

Grad to Grad Spring 2007



### **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 am a TA and one of my students has been making comments that annoy me. He has called me a “hot Latina” and said he thought I was “muy caliente.” He also refers to some of the homework assignments as “bitch work.” I have tried to explain why I find these remarks offensive, but I don’t think he gets it. What more can I do?*

Dear Grad:

Sometimes gender bias intersects with racial stereotypes. Verbal behavior including use of derogatory terms can create a hostile work or educational environment. It isn’t much fun being reduced to a cultural stereotype, so here’s what you need to know about UCSD policy.

Under our Policy on Sexual Harassment, harassment that is not sexual in nature but is based on sex stereotyping is also prohibited if it is severe or pervasive. The University also has a nondiscrimination policy which applies to students, staff and faculty.

There has been recent news coverage of celebrities who have made inappropriate sexual and racial comments. Governor Schwarzenegger faced political heat for implying that Assemblywoman Bonnie Garcia was a fiery, hot Latina. The Governor publicly apologized for his comments and met with leaders from different ethnic groups. Director Mel Gibson made anti-Semitic comments during his arrest for driving under the influence of alcohol. He also uttered a sexual insult to a female police officer. Actor Isaiah Washington was criticized for using a homophobic slur on the set of the popular TV show, “Grey’s Anatomy.” More recently, radio host Don Imus was fired for making sexist and racist

comments about the Rutgers Women's basketball team. Hopefully, we can all learn from the mistakes of these public figures.

Has your student violated policy? It depends. To determine whether a policy violation has occurred, we evaluate the totality of the circumstances including the frequency of the comments and the context. For example, discussion of racial and sexual stereotypes might be relevant to the course material in the Chicano Latino Arts and Humanities Minor or in a critical gender studies class. In that case, a course related discussion of the term "hot Latina" could be protected by academic freedom. However, this term would probably be out of place in a biochemistry or computer science engineering course. Context matters.

So what if you again confront your student who responds that he meant his comments to be complimentary because he admires your drive and passion for the course material? In sexual harassment issues, the impact of the behavior on the listener is more relevant than the intent of the person making the offensive comments. Your student may not realize how his words affect others. In addition, the use of a term such as "bitch work" is inappropriate in an academic setting. He might not fully comprehend professional boundaries between students and TA's.

I suggest that you consult with the Office of Sexual Harassment Prevention & Policy (OSHPP). You can get advice without filing a complaint. OSHPP will review your options with you and offer assistance to stop the harassing behavior. We also have an online program for students, ***Preventing Sexual Harassment***, which is accessible from the OSHPP website at <http://oshpp.ucsd.edu>.

Grad, one of the most helpful resources to you is OSHPP. We collaborate with other campus offices such as the Women's Center, Cross Cultural Center and LGBT Resource Center to enhance your UCSD experience. We are here to help.