

In a recent highly publicized case a professor at the University of New Hampshire, who was found by a hearing committee to have harassed female students for many years, was suspended and required to obtain psychological counseling. The hearing committee said it would lift the suspension only when the counselor notified the school administration that the professor was ready to return to the classroom. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) is opposed to mandatory counseling. Some university administrators, on the other hand, defend the practice, comparing it to the widespread employment relations practice of requiring employees with substance abuse problems to enter assistance programs. Under this practice, the administrators note, employees with drinking or drug problems are characteristically not allowed back to work until the program certifies them as ready.

Is mandatory counseling a morally acceptable measure to use in the case of faculty found to have engaged repeatedly in sexual harassment. If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: In this case it was inappropriate for the disciplinary committee to require the professor to undergo psychological counseling. The focus of psychological counseling is a person's psychological problems primarily associated with his or her feelings and emotions. It is difficult to see how a disciplinary committee could acquire the insight about these matters, on the basis of the kind of evidence and testimony typically presented at a disciplinary hearing, to decide in the case of a particular person whether psychological counselling is advisable. In this case, however, while the disciplinary committee determined that the Professor repeatedly harassed female students over many years, it would have been appropriate to insist that he participate in a program designed to assist him in avoiding the kinds of behavior that led to the need for disciplinary action. Requiring participation in such a program would address the Professor's actions rather than his emotions and feelings.

Case from the February 24, 1996 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1996.