



Go Ask Rog—Sexual Harassment Advice for Graduate Students

(The following situation is fictitious and utilized solely for educational purposes. Any similarity to actual persons or circumstances is coincidental and unintentional.)

Dear Rog:

*My advisor is kind of a bully. He often uses expressions such as “Dick for brains,” “As useless as tits on a nun,” and “I’ll bet my left testicle.” This might not seem so terrible, but he’s also really intimidating. He yells “What the f***?” and “Read your f***** syllabus!” when someone asks him a question that he thinks is dumb. Even when he’s not using profanity, he gets right in people’s faces when he’s angry. Several times he has banged his fist on the desk to make the point that we are wasting his time. The male graduate students don’t seem to appreciate the angry bullying either, but they don’t seem as bothered by it as I am. Should I just try to grow a thicker skin?*

Dear Grad:

Nobody likes a bully and few of us are brave enough to stand up to one. Even other faculty may be offended by your advisor’s behavior but may, like most of us, be loath to confront him. People might think nothing can be done, but there is a solution to this issue.

Is this behavior just rude or could it be sexual harassment? Sexual harassment is unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that is so severe or pervasive that it creates a hostile environment for a reasonable person. While one isolated comment may not be so serious, repeated sexual comments that are unrelated to the course content or research can unreasonably interfere with your educational experience. Repeated invasion of personal space or other inappropriate physical behavior might also create a hostile environment.

Do male students react differently to his comments than female students? A recent federal court decision stated that non-sexual bullying, including screaming and use of profanity, could constitute sex-based harassment if there is evidence that the impact of the harassment on females was different from the impact on

males. Sometimes sexual harassment is not about sexual or romantic interest; it is about bullying or intimidation. Comments alluding to sexual anatomy and fist pounding may create a locker room climate that is unwelcoming to women.

So what about free speech? Doesn't the faculty member have the right to make these remarks? The UCSD sexual harassment policy is intended to prohibit discrimination based on sex, not to regulate protected speech. However, freedom of speech is not limitless. It seems that this professor's comments have little to do with academic research or course content. His speech coupled with his physical behavior may have the effect of intimidating others rather than leading to a healthy exchange of intellectual ideas.

I suggest that you contact the Office of Sexual Harassment Prevention & Policy (OSHPP) at (858) 534-8298 or email oshpp@ucsd.edu. You can get advice from OSHPP without filing a complaint. You may also maintain your anonymity in certain circumstances. OSHPP provides education to the entire UCSD community about sexual harassment and gender discrimination issues. There are ways of addressing this type of behavior which we could discuss with you.

So Grad, you don't have to tolerate bullying behavior. You have the right to study in a harassment free environment and OSHPP is here to help resolve these sensitive issues.