

DRAWING

SEXUAL HARASSMENT ON CAMPUS

THE LINE

AAUW Educational Foundation

Published by the
American Association of University Women
Educational Foundation

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Printed in the United States

First printing: December 2005
Editor: Susan K. Dyer
Cover and design: Alan B. Callander

Library of Congress Control Number: 2005936473
ISBN: 1-879922-35-5

Executive Summary

Nearly two-thirds of college students experience some type of sexual harassment. Yet less than 10 percent of these students tell a college or university employee about their experiences and an even smaller fraction officially report them to a Title IX officer. The few sexual harassment cases that are pursued as a legal matter—those that reach the front pages of newspapers—are simply the tip of the iceberg.

Drawing the Line: Sexual Harassment on Campus presents a look at the “big picture.” Is sexual harassment common? What kinds of behaviors are taking place? Who is being harassed, and who is doing the harassing? For students who admit to harassing others, why do they do it? How does sexual harassment affect students’ educational experience? What do students think should be done about sexual harassment on campus?

This report analyzes findings from a nationally representative survey of undergraduate college students commissioned by the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation and conducted by Harris Interactive in spring 2005. The report is part of AAUW’s continuing work to address the problem of sexual harassment in education. For more than a decade AAUW has been on the forefront of research and advocacy on this issue. *Hostile Hallways: The AAUW Survey on Sexual Harassment in America’s Schools* (1993) and *Hostile Hallways: Bullying, Teasing, and Sexual Harassment in School* (2001) revealed widespread harassment among middle and high school students. The resource guide *Harassment-Free Hallways: How to Stop Sexual Harassment in School* (2001) is one of AAUW’s most requested publications.

With this new report AAUW takes the issue of sexual harassment to the next level of education: colleges and universities. Women have made tremendous gains in higher education and are now a majority of America’s college students,

yet anecdotal evidence of a “chilly climate” for female students, especially in traditionally male-dominated disciplines, is widespread. Aside from documenting criminal behavior such as rape and sexual assault, little research has been done on the prevalence of sexual harassment on college campuses.

This research examines how college students perceive, experience, and respond to a wide range of unwanted sexual behaviors. Chapter 1 defines sexual harassment, distinguishing between a narrow legal definition of the term and the broader definition used in this research, and describes how college students define the term. Chapter 2 describes the prevalence of sexual harassment, including the perceptions of students who have been sexually harassed as well as the rationales of students who admit to harassing others. Chapter 3 examines the emotional and educational impact of sexual harassment, including students’ recommendations for improving the campus climate. The report concludes with a call for dialogue and includes questions that should be addressed.

Key Research Findings

Sexual harassment is common on college campuses.

Sexual harassment is widespread among college students across the country. A majority of college students experience sexual harassment. More than one-third encounter sexual harassment during their first year. A majority of students experience noncontact forms of harassment—from sexual remarks to electronic messages—and nearly one-third experience some form of physical harassment, such as being touched, grabbed, or forced to do something sexual. Sexual harassment occurs nearly everywhere on campus, including student housing and classrooms. It happens on large and small campuses, at public

and private colleges and universities, and at two-year and four-year institutions. It is most common at large universities, four-year institutions, and private colleges.

Men and women are equally likely to be harassed, but in different ways and with different responses.

Male and female students are nearly equally likely to be sexually harassed on campus.

Female students are more likely to be the target of sexual jokes, comments, gestures, or looks. Male students are more likely to be called gay or a homophobic name.

Female students are more likely to be upset by sexual harassment and to feel embarrassed, angry, less confident, afraid, worried about whether they can have a happy relationship, confused or conflicted about who they are, or disappointed in their college experience. Female students are also more likely to change their behavior in some way as a result of the experience. For example, more than half of female victims avoid the person who harassed them or avoid a particular building or place on campus. Female victims are more likely to find it hard to pay attention in class or have trouble sleeping as a result of sexual harassment.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students are more likely to be harassed.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) students¹ are more likely than heterosexual students to experience sexual harassment; be upset by experiences with harassment; and feel self-conscious, angry, less confident, afraid, or disappointed with their college experience. They are also more likely to worry about graduating from college and having a successful career

as a result of sexual harassment. LGBT students are more likely to want their college or university to do more to prevent sexual harassment.

Different racial and ethnic groups experience sexual harassment in similar, but not identical, ways.

For the most part, white, black, and Hispanic students perceive and react to sexual harassment in similar ways.² Some types of sexual harassment—receiving unwanted sexual comments or jokes, being flashed or mooned, or being called a homophobic name—appear to be more common among white students. Among students who admit to harassing another student, white students are more likely to do so because they think it is funny, while black and Hispanic students are more likely to think the sexual attention is wanted. Black and Hispanic students are also more likely to say they would report sexual harassment to a college employee and to want their schools to take additional measures against sexual harassment.

Men are more likely than women to harass.

Both male and female students are more likely to be harassed by a man than by a woman. Half of male students and almost one-third of female students admit that they sexually harassed someone in college, and about one-fifth of male students admit that they harassed someone often or occasionally. Although equal proportions of male and female students say that they harassed a student of the other gender, male students are more likely to admit to harassing other male students. Almost one-quarter of male harassers admit to harassing male students, compared to one-tenth of female harassers who admit to harassing female students.

¹ LGBT students are combined into a single category because we do not have sufficient numbers to analyze the groups separately.

² Separate analyses for Asian American, Native American, and other racial and ethnic groups are not possible due to insufficient sample size.

More than half of harassers think their actions are funny.

A majority of students who admit to harassing another student say they did so because they thought it was funny. About one-third thought the person wanted the sexual attention, and another third believed that it was just a part of school and a lot of people did it. Less than one-fifth wanted a date with the person. In other words, students who admit to harassing another student generally don't see themselves as rejected suitors, rather as misunderstood comedians.

Most victims don't report sexual harassment.

More than one-third of college students do not tell anyone about their experiences with sexual harassment. Those who do confide in someone usually tell a friend. Female students are more likely to talk to someone about their experiences than are male students, but less than 10 percent of all students report incidents of sexual harassment to a college or university employee. Students offer a range of reasons for why they do not report incidents, including fear of embarrassment, guilt about their own behavior, skepticism that anyone can or will help, and not knowing whom to contact at the school. Still, the top reason that students give for not reporting sexual harassment is that their experience was not serious or "not a big deal."

Other than to say it is unwanted sexual behavior, college students do not appear to have a common standard for defining sexual harassment. Moreover, college students are reluctant to talk about sexual harassment openly and honestly and are more apt to joke or disregard the issue despite their private concerns. This reticence to engage in a serious dialogue about the issue may contribute to the prevalence of sexual harassment on campus, as students interpret one another's silence as complicity. At the very least it is an indication that college students don't have a common understanding of where to draw the line.

The ramifications of sexual harassment can be serious. Sexual harassment can damage the emotional and academic well-being of students, provoke and exacerbate conflict among students, and contribute to a hostile learning environment. For colleges and universities, sexual harassment can be financially costly and damage their reputations. More broadly, society as a whole is affected as graduating students bring their attitudes about sexual harassment into the workplace and beyond.