



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 have been doing research in a lab at UCSD. I am getting excellent experience but I don't really feel like I belong because the environment here is unfriendly. Naturally, I do not expect to be best friends with my colleagues, but they often ignore me. For example, my P.I. rarely makes eye contact with me and has neglected to introduce me to others in the lab. Also, I have missed some lab meetings because no one notified me. I'm trying not to take it personally, but I am starting to get the feeling that they don't want me here. What should I do?

Dear Grad:

You have raised two important issues of collegiality and subtle discrimination.

Collegiality is something that can contribute to a positive working environment. We enjoy coming to work when we get along with our colleagues. A collegial atmosphere promotes respect, collaboration, and civility. Lack of collegiality is sometimes noted as a reason for denying an academic appointment or promotion. However, collegiality is like obscenity—it's often hard to define, but we know it when we see it.

Does lack of collegiality indicate bias or discrimination? It depends. If the department is predominately male, you are one of few females, and you believe you are being treated differently because you are female, then that is problematic and potentially illegal.

Is an unfriendly environment the same as a hostile environment? Not necessarily. The phrase "hostile environment" is a legal concept that encompasses a wide range of harassing, offensive, or intimidating behavior that is so severe or pervasive, it unreasonably interferes with a person's work or educational performance.

You have experienced behavior that could be attributed to a lack of collegiality, gender communication differences, or just plain old rudeness. Nevertheless, the microinequities you mentioned (not being introduced, not being informed of important meetings) can lead to feelings of isolation and frustration.

Microinequities are the seemingly trivial events that are repeated and diminish equality by excluding a person who is different. Maybe you are perceived as being different because of your gender or sexual orientation. In any case, this type of subtle discrimination decreases your confidence and performance. Gender-based discrimination, which may include verbal or nonverbal harassment, intimidation or hostility based on a person's gender or sexual orientation, is against UCSD policy. Although gender-based discrimination may be distinguished from sexual harassment, this type of behavior may also contribute to the creation of a hostile work or academic environment.

Grad, I recommend that you seek support from other graduate students. Perhaps others have experienced similar behavior from your colleagues. Maybe the conduct you described is not personally directed at you, but is representative of that particular lab's culture.

You may also want to think about whether you wish to continue working with this P.I. in an unfriendly environment. Think about how your P.I.'s attitude toward you might affect your overall career. While changing a P.I. can set back your research, it might be wise to "cut your losses." Working with a more supportive P.I. may be to your advantage in the long run.

If you believe that this behavior is based on gender, sex-stereotyping, or sexual orientation, I suggest you contact the UCSD Office of Sexual Harassment Prevention & Policy (OSHPP) for assistance. University policy, federal and state laws prohibit discrimination based on sex, gender, sexual orientation, and in California, gender identity.

Solutions found here. OSHPP 201 University Center (858) 534-8298
<http://oshpp.ucsd.edu>.