Letters to the Editor

Harassment Committee Would Be Biased

The Tech’s recent editorial on fighting sexual harassment gives undue credit to the Institute’s harassment policy and makes two suggestions which may be impractical (“A Plan to Fight Sexual Harassment.” November 6, 1992)

The Tech is far too generous in calling MIT “a leader in identifying and dealing with sexual harassment.” MIT’s definition of harassment, based on workplace harassment rules, is too broad and too vague to be appropriate for the personal lives of students. Because of the range of speech it regulates, the policy probably violates state law, and the Institute’s materials give no clear guidance concerning what is harassment, stating only that certain behaviors, including allegedly sexist jokes and remarks, “may constitute harassment.”

The vigorous vagaries of the definition, The Tech’s suggestion that “very single member of the MIT community attend in ‘awareness sessions’ on sexual harassment may be unproductive. If examples of harassment are given without counterexamples of behaviors not considered harassment, the participants will learn little about the boundaries of harassment rules, is too broad and too vague to be appropriate for the personal lives of students. Because of the range of speech it regulates, the policy probably violates state law, and the Institute’s materials give no clear guidance concerning what is harassment, stating only that certain behaviors, including allegedly sexist jokes and remarks, “may constitute harassment.”

Given the vagaries of the definition, The Tech’s suggestion that “very single member of the MIT community attend in ‘awareness sessions’ on sexual harassment may be unproductive. If examples of harassment are given without counterexamples of behaviors not considered harassment, the participants will learn little about the boundaries of harassment rules, is too broad and too vague to be appropriate for the personal lives of students. Because of the range of speech it regulates, the policy probably violates state law, and the Institute’s materials give no clear guidance concerning what is harassment, stating only that certain behaviors, including allegedly sexist jokes and remarks, “may constitute harassment.”

Assuming non-random selection, the harassment committee would probably end up composed mostly of student feminists, committed to teaching alleged offenders a lesson without much concern for guilt or innocence. The views of ordinary students on what constitutes harassment would go underepresented. For this reason, discipline should be meted out by a committee with a mission sufficiently broad that single-issue partisans will not swamp the committee — perhaps the Committee on Discipline or one of the student judiciary committees.

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