

SEXUAL AND GENDER HARASSMENT IN THE ACADEMY

A Guide for Faculty, Students, and Administrators

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Book Review
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This brief Guide is at the moment the clearest and most useful overview of its kind. Published in 1981 in a very swiftly changing society, the booklet is perforce slightly out-of-date already. It is however highly to be recommended to any faculty, student or administrator now seeking either to begin to understand sexual harassment in academe, or to gain perspective on earlier knowledge.

The Guide briefly reviews recent developments, in law and in our common understanding, of the concepts of sexualized and gender-stereotyped harassment. The legal discussion is clear, practical and still accurate. It quickly describes major aspects of state and Federal laws and regulations. 1982 developments in Title IX coverage, (which affirm the applicability of Title IX to employees in relevant institutions), were anticipated in the text of the Guide and in any case simply affirm the legal points covered in the Guide.

One likable attribute of this succinct booklet is a brief discussion of sexualized, offensive behavior ("sexual" harassment) as distinguished from offensive behavior based on gender, but not sexualized, (for example, "Women are so fickle, so unpredictable; who'd want a woman President?") The topic of gender harassment is extremely broad and has its own literature (not described in this booklet); it was useful nevertheless, for these authors to put the narrower topic of sexual harassment into the perspective of the broader problem, and to provide some definitions.

This booklet quickly moves to academic and institutional reasons to be concerned about harassment. There is the beginning of a discussion on distortions of meritocracy by sexualization of the work place and of education. The principal reason academics should address sexualization of work and teaching

relationships is, of course, not just because it is sometimes illegal, but because it subverts the basic nature of inquiry and of reward for excellence. Harassment is a negative distortion of meritocracy; favoritism based on sex (or on any other "reward") may be viewed as a "positive" distortion. Neither is acceptable in academe; neither should be acceptable anywhere that excellence matters. In addition, sexual overtures which are meant to be friendly are often misinterpreted or go awry.

The booklet strongly makes a point that is hard for inexperienced observers adequately to understand, that harassment sometimes does very serious damage:

"Women, for example, frequently decide not to take certain courses if the professor has a reputation for practicing sexual discrimination. Other students report dropping courses or even changing their majors to escape from small departments where they cannot avoid a particular professor. Still others drop out of programs or leave school. The overall effect of these decisions is to limit women's educational options and experiences."

"Male colleagues are probably unaware of how unpleasant and distracting such remarks are, how upsetting they are to a junior faculty member's self-image as a professional, and how difficult it can be to give, again and again, the kind of humorous response that women are supposed to have ready."

There is an excellent brief discussion of how to build appropriate institutional structures, policies and procedures to deal with sexual harassment. This section is particularly succinct; the reader is well-advised to read it several times very carefully, for each sentence sums up months of debate in a typical university. Examples include the discussion of appointment of hearing officer(s), formal and informal processes, "questions of how best and how long to preserve the anonymity of both parties....", etc.

One important question not squarely addressed in this booklet is whether a university wants a "Harassment Policy" or a "Sexual Harassment Policy," and whether it wants specific sexual harassment procedures or general complaint procedures which are also known to handle harassment complaints effectively. There are no universally right answers to these questions. But perhaps it should be mentioned that the question is becoming more and more important.

An institution whose policy reads "Harassment is not acceptable at the University of X" will receive many harassment complaints on the basis of race, age, religion, sexual orientation and plain meanness, as well as sexual harassment complaints. This fact will serve to make both the policy and the procedures much better known. Some may fear that the existence of general policies and procedures will obscure the special problems of women, so an institution will wish to consider the pros and cons of general vs. specific options.

The Guide has a helpful section for students and employees, in which the main headline is, "Get together with other responsible people and take action." There is also a good brief bibliography which will help individuals as well as institutional groups.

Here again, recent months have seen the publication of more, specific actions which victims can undertake to deal with aggressors. The Guide correctly represents the views of most experts that offended persons are usually better off taking action rather than ignoring an offender, especially if the offender is part of their normal living environment. There is a good short list of suggestions for offended persons:

Don't smile.

Deal with the situation immediately.

Don't look away: stare right back.

Don't let someone lean on you or get too close--remove yourself, stand up.

Confront the harasser right away: "Don't touch me; I don't touch you."

Don't go to the harasser for personal advice.

Don't worry about his ego--worry about your own self-respect.

Don't let anyone ask you personal questions, especially in an interview situation.

Try role playing: "How do you think your daughter would feel being treated like this?"

Demand respect.

Use a direct, honest approach.

Embarrass the harasser in front of his peers.

Two recently developed techniques for dealing with harassment which the booklet does not cover are, 1) the writing of letters, by offended persons to offenders, and 2) institution of training programs within academic institutions. There are emerging literatures on these two topics which may be of use to academics.

In summary, I think this Guide is very useful, for individuals and for institutional administrators; I recommend it highly.