

Professionalism Before Gender: The Evolution of a Dialogue on Sexual Harassment

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In the summer of 1989, a woman graduate student in Civil Engineering at The University of Texas at Austin went to a University student affairs office to obtain some information on sexual harassment: what it is and how to report it. She was told that her department should have the information, but when she returned to the CE office, specific procedures and policies were still difficult to track down. More unfortunately, she felt that suddenly everyone in her department was aware of her very personal and (until then) private dilemma. She didn't file a complaint, but she did talk to her fellow students about her situation.

This is the story of a group of women graduate students who decided to do something positive about changing the climate of fear and sexism (often unintentional) that they felt was hindering them from having a fully productive graduate experience. Three facts need to be stated up front as a framework for this story. 1) The University of Texas has recently reinforced and rewritten its policy on sexual harassment and, equally important, has made the information much more accessible, producing a well-designed brochure. 2) No one involved in this story has ever suggested that the U.T. CE department has more problems with sexual harassment incidents and issues than any other engineering department of the engineering workplace. 3) Sexual harassment is one of the most controversial issues of our time. The purpose of this paper is not to promulgate definitions of harassment or policies for dealing with it but to offer the record of what happened when some women graduate students decided to come together to open up a dialogue on the issue, first among themselves, and later with all members of the department. If there is a moral to this story it is that everybody wins when students are encouraged to discuss openly and constructively all issues that relate to the environment in which they are acquiring a sense of their own academic and professional development.

Sometime in the fall of 1989, several women graduate students in Environmental and Water Resources Engineering (including the information-seeking student) asked me to act as advisor for a discussion group on what could be done about the sometimes "chilly" climate for women in engineering in general and in the department in particular. Since information on sexual harassment was so difficult to come by, they thought that they could try to disseminate information at a grassroots level. I am one of

two women on the CE faculty, and the other (a geotechnical engineer) was on leave that semester. Three or four students started meeting in my office, but as they began to reach out to women in other areas of the department, we soon found that we needed more room.

For the next three months or so we met at my house about once a week in the early evening over pizza. At first, the content of these meetings was "war stories" about being a woman in a man's profession, about being the only woman in class, in the lab, in meetings, on field trips, at conferences—not always the **only** woman, but almost always one of very few women. We talked about incidents that had made us uncomfortable, especially male colleagues or faculty or bosses saying or doing things to which we didn't know how to respond. Often the women weren't even sure exactly **why** they were made uncomfortable. For a while the group was primarily a support group that allowed us to raise hitherto unarticulated questions:

- Why did (usually positive) comments on our appearance make us nervous?
- How should we conduct ourselves at male-dominated conferences: Is it OK to go out with a male colleague for a beer to discuss his paper? Will he take such an invitation the wrong way?
- Would telling a professor that a remark he made in class seemed sexist be committing academic and professional suicide?
- Why didn't we say something when a professor slapped us lightly on the fanny with a rolled up paper? Why didn't we say, "That makes me uncomfortable; please don't do that," instead of just giggling nervously?

I have never particularly been a feminist, but I found myself very moved by the intensity with which these young women were wrestling with moral and psychosexual realities around them. They had internalized a lot of their struggle to behave properly and live comfortably; they really agonized over their failure (as they saw it) to address inappropriate remarks and behavior head on. Time and time again, someone would say, "What I should have done was..." This was not male bashing (as those men who knew of these meetings probably thought); this was introspective analysis and, oddly, a kind of blame-accepting ("If I just had been brave enough to say something the first time, then I wouldn't

have to keep dealing with this”).

About mid-spring the group made a decision to try to improve things for those students who would come after them by writing up some of the ‘results’ of these meetings. I suggested they take a look at a report written by MIT women graduate students in Computer Science in 1983, *Barriers to Academic Freedom*. They decided to use this report as a model and set about writing a much shorter version, using a similar organizational structure:

- an introduction of the problem
- an anecdotal section describing various incidents and how those made the women feel (without naming any names or giving identifying information)
- a conclusion and recommendation section.

