

Grad to Grad  
Spring Quarter 2003

### **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:*

*I share an office with other graduate students in my department. Some of them routinely talk about the undergrads in their sections. They don't just speak about students' academic performance; they often talk about who's "hot" and who's not. I've overheard some of my colleagues jokingly complain that there aren't enough hot men and women at UCSD. I know they are just having fun and letting off steam, but I'm tired of listening to it. I don't want to be uncool and ask them to stop. Lately though, I've avoided spending time in the office because I'm so bugged. Any suggestions on how I can deal with this situation?*

Dear Grad:

If your colleagues are grading students based on sex appeal rather than academic achievement, that would be a case of gender discrimination—which is, of course, illegal. Assuming that there is no outright gender discrimination, your question raises the important issues of third party harassment, office etiquette, and professionalism. Third party sexual harassment, also known as bystander harassment or environmental harassment, occurs when someone like yourself is unwillingly a captive audience to co-workers' inappropriate sexual banter or innuendos in the workplace. Although you are not a party to the conversation, it affects your ability to do your job. If the unwelcome sexual behavior is serious or persistent, you find it offensive, and any reasonable person in your shoes would also find it offensive, then it is sexual harassment. The people who are discussing who's hot on a routine basis may be creating a hostile environment for you and they may be unreasonably interfering with your ability to get your work done.

A recent national survey found that 33.7% of employees heard sexually inappropriate comments in the workplace during 2002. The survey also found that younger workers were twice as likely as older employees to have heard such sexual talk at work (43.4% of those under age 35 versus 23.2% of those age 55-64).

Other types of behavior that might create a hostile environment for third parties include sexually explicit screensavers, calendars, posters, or magazines, as well as viewing and downloading inappropriate sexual material from the Internet that is not utilized for academic pursuits.

You do have options for addressing the situation. You could say “It makes me uncomfortable when you talk that way.” If you do not feel comfortable asking your officemates to knock it off, you may contact your department administrator or the Office of Sexual Harassment Prevention & Policy (OSHPP). You can get informal assistance in stopping the offensive behavior and you can also get advice without filing a complaint. We can help you stop the behavior without making the matter into a headline for *The New York Times* or even *The UCSD Guardian*.

The best office etiquette requires consideration for others around you and recognition that work may not be the best place for sexually-based humor. You have the right to be comfortable in your assigned office space. All UCSD community members have a responsibility to ensure a respectful work and educational environment that is free from sexual harassment.

For solutions, contact OSHPP at (858) 534-8298 or <http://oshpp.ucsd.edu>. We are located at 201 University Center on the corner of Gilman and Myers.