



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'm having an issue with my advisor and I'm not sure what to do. She asks me frequently who I'm dating and whether I ever want to get married. I was vague at first and didn't tell her I am a lesbian because I didn't want to be out to her. She was so persistent with the relationship questions that I finally told her I'm queer. Now she asks me even more personal questions like how does it feel to be intimate with a woman, whether I go to lesbian bars, and if I watch "The L Word." I know she isn't hitting on me and I'm sure she doesn't intend to make me feel weird. But it seems that now she views me as a lesbian with a capital "L" and not just a grad student. What should I do?

Dear Grad:

You raise the issue of how to have friendly interactions while maintaining professional distance with your advisor. Here are some things you should know.

Sexual harassment is not always based on sexual or romantic desire. Many people think sexual harassment is related only to unwanted requests for dates but it can cover a wide range of behavior. Unwelcome conduct that is based on sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or sex stereotyping that is so severe or pervasive it unreasonably interferes with your ability to study could be sexual harassment. Sexual harassment can also occur between people of the same sex. Determining whether certain behavior constitutes sexual harassment depends on all of the surrounding circumstances.

In your situation, it seems as though your advisor is curious about the lesbian community or maybe she is trying to get to know you better. Although she may not intend to, she is making you feel uncomfortable. It is the impact of her behavior on you, rather than her intent, that is most relevant.

How can you tell her that you would rather discuss your research instead of your personal life? You should contact the Office of Sexual Harassment Prevention and Policy (OSHPP) where you can get advice without filing a complaint. OSHPP will discuss your options with you and ways to help your advisor understand that her questions are unwelcome. Sometimes issues can be resolved anonymously. OSHPP could provide your advisor with a reminder about our policy without ever mentioning your name.

You may also want to get involved with the Queer Grad Professionals Group which meets quarterly at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Resource Center on campus. You will be able to get support and advice from your peers about handling delicate situations like this.

Remember Grad, you have the right to study and conduct your research in a harassment free environment. Many of us share details about our personal lives when we work closely with someone. When those conversations cross the line, it is always a good idea to ask for help. OSHPP at <http://oshpp.ucsd.edu> and the LGBT Resource Center at <http://lgbt.ucsd.edu> are here for you.