

Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

Responses to "Could You Be Next?"

by Linda DeForge, 10/1/93

When I read Linda's opinion piece, I thought about the anecdote concerning ordinary citizens and the Nazis before WW II:

"When they came for the gays, I did nothing. When they came for the infirm, I did nothing. When they came for the mentally defective, I did nothing. When they came for the Christians, I did nothing. When they came for the Jews, I did nothing. When they came for me, there was no one left to help."

The issue here is due process for faculty. If any faculty member can be accused and forced to "choose" a penalty before seeing the letters and accusers, any of us can be dismissed with charges, whether trumped up or real. There must be some sort of preliminary hearing that provides protection of the ACCUSED person, as well as the accusers.

A personal experience: I was called into the Dean's office about 10 years ago. I was accused in the presence of the Department Head of some vague offense purportedly committed during a class. No accusers, just the Dean attempting to get me to admit to something that he had not defined. I still don't know what I was accused of or who did the accusing. I asked for more information about the offense and who might be complaining, but that was not forthcoming. The explanation was that if I were told, it would become a "matter of record." The Department head smoothed things over somehow, and I returned to my office, but with a new view of that Dean.

I close with a quote from Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas: "As the nightfall does not come at once, neither does oppression. It is in such twilight that we must all be aware of change in the air--however slight--lest we become unwitting victims of the darkness."

David Teague, Mathematics and CS

While many of us believe we know the line between harassment and the proper exchange of ideas in an academic setting, the general feeling at WCU seems to be, "it couldn't be me, so it's not my concern." But judging from the scenario Linda sketches out, all of us should bring these issues into open debate, without delay. If we--whose jobs depend on our abilities to think logically and present our ideas lucidly--cannot provide clearer language for preventing sexual harassment than "generalized remarks or behaviors which inappropriately emphasize the sexuality of another person or which communicate insulting, demeaning, or sexist attitudes," then perhaps we don't deserve our positions.

It certainly behooves us, as well, to treat claims of harassment as seriously as we would claims of "bad teaching," as warning signs that there are problems that perhaps must be dealt with. But treating harassing behaviors as grounds for dismissal without carefully defining what harassing behaviors are will certainly not increase the humane qualities of our community. In fact, such procedures may produce a "witch-hunt" mentality in which otherwise decent teachers decide that they will not discuss anything--in class or out--which might, from any perspective, be construed as giving offense to anyone. After all, in a litigious society, one worries first about getting sued and only secondly about living a fulfilled and fulfilling life in a human community of scholars (or scholarship, if you prefer).

I commend Linda for presenting so forceful a call for action on this point, and I ask that the rest of us not hide behind the moralistic screen of "it can't happen to me." If it happens to any one of our colleagues, we need to ask rather, "how can we prevent such problems from occurring again?"

Steve Eberly, English

Responses to Linda DelForge

continued

One should not be startled if charges of sexual harassment are not handled with sensitivity by the University administrators. In the past they have always dealt with sexual harassment by ignoring it. Some administrators may be guilty of sexual harassment themselves. Considering these circumstances, no one should be shocked if administrators do not have a deft touch in dealing with it. Crimes unpunished are crimes none-the-less, and chronic, on-going, sexist behavior must no longer be tolerated, ignored, or excused. Sexual harassment is just one type of discrimination against women on this campus, and it is the least subtle form.

I should think that many male employees who are "fiftyish" might be offended by the assumption that they had been regularly engaging in behavior considered by most people to be socially unacceptable, if not illegal. But many men of this age are guilty of some degree of harassment, and all are guilty of tolerating it, though some have been thoroughly embarrassed by the behavior of particular colleagues.

One could hardly live in the electric atmosphere in this country since the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill debacle without knowing that times are changing for men of all ages. Removal "for cause" of a tenured member of the faculty is a very serious matter, and failure to acknowledge enlightened attitudes in our society, which clearly extend into the University community, indicates a certain dullness of intellect. Let the "ticking time bombs" beware. Let the pendulum swing. Let the heads roll.

anonymous

While I wholeheartedly agree with the thrust of Linda's piece I confess I am a bit bothered by the seeming implication that only males can be the instigators of such harassment. Sexism can cut both ways, and while it may be much more common one way than the other all of us need to be concerned about this issue, especially when there is such a lack of clear-cut definitions and so much seems to depend on perception, regardless of intent (or even overt actions).

Richard Beam, Comm. & Theatre Arts

Kudos to Linda DelForge for her strong and timely call to "set up mechanisms for resolving conflict between faculty and students rather than just accusing and dismissing." In a Western After Hours focus group two years ago and a Gender Issues meeting last spring, I heard students make similar calls for student-faculty dialogues. As our national, judicial, and penal systems demonstrate, mere disciplinary sanctions often leave all parties dissatisfied and the risk of repetition high. Add my voice to these calls for new "mechanisms" or "dialogues." And, so, who will answer?

**Chris Gunn, Counseling &
Psychological Services**

On June 2, 1993, the American Association of University Women released the report, Hostile Hallways: The AAUW Survey on Sexual Harassment in America's Schools. Among its conclusions were the following: sexual harassment in school is widespread; harassing others is a routine part of school culture; public areas are the most common harassment sites; students usually do not report incidents to adults; and notably higher numbers of girls than boys say they have suffered as a result of sexual harassment in school. According to Judith Scott, University Sexual Harassment Officer at UNC-Chapel Hill, socialized sexism is the major factor contributing to sexual harassment. As she explains: "Sex and gender-role stereotyping mean that social norms encourage it, adults do not disparage or actively discourage it, and young people don't respond to it with understanding or clear communication. Adult failure to appreciate the devastating social impact of stereotyped attitudes and behaviors mean a lack of effective policy, procedures, and preventive education." As a female faculty member, AAUW member, and mother whose daughter experienced her first sexual harassment at age five on the school bus, I applaud and support Linda DelForge's call to action. Sexual harassment will continue to exist as long as we fail to treat it seriously. The message must be clear: control and intimidation of any type have no place in our environment.

**Lynn R. Heinrichs,
Accounting/IS/Management**