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Fifteen female students surveyed reported sexual harassment

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Fifteen female students surveyed reported sexual harassment

To the editor:

Last spring I conducted a survey on faculty sexual harassment of female students at UMO. A mailed questionnaire was sent to a random sample of female students. Information was gathered on student attitudes toward this behavior as well as on the incidence of, and student response to, sexual harassment. Following EEOC guidelines, sexual harassment was defined as "any *unwanted* sexual advance, requests for sexual favors or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature which you find objectionable or intimidating within the context of a student-faculty relationship." Of the 488 undergrad and graduate students receiving the questionnaire, 57 percent or 280 completed and returned it. While this response rate is a bit higher than that typically associated with mailed questionnaires, the extent to which the findings reported here are applicable to UMO female students in general is difficult to ascertain for several reasons. First, while those returning the questionnaire did not deviate significantly from UMO female students as a whole on measures of age, marital status, class or major, they were a bit more likely to live on campus and to be out of

state students.

Second, I know nothing about those who did not return the questionnaire. This group could have been either more or less likely to have experienced sexual harassment. With these qualifications in mind, I would like to present the preliminary results of the survey.

When asked how frequently they thought UMO women were sexually harassed by male faculty, approximately one third of the sample marked "seldom" while 44 percent said "occasionally". Students between the ages of 23-35 were the most likely to choose the latter response. When asked to estimate how serious a problem sexual harassment would be for a woman student should it happen to her, more than 80 percent of the sample felt that it would be "somewhat" or "very" serious. Seventeen percent of the sample indicated that they personally knew of a woman student who had been sexually harassed by a male faculty member at UMO. Students between the ages of 23-35 were twice as likely, and those who reported being sexually harassed themselves 4½ times as likely, to report having such knowledge. Over two thirds of the sample said they did *not* know of any place on or off campus where it would be appropriate to report instances of faculty-student harassment.

A similar pattern was found among those who experienced harassment. Students who indicated that they did know where to report such behavior were most likely to cite formal help organizations on campus such as the police, counseling center, SLS or EEO Office. The higher the student's GPA, the more likely she was to be aware of such resources.

Five percent, or 15, of the students surveyed reported being sexually harassed by a male faculty member at UMO. Four of these students reported that they received such unwanted sexual attention from two different faculty members. Whether or not these findings reflect the true incidence of faculty-student sexual harassment at UMO is difficult to determine. We do know that the figure of 5 percent is slightly lower than the rate of 20 percent found at Berkeley. These differences could be due to a number of factors. For example, unlike our sample, the Berkeley study was restricted to senior women who may be the most likely to have experienced harassment since they have been in school the longest. Also, in contrast to Berkeley faculty-student sexual harassment was a controversial public issue during the time the research was in progress. Under these conditions, students may have been more knowledgeable

about the issue and/or more likely to report harassing incidents.

Despite the relatively low number of students reporting harassment, patterns did emerge. However, due to our small numbers, such patterns are best viewed as suggestive rather than definitive. Students reporting sexual harassment did not differ significantly from the rest of the sample in terms of age, class, major, GPA or residence. However, all were single and in the overwhelming majority of cases the faculty member in question was the student's current instructor in a course required for her major and he was likely to be the only faculty member who taught the course. When asked to describe their experience of sexual harassment, the majority reported instances of inappropriate body language by faculty such as leering and unwanted verbal and physical advances such as sexual remarks and touching. In contrast to reports of sexual harassment in the workplace, *over* sexual propositions such as the offer of academic rewards for sexual favors, were rarely reported by our respondents. All the students but one told someone else about the incident and in the majority of cases this person was the student's roommate or another friend. One third of the students reported the

behavior to the department chair, a university administrator or another individual enmeshed in the formal help network. The more severe or intrusive the harassing behavior, the more likely the student was to "officially" report the incident. The most common tactics for dealing with sexual harassment were avoidance of the faculty member or redefining the behavior as harmless. The latter was most likely to occur when the student did not receive support, from either her classmates or friends, for her interpretation of the behavior. Unfortunately, there is insufficient information to assess the efficacy of either tactic.

In closing, I would like to thank all students who participated in the study and the university administrators and campus organizations who endorsed this survey. Thanks also to Sandy Caron for her help in designing the questionnaire and Cindy Barnes for her assistance with the data analysis.

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