

Fear, guilt hinder discussion

Office tackles sexual harassment

By CAROL DONIGAN
Of the Emerald

Until recently, sexual harassment was a problem women didn't discuss.

Feelings of isolation and guilt caused many to conceal or ignore its existence. A woman who refuses to submit to unwanted sexual demands may jeopardize her grades, career and future. Women as professors, employees and students have to contend with this problem, and the University Office of Affirmative Action is here to help.

Sexual harassment is defined by Bea McFadden, assistant compliance officer for affirmative action, as "unsolicited and unwanted sexual attention." McFadden says she's pleased the University has been forthright in this issue and has made it clear "that suit action is intolerable, inappropriate and disallowed." Several courts have ruled that sexual harassment constitutes sex discrimination in employment under Title

violence, and sexual harassment is an exertion of power." Since women usually are not in positions of power, they are the primary victims, she says. It's possible for males to be victims, but it depends on the balance of power, Grier adds.

The Office of Affirmative Action has an informal grievance procedure that allows victims an opportunity to share their problems. Because of the personal nature of sexual harassment, McFadden promises "a quick response and confidentiality." If a victim wants information and prefers not to leave a name, such inquiries are also welcome. What's important, McFadden says, is "resolving the problem at the lowest possible level."

If this procedure doesn't bring desired results, then a formal complaint can be filed. Sometimes a woman may drop a class or transfer an employment position to escape the problem. "Why should you be the one to change positions if you didn't

stepped out on this issue the community may assume that the University must really have a problem. Not so, she says. Sexual harassment is a societal problem, and McFadden would like to see "awareness materials distributed on this matter." She suggests this as a possible project for a campus group.

"Sexual harassment is something students and employees should not have to put up with," says Grier. The University supports this policy, and the Office of Affirmative Action maintains that it will not be tolerated.

Women or men who suspect they are being sexually harassed should contact the Office of Affirmative Action, 472 Oregon Hall, 686-3123.



Bea McFadden

Photo by Bob Baker

'... sexual harassment is an exertion of power.'

VII of the Civil Rights Act and in education under Title IX.

Sexual harassment is a new issue only in terms of being talked about, McFadden says, adding that women who are sexually harassed are in a difficult position and feel isolated. She says it has always been a problem that women have been reluctant to report.

How do you know if you've been sexually harassed? If you've made it known you don't appreciate someone's sexual advances, but they continue — this is sexual harassment, McFadden says. "A gut feeling is usually a pretty good clue," she adds.

Sex and romance are not involved in sexual harassment. McFadden says it's a "power play." Someone in a position of power using sexual advances or demands in such a way that another person's position may be threatened is sexual harassment.

As in rape situations, women of all ages are affected by sexual harassment, and it's sex-related only in that a person's sex is being used against them, McFadden says.

Melinda Grier, compliance officer for the Oregon State System of Higher Education, says, "rape is an exertion of

initiate the problem?" McFadden asks.

More men and women are coming into contact professionally, and they aren't used to dealing with each other on a peer level, McFadden notes. "We all grew up with the image of the boss chasing the secretary around the desk," she says.

It's important to distinguish sexual harassment from normal sexual relations in the University environment, Grier says. A professor may develop a relationship with a student that involves sex, but if two consenting adults are involved then Grier says it's not a case of harassment. There may be a question of ethics, but Grier says "we're not attempting to regulate people's private lives, it's unsolicited sexual attention we're concerned about."

"Sexual harassment is socially unacceptable, but that doesn't keep it from happening," says Maxine Thomas, law school professor, adding that although the problem can't be completely eliminated, a clear personnel policy is helpful.

The University has taken the lead in the state system for its progressive policy toward sexual harassment, says Grier, but McFadden says she is concerned that since the University

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