LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

GSC interprets harassment report

(Editor's note: The Tech received a copy of this letter addressed to Associate President Samuel J. Keyes.)

The Graduate Student Council, Committee on Housing and Community Affairs has reviewed the Report of the MIT Committee on Sexual Harassment. This letter represents the consensus opinion of our committee. We found the report to be insightful in at least parts and contradictory in others.

Accordingly, we found that some recommendations of the report were sound, while others were contradictory. We extend our thanks to your committee for expending our efforts on such a worthy project.

We have identified parts of the report which are unclear, insufficient or ambiguous. We list them here:

1) The report acknowledges that some complaint handlers are trained in dealing with complaints. Beyond this, however, there is no mention on the accountability of complaint handlers regarding their pursuit of a complaint and their confidentiality in doing so. Some assurance should be given that complaints have been handled fairly and impartially.

2) There is no statement as to the current extent of reported or actual sexual harassment at MIT. Such information should be disclosed at least once a year.

3) The mechanisms for disciplining harassers who are students (the Committee on Disciplines), whereas the mechanisms for disciplining harassers who are not students is unclear.

4) The report correctly identifies prevention as the best treatment for harassment. However, the Education and Prevention section of the report is half about education and half about what complaint handlers should do after a complaint has been received.

While we acknowledge the value of education in prevention, we feel that not enough emphasis is placed on deterrence. Indeed, the sole reference to deterrence is in the "Sanctions" section, which recommends that a deterrent be imposed after the harassment has taken place.

We wonder about the effectiveness of such a deterrent. Better would be a policy which indicates what sanctions might be appropriate for what behavior.

5) The recommendations concerning education are seriously hampered by the lack of statistics on sexual harassment at MIT, and by the lack of examples of inappropriate behavior.

6) The criteria listed in the "Standards of Proof" section are ambiguous. This section adopts a "rule of reason" in determining whether or not conduct that has occurred is "unreasonably destructive." This could be interpreted to mean that some harassing behavior is not unreasonably destructive, and should thus be tolerated.

This could also be interpreted to mean that behavior which is not unreasonably destructive is not harassment. Both interpretations contradict other sections of the report. Furthermore, as no definition is made of "unreasonable," the rule of reason offers little insight into standards of proof.

7) The report does not recognize the boundary between sexual harassment and other oppressive behavior, such as violent crime and discrimination on the basis of gender. Such a boundary ought to be considered.

8) For example, it is not clear whether sexual assault is constructively categorized as an act of sexual harassment, or as a pari passu "inappropriate social interactions," rather than as a violent crime on par with homicide.

9) As another example, the proposed policy on harassment seems to include all examples of discrimination as a subset of harassment. This would contradict the report of the Ad Hoc Faculty Steering Committee on Sexual Harassment which states that "sexual harassment has been ruled to be a form of sex discrimination." The consequence of this distinction between discrimination and harassment are not clear.

10) The specific examples of sexual harassment in the current report are essentially all drawn from the description of sexual harassment contained in the 1980 report.

9) We are intrigued by the recommendation in the "Education and Prevention" section that "Programs intended for men and women separately... should be organized." We do not see necessarily agree with this, but we wonder about the intended content of such programs that makes segregation desirable.

10) While we recognize the value of the multi-access system which the report recommends, a more publically identifiable access point would encourage the reporting of incidents of harassment. Be it the MIT bulletins or the MIT Bulletin identify a person with whom a student might register a complaint.

We recognize the difficulty in drafting a report such as your committee did, and we do not mean to detract from the value of the report by pointing to what we perceive as weaknesses.

We agree that the implementation of the recommendations of the report will do much to make MIT a more civil and hospitable place for all members of its community. We hope that we input might help strengthen and clarify those recommendations. Thank you again for your efforts.

Ofel Hollman
Chair
HCA Committee

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