

2.3.5 Letter to Incoming Graduate Students

Mentor Program Administrator
College of Engineering
University of Illinois
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Dear New Graduate Student,

It is with great pleasure that I announce to you the beginning of a new mentoring program for female graduate students in the College of Engineering. The Engineering Graduate Student Mentor Program aids first year female graduate students by assigning them a volunteer female "mentor" who is a currently enrolled student in their department. This mentor is an unofficial source of information about the college, department, and university.

As a new female graduate student in the College of Engineering, you are invited to participate in the program. Your mentor will be chosen based on your answers to the attached survey. You will meet your mentor and others participating in the program at a special gathering the first week of classes. Your mentor is responsible for being generally available to answer questions and ease your transition into graduate school at the University of Illinois.

If you would like to participate in this program, please complete and return the enclosed survey.

Sincerely,

Mentor Program Administrator

2.4 Sexual Harassment Awareness Program for Public Computing Labs

Sexual harassment is a problem of unrecognized proportions on college campuses. Spertus [1991] writes, "A recent survey of Harvard students and faculty revealed:

Thirty-two percent of the tenured female professors, 49 percent of those without tenure, 41 percent of the female graduate students, and 34 percent of the undergraduate women reported having been sexually harassed by a person in authority at least once during their time at Harvard. Fifteen percent of the graduate students and twelve percent of the undergraduates reporting harassment consequently changed their academic plans because of it. Most did not report the incidents [Simeone 1987, page 115-116]."

Computer-based forms of sexual harassment are a problem on campuses across the nation, and unfortunately the University of Illinois is no exception. Most schools either ignore the problem or put together a sweeping policy banning offensive actions, which at several of our sister Big Ten schools has been struck down in court as a violation of the First Amendment (e.g., Wisconsin and Michigan). With the help of Carl Kadie, an expert on the rights of the individual, we have put together a program which we believe will be both effective and legal.

To explain some of the difficulties in engineering a successful policy, we quote from Spertus [1991]:

Some computer science graduate students and staff at Carnegie Mellon were sufficiently disturbed by the display of nude pictures as backgrounds on computer terminals that they got together and tried to change the situation by publicly appealing to the community. [CMU 1989] is a fascinating report describing their appeal and the friendly and hostile reactions. Their appeal included the following passage:

When a woman sees such a display on your workstation, is she likely to believe that you take her seriously as a fully contributing member of the department? Rather, she may feel that you could be a source of sexual harassment, and feel hostile towards you, or nervous about working with you. If so, that is a loss for you, for her, and for all of us. Among the visitors to the department, some of whom are prospective students, staff, or faculty, there are surely some who will view us as unprofessional if they see these displays, and this hurts us all, too. Conversely, an environment more hospitable to women — specifically, one in which relations between women and men are less strained — is of clear benefit to men as well.

For some people, displays of naked women on workstations, or elsewhere in offices, remind them of the forces in our culture that view women as sexual playthings, not as men's peers. For others, such reactions do not occur. People who are offended will interpret such displays as derogatory, even if that is not your intent. We therefore ask you to refrain from using them out of respect for those who are offended, even if you believe the offended people are just overly sensitive [CMU 1989, page 2].

The appeal closed by making clear that they were not advocating banning such displays but were requesting that people voluntarily remove them out of sensitivity to others. Responses about the appropriateness of the displays and of the appeal were mixed and are categorized in the report. Negative reactions included the position that the writers

were advocating censorship "like the Nazis or the Ayatollah Khomeini," that people should not be asked to change their behavior merely because of what others might think, and that a public appeal was inappropriate but instead should have been made by individuals to individuals. Of those agreeing, the majority of responses said that the request was reasonable and not an attempt at censorship, that it prevented people from unintentionally giving offense, and that it was effective at raising consciousness. In response to the criticism that individuals should complain personally, several women wrote that "[w]omen asking for changes in behavior individually are exposed to ridicule and abuse" [CMU 1989, page 4]. This point was echoed by a woman quoted in a paper about the "Garden", a laboratory in the MIT Media Lab:

[W]hen comments are made about the offensive nature of the music or movies, they are often ignored, or belittled, or are chortled at. Ironically, once you are labeled a feminist in the Garden, your comments are taken less seriously, because you are considered radical and your judgment less fair [Tidwell 1990, page 14].

Both the Carnegie-Mellon and Garden papers conclude that the attempts at changing people's behavior were somewhat, but not highly, successful.

In brief, the committee recommends the following actions, which are described in detail in subsequent sections.

- Create a poster to be displayed in every public computer laboratory, describing the university policy on sexual harassment, giving examples of computer-related harassment via, for example, bitmaps, audio, messages, etc., and explaining how to report offenses.
- Create a notice to send to system administrators and to site operators, requesting that they display the posters in prominent locations on- and off-line, and providing them with instructions on what should be done if an offense is reported to them.
- Modify the current brochure (or produce a new brochure) on sexual harassment ("Take Action Against Sexual Harassment") to include examples of harassment via computer displays. Also, add a new section on harassment to the recent CCSO publication *Computing Handbook for Students and Everyone Else: Using Computers at the University of Illinois*.

Computer-based sexual harassment is a problem in computer labs across the campus, not just in the College of Engineering. We would like to see our program extended to cover the whole campus, and our requested actions with respect to the *Computing Handbook* and "Take Action" brochure extend beyond the borders of the Engineering College.

2.4.1 Poster

The following page presents our recommended poster for display in the public laboratories. For off-line display, this poster should be formatted into an eye-catching design (with assistance from graphics artists), as otherwise it will be lost in the mass of announcements currently displayed in public laboratories. The committee has found that a graphics artist can be hired to design the poster for approximately \$100, and we recommend that the Dean commission the design of the poster this summer, so that it will be printed and in place by the beginning of the fall semester. For on-line display, the contents of the poster should be placed on-line and used as the message-of-the-day, or other prominent electronic display, at regular intervals throughout the semester.