At this point, the group decided that it was time to solicit feedback from male colleagues who had privately expressed interest to some of the women in helping define and describe the issues. The point of writing the report was to communicate to all current students and all incoming students the importance of being sensitive to certain behaviors that might make someone feel that her or his gender is more important than her or his professional identity. (The women students were quite cynical about being able to educate certain faculty and staff about these behaviors.) Since I would be away in the summer, I asked a male colleague, Dr. Desmond Lawler, to take over as advisor for the group. Men and women graduate students met at Dr. Lawler’s house in June of 1990 and finalized the report. It was titled “Professionalism Before Gender: A report on Gender-Related Issues in the Department of Civil Engineering at The University of Texas at Austin.”

The report is only six pages in length, almost half of which is a descriptive list of personally discomfiting incidents (again, without any identifying details) divided into categories such as Patronizing Behavior, Visual and Verbal Obscenities, Unwanted Attention. Although many of the incidents are blatant examples of sexism, one of the categories, Exclusionary Comments, contains statements that many people might not consider sexist but which have unpleasant repercussions for the women recipients:

- “A professor explained why he chose to single out a female student in class, ‘Because you’re good looking and you’re a sport.’ This was said in front of the class. The professor obviously meant to be complimentary, but he made the woman feel uncomfortable and different.”
- “After he uses the generic ‘he,’ one of my professors always looks straight at me (often the only woman in the room) and adds, ‘and she.’ He is trying not to discriminate but instead is making me, along with the rest of the class, aware that I am different.”

The report ends with conclusions and recommendations for everyone involved in the academic enterprise. I excerpt these in the entirety.

“Engineering is an exciting and challenging profession. All of us benefit from an egalitarian environment and positive interaction with our colleagues. In order to continue personal and professional growth we need to create an environment which encourages such positive interactions.

Everyone must first recognize that situations exist where gender is placed before professionalism. Faculty, students and staff have the responsibility to take appropriate action. The following are some suggested actions.

Actions Faculty Might Take:

- Create a supportive classroom environment
- Make a conscious effort to eradicate sexist behavior in oneself and others
- Take responsibility for removing offensive visual material in the department
- Avoid sexual examples to explain concepts in class

Actions Female Students Might Take:

- Immediately confront the person responsible for the offending action
- Talk to other students about these issues
- Participate in discussion groups to increase your own awareness and receive support

Actions Male Students Might Take:

- Speak up when you see or hear offensive behaviors
- Support women who find themselves in a specific difficult situation
- Encourage a supportive attitude among fellow male students

Remember:

- Ignoring a situation does not make it go away
- Silence implies approval; it is everyone’s responsibility to take action
- Think before you speak
- Have respect for all your colleagues”

At the initiative of the CE chairman, C. Michael Walton, the report was circulated that August to all CE staff, graduate students, and faculty, and it was discussed at our annual Faculty Advance. The response was, by my estimation, cautiously favorable. Almost everyone said it was laudable, but some said certain incidents described seem too petty to be regarded as “discomfiting.” In the two years’ since the report’s issue, I have been told privately by several people that their response veered between thinking, “No, that couldn’t really go on here!” and thinking, “Oh well, that remark seems perfectly innocuous.” The women students who compiled the report have all graduated and left by now, and no one is quite sure whether to reissue the report on an annual basis or just let it lie. This week we are sending a memo to graduate students and faculty reminding them of the report’s existence and where copies can be found.

I have no way to measure the effectiveness of the report in discouraging sexist behavior in the department over the last two years. But I do believe that the women who met and discussed and produced that report have left a legacy behind. They opened up these sensitive issues for the first time to general discussion in our department. They helped remove some of the cloak of secrecy and fear that has made varying forms of sexual harassment possible on our campuses for decades. No one could say, after reading their report, "Oh well, that sort of thing doesn't go on here." And in reaching out to the students who would come after them, by leaving behind a published record of their experiences and their suggestions for change, they have helped foster a more open, more comfortable, more productive and ultimately more intellectually stimulating environment for each one of us in the department.