

Grad to Grad Spring 2005



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:

A popular professor in my department routinely socializes with his graduate TA's and undergrads. He often joins us for happy hour and he mixes martinis when we meet in his office. I've noticed that after he has a few cocktails, he makes multiple sexual innuendos and snarky remarks about other students and faculty. He also gets more physical when he drinks and puts his arms around our shoulders. We all laugh at his comments but I wonder if some people feel uncomfortable. I mentioned this in passing to another professor. I guess she must have talked to him because now he won't even look at me. He and the other TA's seem really ticked off at me like they think I'm a narc or something. Should I have just kept my mouth shut?

Dear Grad:

You find yourself in a tough position of wanting to protect others from potentially negative behavior and wanting to stay on good terms with your department colleagues. Someone who is not the direct target of harassment may still be offended by it. Yet people are often reluctant to report inappropriate behavior because they are afraid of adverse repercussions.

Blurring boundaries can lead to misunderstandings, unmet expectations and perceptions of bias. This professor is playing a risky game that could have negative consequences on his career. In 2002, the dean of Boalt Hall School of Law resigned because of sexual harassment allegations. He too enjoyed socializing with students and after a night of drinking, he went home with a female law student. The former dean admitted that they had consensual sexual touching; the student stated that there was no consent because she had passed out when he touched her.

Under UCSD policy, any member of the University community can report conduct that might constitute sexual harassment. You did nothing wrong by informing another faculty member that this professor's behavior may cross the line.

Sometimes witnesses to sexual harassment can remain anonymous. UCSD has a hotline where you can make a confidential report of potential violations of laws or policies, including fraud, misuse of University property or discriminatory practices. The UCSD Hotline is available 24/7 at (877) 319-0265. You may also contact the Office of Sexual Harassment Prevention & Policy (OSHPP) to receive information about resolution options. You can get advice from OSHPP without filing a complaint.

Remember that witnesses to sexual harassment are protected against retaliation which is a violation of federal and state laws, as well as our University policy. Retaliation includes threats, intimidation, reprisals, and/or adverse actions related to your education or employment. If you believe that you are being retaliated against for talking to a professor about potentially sexually harassing behavior, please contact OSHPP at 534-8298 or email oshpp@ucsd.edu.

Grad, I understand that you might be feeling bad for saying something about your professor. Doing the right thing is not nearly as convenient as doing nothing at all. Silence is a big obstacle to effectively responding to harassment issues and passive bystanders are not the ones who seize opportunities to change our culture. By speaking up, you have helped us to maintain a harassment free environment at UCSD.