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Sexist language distracts, demeans

by Marcia Gauvin
Staff Writer

The use of sexist language, both in the classroom and the textbook, often will distract female students and inhibit the learning process.

That was a common sentiment expressed by students at the President's Task Force on the Status of Women Wednesday.

The meetings of the task force's final week focus on the issue of climate at the University of Maine, such as the use of sexist language, images and other symbolic acts, child care, family issues, and campus organizations.

Essentially, all of the discussion during the hour and a half meeting focused on the use of sexist language at the university and possible ways to eliminate it.

Although the university has an official policy that non-sexist language should be used in all publications and in the classroom, several students and faculty said that they felt it was not being adhered to.

One student pointed out the symbolic message conveyed by the title of The Center for the Study of Early Man, and how it promotes a sexist attitude by the university.

"That sign is one of the first things you see when you drive on campus," she said.

Other women said that when they brought the use of sexist language to the attention of male faculty or administrators their concerns were frequently trivialized.

"(Sexist language) is not just a woman's issue; a real effort needs to be made to make male faculty aware of the issue," said Stephanie Seguino, a graduate student in economics.

Sexist language in college texts, the repeated use of "man" or "he" when actually referring to both sexes often influences women to view academic or technical areas as exclusively male.

Several ideas were raised as possible methods to eliminate the use of sexist language at UMaine.

John Alexander, chair of the department of civil engineering and

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• Sexist

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a member of the task force, suggested that a specific category regarding the use of sexist language be added to the student course evaluations.

Dean of the College of Education Robert Cobb suggested that the way to effectively influence the faculty's perception of sexist language is by incorporating a policy into an already existing evaluation process.

"Faculty feel more comfortable and at home in being made aware of the sexist-language issue within the already established institutional framework," he said.

Cobb proposed that during a college's regular self-evaluation of a graduate school, it could also evaluate for sexist language and attitudes by asking for student input.

Seguino suggested, however, that internal faculty monitoring increases as the number of female faculty members rises and recommended that the university hire more women faculty members.

"In my entire college career, I have never had a woman professor," Seguino said. "If women are 50 percent of the population, 50 percent of the faculty should also be women."