



# Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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## *The Lecherous Professor: Sexual Harassment on Campus*

Billie Wright Dzeich and Linda Weiner. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984 (2nd ed. 1990).

Reviewed by Chris Carlsmith.

What constitutes sexual harassment? How do you know if you have crossed the line?\* The issue of sexual harassment exploded into the national limelight in 1990 with Anita Hill's testimony on Capitol Hill, and has remained a troubling and difficult question ever since. University campuses have been particularly sensitive to this issue, given their unique combination of naive, impressionable students and more experienced, powerful professors who wield nearly total authority in the academic world. UVa has not been immune from the debate; we received national press coverage last spring for our proposed ban on all faculty-student relationships, a policy which continues to be discussed on Grounds today.

Despite its provocative title, *The Lecherous Professor* offers an informative look at the issue of sexual harassment on campus. The authors, both of whom were professors at the University of Cincinnati, wrote the book in response to data collected from their own interviews with college women as well as from self-report surveys at several institutions. They admit that they were "horrified" at the scope of the problem (estimating that 20% of all female students are sexually harassed during their college careers), and chose to construct a book around those anonymous responses that they received. The

authors focus their attention exclusively on relationships between male professors and female students; while recognizing that harassment can occur between female professors and male students, or between students and faculty of the same gender, the authors dismiss these latter cases as statistically insignificant.

The book is divided into seven chapters, including a preface to the second edition in which the authors comment on developments since the initial 1984 publication. The first two chapters outline characteristics of sexual harassment on campus, while Chapter 4 debunks the myth of the voluptuous college coed willing to exchange love for a better grade. Chapter 5 sketches a portrait of the lecherous (male) professor, and the following chapter assesses the role that women faculty play in counseling students and confronting their colleagues. The final chapter considers the "Future of Academe" and includes several appendices from the EEO and other institutions that will be of interest to policy-makers.

The most memorable parts of the book are the short vignettes in which students recall their surprise, anger, frustration, and helplessness when confronted by a "lecherous professor." These brief case histories have the ring of truth and paint a negative picture of the hallowed ivory tower and its inhabitants. The underlying thesis of Dzeich and Weiner is that sexual harassment is not about sex, but about power-- and the professors hold all the cards. The

disparity is particularly evident in the stories recounted by graduate students, many of whom are completely dependent upon their professor for an academic future and have few methods of resistance. There is certainly a great deal of truth in this characterization of powerful professor and powerless student, as illustrated by UVa's policy which addresses potential "conflict-of-interest" rather than sexual harassment. But this portrayal of women as weak, passive victims also does a great disservice to the active women who strive to explode the myth of "the weaker vessel." Another weakness of the book is its psychological interpretation of lecherous male professors as men who may be compensating for their lack of success in high school with young women, where (according to the authors) they were generally bookish, unattractive and unable to compete with the football jocks for female attention. Dzeich and Weiner also suggest that professors may be responding to a midlife crisis or to their low salary, viewing the opportunity to have a relationship with a student as one of the "perks" of the job. The authors are reluctant to consider the fact that many students are willing to consider a relationship with a professor owing to love or ambition, or a combination of both. However, Dzeich and Weiner do make the point (as does UVa's policy) that it is difficult to envision a truly consensual relationship between professor and student given the wide disparity in their positions and the unequal power ratio that exists between them.

\*This topic of sexual harassment in the classroom was explored at the 1994 January Teaching Workshop, in a panel led by Susan Andrews.

The book provided me with a heightened awareness of the complex and slippery issues that surround this contentious debate. In emphasizing that the fundamental issue is one of power rather than sexual attraction, the authors make an excellent point, one that is all too often lost in the clamor of the argument. The issue of sexual harassment is unlikely to go away and those of us who live and work in the academy must come to realize how pervasive it is and what steps are needed to eliminate it.