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HARASSMENT AT MIT: THINK
PREVENTION

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Harassment at MIT: Think Prevention

Mary Rowe

Is there more harassing and mean behavior in US institutions? Is it an increase in reporting or an increase in behavior? I believe that there is an increase in reporting and an increase in harassing behavior, all over the country, and at MIT.

In 1973 MIT was probably the first major employer and the first academic institution in the US to use the term harassment and to develop policies and procedures about offensive, intimidating and hostile behavior that has the intent or effect of unreasonable disruption of the

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educational or work environment. (The present policy (see box, page ?) developed from recommendations of a faculty committee chaired by Peter Elias ten years ago.) Not only have we worked on these questions and developed some of the more widely recommended procedures for dealing with harassment concerns, but we have had, since 1973, two presidents and three provosts who feel strongly about the subject.

In fact most people at MIT feel really strongly that harassment is unacceptable. Those who care a lot about diversity and equal opportunity find harassment repugnant, cruel, contemptible. The least consciousness-raised among us still rejects harassment: it distorts the meritocracy and pursuit of excellence that is MIT. Like its Janus-twin favoritism, harassment distorts the environment so that creativity and

genius are twisted out of their proper paths. Harassment is an unacceptable corrosion of objective excellence and accomplishment.

So how are we doing? I am concerned about this question. Let me give you some reasons. I am contacted by MIT people hundreds of times a year about harassment. Some is sexual: drunken advances in living units, pawing and propositions, posters and graffiti, jokes, a dildo at Christmas. Some is based on gender, on sexual orientation, on religion and color and nationality and appearance. Some is based on race: a failure to invite one person, the only African American in the office, to any office birthday party or picnic. Some is just plain human meanness: grossly foul language, interference with work in the lab, humiliating public tantrums, the faculty member who won't read a graduate student's thesis for months and months, or keeps breaking appointments or the administrator who is unconscionably offensive with a support staff person. (In an April 1988 survey the most common harassment concerns were from graduate students upset about unreasonably mean behavior from faculty members; in recent weeks a number of support staff have reported very mean behavior from faculty, staff, students.)

Am I talking about a wide range of behavior? Yes. Would everyone here agree that a slide of a partly clad woman in a science lecture is harassment? No. One person's ethnic joke causes another to lose sleep, one person's tirade seems like normal behavior to another. The student who harasses a professor may think "it is just a hack." People also sometimes harass each other. These are among the many reasons that it is difficult to keep statistics. But whether you would agree that a given incident is or is not harassment, there

are hundreds of MIT people a year who contact me, who feel their lives "unreasonably disrupted." And I am just one of the several dozen people who hear a lot about harassment.

Another reason I am concerned is that too many of these incidents cause demonstrable damage. A graduate student is recalled to her home country just short of her PhD because of a defamatory letter sent to her parents. Each year several dozen faculty, staff, and students report being quite frightened by obsessed persons harassing them. A handful of people injure each other physically. A handful of women and men each year report that they give in to sexual coercion. Another handful quit courses or projects or employment at MIT because they will not give in to what they see as coercion. Students and secretaries warn each other away from a handful of MIT students and professors and employees, letting each other know of the student who makes anti-Semitic remarks, the A.O. who does not want to work with people of color, the professor who stands in the hall and stares at women or calls them late at night, or makes suggestive remarks in the office.

I am also concerned because harassment really is disruptive. Loss of sleep, pinched neck, inability to concentrate, unexpected tears, loss of appetite, a loss of interest in making love, stomach ache, fury, sadness, frustration, fear and heartache accompany harassed persons into my office; on the average at least two or three times a day.

I am also concerned because harassment is a peculiar problem to deal with. First of all people disagree strongly about what harassment is, especially if a case goes formal. And only about one case in a hundred has enough evidence of wrong-doing for a responsible (fair process)

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administration to punish an offender. And at least 90% of offended persons ask to pursue one of a variety of informal and confidential options with respect to their concerns; these cases rarely come to light. For these reasons, the community at large does not readily comprehend the extent to which MIT people feel their lives unreasonably disrupted by mean behavior.

In the past two years we have seen strong initiatives from MIT student groups concerned with racial, religious and sexual harassment (including people working on acquaintance rape). For example a group composed mainly of graduate student women has called for sweeping change of MIT policy and procedures on sexual harassment.

The ODSA, COD, Personnel Offices and Campus Police have streamlined their formal processes and

extended their outreach. John Deutch, Jay Keyser, past and present Faculty Chairs, Shirley McBay, Constantine Simonides, the Working Group on Support Staff Issues and various academic and administrative department heads have been working actively in recent months on various specific initiatives including wider publication of aggregate data on complaints, support to those who are harassed anonymously, Tell Someone booklets, and a proposal for a new Provost's Committee on Sexual Harassment.

What can an individual faculty member do? Please encourage those who feel harassed to "tell someone"--to consider the wide variety of adjudicative and problem-solving options open to offended people. If you see harassment, stop it. If you know someone who harasses, ask them to seek counsel. (Confidential counsel

is open to all.) Mean, violent, sexist and racist behavior is more prominent all over the U.S. But we need not tolerate it at MIT.

Do people who harass know they are doing it? Sometimes not. It is important to encourage someone who is being meanly treated to talk with the person of their choice: a religious counsellor, a health care or personal assistance practitioner, a supervisor, a dean, an advisor, a personnel officer, a department or lab head, a housemaster, a graduate resident, the Campus Police, a friend, yourself, my colleague Clarence Williams or me. But prevention is even better. Each of us should also encourage those who treat others meanly to seek advice. If you know someone who is harassing others, please do not collude with the behavior; please help get the behavior to stop.

Policy on Harassment

Harassment of any kind is unacceptable at MIT and is in conflict with the policies and interests of the Institute. Moreover, many forms of harassment have been recognized as violations of the civil rights laws, by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and by the courts.

Harassment is defined as verbal or physical conduct which has the intent or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's or group's educational and/or work performance at MIT or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive educational and work environment on or off campus. Harassment on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, or sexual orientation includes harassment of an individual in terms of a stereotyped group characteristic, or because of that person's identification with a particular group. With reference to sexual harassment, the definition also includes unwelcome sexual advances and requests for sexual favors which might be perceived as explicitly or implicitly affecting educational or employment decisions concerning an individual.

Any member of the MIT Community who believes that he or she has been harassed is encouraged to raise the issue, or lodge a complaint, in accordance with the established grievance procedures of MIT described in Section 3.24.

From MIT's Policies and Procedures.