his article, and wanted Jason to know he could trust me.

With regard to getting his number, Maria gave me her phone number the first night, as she had been telling a story about her work and I saw a piece from the New Yorker that related to what she was talking about. I didn't text her again until asking for Jason's number. I had wanted to see if he wanted to grab dinner, but I came up with an excuse that I was looking for a guy's night out as I thought it might be awkward for Maria if I didn't invite her too.

While Jason had mentioned he kept his work and social life separate, I didn't think that applied to me, as you can see from the text exchange (shows text exchange). I was not anticipating that he would get so upset. I didn't realize he had blocked me, but I think that was an overreaction. I had clearly upset him, but I didn't know why, and I didn't want to impact a relationship with someone I had really come to admire and that I now considered a friend, so I left him an apology gift to his two favorite coffee shops. I saw that he started including Hammerhead in his rotation, so I thought that would be more thoughtful.

I didn't hear from him, so I waited a week for things to settle down, and stopped by his office after a class. He was extremely rude, and I got upset and did call him a dick, which I was sorry for as soon as I left the building.

I reflected at home and realized if I was to repair this friendship, I was going to have to respect his wishes. We're all adults, so I assumed this would blow over and I'm mortified that it's come to this and a little offended.

✧ What follow-up questions, if any, do you have for Ty at this time?

Statement from Maria Jones

March 27, 2018

Jason seemed a little aloof, but polite at the Krannert functions, and I assumed he was helping out a new student on research or something. I don't really ask him about his research so I didn't think much of it, on occasion we would run into someone he knew from work. Ty was more interactive than others that would stop to say hello, and seemed eager to hang out that night. After that, when I realized he was coming alone to the events and would come straight to us to hang out, I assumed that Jason had invited him to join us, although Jason never seemed to invite him to any of the other things we would do together. Ty had texted me once and shared the article that first night, but nothing more until the message where he asked for Jason's number again. Jason seemed extremely unsettled once he received contact from Ty, and I was sorry that I had not asked more about Ty previously. I have since blocked Ty's number.

✧ What follow-up questions, if any, do you have for Maria or any other participant?

✧ Are there other witnesses/individuals you would want to talk to?

✧ What, if any, information do you feel you still need regarding this situation?

✧ What information has been corroborated?

✧ Do you need to evaluate credibility of any individual(s)?

✓ If so, do that and explain your determination.

✧ Based on the information provided, do you believe Ty is in violation of the Sexual Misconduct Policy?

✓ Why or why not?

✓ If so, which section(s)?