



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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## Could You Be Next?

If you think "gender issues" are just for women or just for students, think again: **the job you save may be your own.** Consider this scenario:

You are summoned to the Dean's office and charged with sexual harassment. You are given two options: resign immediately or be recommended for dismissal. Your dean and department head tell you some of the specific complaints but they want your decision even before you are allowed to read the letters of complaint or know the names of your accusers. You are told you must decide quickly whether you will resign.

Is this a melodramatic plot for a made-for-TV movie? Nothing like this really happens--at least not in Cullowhee--right? Wrong. The scenario is all too close to reality, here and across the country. I am shocked to find how little is required to suspend or dismiss a tenured faculty member. You don't need to have touched anyone in inappropriate places or ways. Apparently nothing has to happen behind closed doors. Apparently you need only to be perceived to be harassing--to some students--in the classroom or in the hall.

The administration is compelled to act since Supreme Court rulings in 1992 upheld the right of victims of intentional harassment to sue the University (or other employer) if it does not react quickly and appropriately in response to complaints--and who can wait to determine whether the harassment was intentional? Charges are made and there is a rush to quietly and quickly "dispose of the problem," namely the accused faculty member. And the charges may not be what you would expect for dismissal.

Materials distributed by the University Sexual Harassment Officer at UNC Chapel Hill list five categories defining a continuum of sexually harassing behaviors:

- gender harassment
- seductive behavior
- sexual bribery
- sexual coercion
- sexual imposition

The behaviors are on a continuum of increasing intimidation because sexual harassment is about abuse of power in a sexualized context. The term gender harassment "consists of generalized remarks or behaviors which inappropriately emphasize the sexuality of another person or which communicate insulting, demeaning, or sexist attitudes." Is it reasonable that behavior confined to this lowest step on the continuum be grounds for dismissal? I am extremely troubled, for I fear that many of my friends and colleagues, men nearing retirement age, are ticking time bombs, waiting for the right (wrong?) students to sit in their classes, catalog their speech and body language, and launch formal complaints.

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We have a sexual harassment policy on campus which spells out what a student must do to file a complaint. Do we not also need a detailed policy which spells out the penalties for specific behaviors and assists faculty members to avoid offending (harassing) behaviors? Most of us know that forcing a student into a sexual relationship is harassment, but we may not agree on the gray areas that involve body posture, verbal patterns, loudness of voice, and class assignments which some students may construe as harassment.

The phrases from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission that are intended to define sexual harassment--"verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature" and "creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment"--are so vague that they can also be used to punish free speech in the classroom. Should not the intent to harass be considered as well as whether the student felt harassed in a given situation? If an entire class observes the same behavior and only two indicate that they felt harassed, is the professor to be condemned? It's time administrators and faculty cooperate to describe what is considered as misconduct and specify corresponding penalties.

Shoving sexual harassment complaints into the closet is no way to reduce sexism in the classroom: there must be constructive ways of alerting men to the types of behavior which can apparently be firing offenses. There must be some programs designed to change behavior, not just to catch and fire productive faculty who happen to have been born in an age when "mankind" and "his" were acceptable as terms including women as well as men.

I'm torn in two directions. As a woman I am elated that we have finally been empowered to rid ourselves of unwanted sexual advances and overt pressure for sexual favors. This was long overdue. But as the wife of a male faculty member and friend to many who are now fiftyish--and many are, for the university was growing rapidly when I came in 27 years ago--my heart goes out to men who have been teaching for many years. Behaviors and body language which have been acceptable for all that time are now apparently so "harassing" that these men cannot be rehabilitated and must go, quickly and quietly if possible.

Is this humane? If we empower students to get professors fired for sexist behavior in the classroom, shouldn't we at least make an honest attempt to empower at-risk professors to change behaviors before--and even after--charges are made?

EEOC Guidelines (1980) state that "Prevention is the best tool for the elimination of sexual harassment. An employer should take all steps necessary to prevent sexual harassment from occurring, such as affirmatively raising the subject, expressing strong disapproval, developing appropriate sanctions, informing employees of their rights to raise and how to raise the issue of harassment under Title VII, and developing methods to sensitize all concerned."

I think we are far behind in providing faculty with what public schools would call "in-service" programs in the area of sexual harassment. The Gender Issues group on campus is certainly a start, but participation is voluntary and it may not attract the group of faculty most at risk. We need to set up mechanisms for resolving conflict between faculty and students rather than just accusing and dismissing. It seems to me past time we had programs in place to bring together faculty and students in such a way that there is common understanding about what is acceptable and what is considered harassing in the teaching/learning environment.

**Linda DelForge, Biology**

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If you would like to respond to this opinion piece, please send your comments by the 8th of the month to the FCTE. If possible, send to TNienhuis by VAX or by WP Mail. Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.