

Grad to Grad Winter 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 work in the lab of Dr. Blue who is a renowned expert in her field. I am usually the last one to leave the lab in the evening. When Dr. Blue is there in the evening, we sometimes talk about personal stuff like who I'm dating, where I work out, and what my family is up to. Sometimes Dr. Blue brings me gifts like coffee beans, chocolate, interesting newspaper articles or science journals that she has finished reading. A few times, I have borrowed some of her CD's and DVD's. I was talking about my routine in the lab and one of my colleagues warned me that Dr. Blue might be romantically interested in me. Am I being sexually harassed and don't know it?

Dear Grad:

You raise a good question about whether someone can be sexually harassed without knowing it. **Sexual harassment is defined as unwelcome sexual conduct that is so severe or pervasive, it causes a reasonable person to feel that he or she is working or studying in a hostile environment.** The legal definition requires unwelcomeness—in other words, unwanted, not mutual, uninvited sexual behavior. You should ask yourself whether you find Dr. Blue's attention friendly, mutual, or professional. Also ask yourself whether your interaction with Dr. Blue makes you feel uncomfortable, offended, or embarrassed. If your answers are "yes" to the first question, and "no" to the second, then you are not being sexually harassed.

However, sometimes unwanted gifts and unwelcome personal attention can lead to harassment if the behavior is repeated, sexual, and accompanied by other inappropriate acts. To determine whether the behavior violates University policy, we look at all of the circumstances including the frequency of the conduct, the severity of the conduct, the degree to which the conduct adversely impacts the work or educational environment and the relationship between the parties.

What if the gifts become overly generous or highly personal? For example, what if Dr. Blue invites you to take a trip away with her? If Dr. Blue invites you to attend an out-of-town conference with her, make sure that appropriate arrangements are made for your hotel accommodations. Despite budget concerns, I advise you to reserve your own hotel room on professional trips. What if she gives you intimate apparel or gift certificates for spa services such as massages? In that case, you may no longer welcome Dr. Blue's personal attention. You might feel pressure to accept such gifts because of Dr. Blue's

status and position as your supervisor. You are under no obligation to accept these gifts. Remember that you have the right to be free from coercion, intimidation, and sexual harassment at UCSD.

Is Dr. Blue friendlier with you than she is with others who work in the lab?

If so, some researchers might complain that you are receiving favoritism because of your close connection with her. Declining personal gifts is a practical way to avoid your colleagues' speculation about the nature of your relationship with Dr. Blue.

If you do become uneasy with the level of familiarity between you and Dr. Blue, please consult with the Office of Sexual Harassment Prevention and Policy (OSHPP) at 534-8298 or email oshpp@ucsd.edu. You can get advice from OSHPP without filing a complaint. OSHPP also hosts an online education program, ***Preventing Sexual Harassment***, which includes hypothetical questions, behavioral examples and self-paced quizzes. Log on to <http://oshpp.ucsd.edu> and click on "education programs".

So Grad, it is alright to maintain a friendly, cordial relationship with your P.I., but also be aware of professional boundaries. You are likely the best judge to determine whether someone is harassing you. If in doubt, ask for help from OSHPP.