



# Haverford College

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

HAVERFORD, PA. 19041 215-649-9600

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Dear Colleagues:

The enclosed report on "Problems Encountered by Women in Haverford Classrooms" is submitted by the College Committee on Women to call the attention of the faculty to a matter of growing concern among students. The report is intended to be advisory; our hope is that it may be of help to individual teachers -- male and female -- in the planning and conduct of their classes, and in their roles as advisors.

In light of Haverford's commitment to coeducation, the Committee believes that a full and frank discussion of these problems -- whether in a general faculty meeting, a department meeting, or a more informal conversation among colleagues -- would greatly benefit the college community. Since each of these contexts is likely to yield its own special insights, we urge that the faculty undertake such discussions on several levels.

Yours sincerely,

Marjorie Garber, Chairman  
College Committee on Women

## PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY WOMEN IN HAVERFORD CLASSROOMS

The College Committee on Women has been exploring campus attitudes toward women in order to identify problems and prepare ourselves for the era of full coeducation at Haverford. At the President's request, Steve Cary has also been discussing these matters with men and women students at Haverford, and with Bryn Mawr students living on the Haverford campus.

The following summarizes the results of these explorations. We expect as well to make a verbal report at a faculty meeting, and hope that departments will address specific problems as part of a general effort to remove the sources of complaints.

In making this report, we begin by saying that virtually all the problems we have identified come under the heading of irritations. They have to do with teaching practices -- doubtless often unconscious, or representing a well-meant approach gone awry -- which women (and some men) find offensive. All are subject to correction, and we were pleased to note a widespread feeling among women students that many faculty already qualify for high marks for their handling of coeducational classrooms.

The most commonly cited problems concern classroom discussion. Some students have said that faculty members seem to use one tone of voice for women students and another for men students, which many women find annoying. A few others never call on women, or do so only to get the "woman's viewpoint" on the subject under discussion. There is an impression among faculty and students that women do not participate in classroom discussion as vigorously as men, especially in larger classes. Other factors, quite unrelated to teaching style, may contribute to this difficulty where it

exists, but faculty members could make special efforts to encourage balanced participation by all members of a class.

More serious is the charge that a few professors regularly introduce and encourage sexist humor in the classroom. Faculty initiatives in this area quickly evoke a response in kind from male students, thus creating what has been described as a locker room atmosphere, uncomfortable for women. If we do not condone racist jokes, why sexist jokes? Women are not objecting to ribaldry as such, (and no one wants to return to the days when mixed classes wouldn't read certain works or discuss certain issues), but they do object to humor degrading to women. It might be added that this is a matter on which it is particularly difficult for individual women to speak up, since they don't want to be considered humorless or prudish.

Students also said that some departments appear less ready than others to accept women students. This charge involves more than complaints about the preponderant male focus of illustrative material or sources cited. This problem, while real, and a source of irritation to women students, is not a problem exclusive to Haverford; it is an historic and societal one, which we should make efforts to minimize. The special problem at Haverford that a number of women cited is that in a few departments they feel they are unwelcome or merely tolerated, and occasionally even resented by faculty.

There have been a number of complaints about test questions and paper topics. Too many are felt to be narrowly based on male experience. Women don't, however, want the problem resolved by the addition of "women's topics" for women students; they suggest a wider range of topics, and a special sensitivity to any sexual dimension in test questions.

Finally, care is needed in advising. Some advisors, perhaps unconsciously, tend to steer women in certain traditional directions -- languages and literature, for instance, rather than science -- without sufficient attention to the individual's needs and capacities.

Many incidents and irritations in campus academic life may seem in themselves trivial, and there is a tendency to regard them as funny. Some are trivial or funny, but we need to remember that their cumulative effect is neither, and can undermine the position of all women at the college. We may disagree about the significance of the complaints raised here and others like them, but it is important that when raised they be given serious consideration.

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