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DEBRA J. SAUNDERS

When sexual harassment is a joke

[Debra J. Saunders](#)

Tuesday, January 31, 2006

BY THE YEAR 2020, every American will be a victim. Give it another 15 years, and there will be a study that puts every man, woman and child into one aggrieved group or another.

In that spirit, a new study by the American Association of University Women found that "nearly two-thirds of college students experience sexual harassment at some point during college." When you consider what the AAUW's definition of sexual harassment is -- "unwanted or unwelcome sexual behavior that interferes with your life" -- it is surprising that the percentage is so low. The study even lists "sexual comments, jokes, gestures or looks" as "examples of different types of sexual harassment."

As the Philadelphia-based group FIRE -- Foundation for Individual Rights in Education -- noted in a press release, the AAUW's definition risks "trivializing actual harassment." Samantha Harris of FIRE noted, "If I were someone who experienced real harassment, I wouldn't want to be lumped in with people who heard a bad joke."

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FIRE prefers the federal government's definition: conduct "so severe, persistent, or pervasive that it affects a student's ability to participate in or benefit from an education program or activity, or creates an intimidating, threatening or abusive education environment." That definition puts the burden of proof on the accuser, where it belongs.

The AAUW, alas, wasn't looking for severe or persistent. The study also did not bother to distinguish between students and teachers. This means that if a date became too aggressive -- that is, "touched, grabbed or pinched in a sexual way" that was unwanted -- that could qualify as sexual harassment on campus, for the study's purposes.

Even if he backed off.

Barbara O'Connor, a professor of political communication at California State University Sacramento, noted that she has seen "enough serious cases to know (sexual harassment) exists. You don't want to make it so silly that the serious ones don't get treated."

FIRE is afraid that universities will use ratcheted-up sexual harassment rules to stifle free speech. Ditto O'Connor, who noted, "It would take all the fun out of life, if you couldn't have conversations."

Harris noted, "Harassment policies are frequently used to suppress any speech that someone might find offensive." William Paterson University of New Jersey reprimanded a graduate student and employee who sent an e-mail to a professor in which he objected to a movie about two aging lesbians -- he called them "perversions" -- after the professor complained that she felt threatened by the e-mail. In December, after FIRE got involved, the school revoked the reprimand -- but the reprimand never should have happened.

The AAUW study even listed someone calling you "gay or lesbian" to be sexual harassment, if the words are unwanted.

This should scare you: 57 percent of students polled want their college to set up an Internet site where they can make anonymous accusations of sexual harassment. This reinforces the strong sense I get that the AAUW doesn't think students have an obligation to fend for themselves.

Worse, universities are instilling students with the belief that they have an "absolute right not to be offended," Harris noted -- which means that when they graduate, "they're in for a rude awakening in the real world."

The AAUW also trivializes criminal behavior by lumping it into the sexual harassment category. The study didn't refer to rape as sexual harassment, but the AAUW released the study with a statement by a student who said she had been raped. Rape -- that's a felony. But she talked about it as if it were not a matter for the authorities, but her school's women's resource center, 24-hour-hot line and free counseling.

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One sophomore noted, "There's a guy in all my classes who consistently touches me in a sexual way that I really don't appreciate." What is her major? Victimhood.

Forget anonymous tip lines and counseling. Get angry and stand up for yourself. If a guy grabs a body part he has no business touching, you yell, warn him to stop. Complain to your professor. If that doesn't stop the brute, punch him. Trust me. It works.

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