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The Sexual Harassment of Students by Teachers: The Case of Students in Science

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This paper reports the findings of a study on the self-reported incidents of sexual harassment of students in four scientific fields. Of the 1178 students who responded to survey questions, 2% of the men and 17% of the women reported being sexually harassed by their teachers. The results of cross-tabular analysis indicate that of the 101 written descriptions of sexual harassment, 38 are reported at or before high school. However, a systematic analysis of these written descriptions indicate that there is no "type" of sexual-harassment experience that can be placed more on one level of schooling than on another. The results further suggest that as women continue their educations their chances of encountering sexual harassment from teachers are likely to increase. This paper concludes with a discussion of the phenomenon of the sexual harassment of students, focusing on the conflict and confusion surrounding sex roles and professional roles.

...at the opposite end of the spectrum are professors, very few in number, but well known to the students, who quite unabashedly importune their female students for sexual favors, sometimes blatantly offering high grades in return. The practice is known as "an A for a lay", and it is offered without embarrassment or fear of challenge, year in and year out, apparently with fairly frequent success. (Taylor, 1981)

...(he) went to bed with a few students (male and female) who were taking his course. He approached me often, I refused. Consequently, I failed the course—definitely did not deserve to! I was close to the assistant principal—he couldn't do anything about the teacher, but he changed my grade on the records and gave me my diploma. (Questionnaire 10, pretest)

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It is often stated that educational institutions, rather than being forerunners of change, are institutions that reflect reality in the greater society: their primary function is the socialization of children and young adults to fulfill the expectations that have become custom or tradition (Stockard, 1980). Such statements are made by those who view educational institutions as 'microcosms' of the greater society. They argue that the socialization process in the schools includes patterns of interaction between men and women as well as those between superordinates and subordinates that have been established in our culture. The situation between teachers and students is one in which both of these traditional patterns of interaction converge.

Benson and Thomson (1982) see the initiation of sexual demands upon the student, regardless of whether in exchange for a "favor" or "threat," as a situation that results in the creation of an intimidating environment for the student. Because teachers have positions of authority from which they evaluate the performance of the student, the initiating of sexual demands can leave the student unsure of the teacher's reaction to a refusal. All such initiation is viewed as sexual harassment on the part of the teacher.

Others claim that this view is incorrect. Taylor (1981) argues that the modern university cannot be thought of as a kind of microcosm because the interpersonal relationships found in the university are "much more free and joyous" than those found on the outside. In a discussion of such free and joyous relationships, Taylor focuses on the intense intersexual relations among the members of this community, and highlights student/teacher sexual relations. According to Taylor, characteristics of the university that foster this intense situation include (1) a sophisticated faculty, well read, widely traveled, and original and independent in their thinking, (2) a fair number of the female undergraduate population that is psychologically and otherwise more mature than their male counterparts, and (3) a university administration that prefers to be kept uninformed.

Explicit propositions made to students that offer favors and grades in exchange for sexual relations do not, in Taylor's view, constitute acts of sexual harassment. Only when an explicit threat is made, or a retaliatory act is taken, does such an act constitute a problem. Further, it is Taylor's opinion that what is commonly referred to as an "A for a lay" is a situation that is accepted without question or noticeable comment by most members of the university community.

The opposing positions taken by Benson and Thomson (1982) and Taylor (1981) are indicative of the confusion surrounding sex roles and professional roles in today's educational institutions. And it is this confusion, producing anxiety and discomfort in both students and teachers, that is finally being addressed. Indeed, a refutation of Taylor's position on university acceptance is supported by the growing interest in, discussion of, and policy formation surrounding the sexual harassment of students by