

Improving the Gender Climate at Sea

Summary of Report and Actions Being Taken Based on the Recommendations of The MIT/WHOI Joint Program Gender Equity ad hoc Committee for Research Cruise and Field Program Activities

By:

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Background:

An MIT/WHOI Joint Program Gender Equity *ad hoc* Committee for Research Cruise and Field Program Activities (the “Committee”) was formed at the request of Dr. Robert B. Gagosian, President and Director of WHOI, and Professor Robert Brown, Provost of MIT, in response to a recommendation made during the 2004 visit of the External Review Committee for the MIT/WHOI Joint Program in order to: (1) investigate the extent of gender related issues on research vessels or WHOI and MIT field programs, (2) review current policies, training and educational materials for addressing gender issues at sea for students, faculty, staff and crew, and (3) make recommendations to the Joint Program (JP) with regard to responding to concerns and issues that may arise from the Committee’s deliberations.

The Committee used three strategies to gather information: open forum meetings with the JP students, an anonymous on-line survey, and personal meetings. All JP students, male and female, were encouraged to participate. Survey respondents were assured of anonymity, and that no personnel actions would be taken against any individual or group based solely on the survey responses. Because of these assurances, no subsequent inquiries were made to verify the information reported.

The survey was tailored specifically to sea-going or field-going JP students, using modifications of the types of questions asked in similar surveys in academia, industry and the military. No definition of sexual harassment or harassment in general was provided, but the questions focused on unwanted sexual or gender-related conduct. Survey participants were asked a set of questions to determine what, if any, types of incidents they had experienced, how often, where and from whom. They were not asked to divulge names of individuals. However, the respondents who said that they experienced an incident of inappropriate conduct were asked to describe one incident in detail to get a better idea of the nature of incidents. Another set of questions explored how respondents reacted to the incident - whether they reported it, and if not, why not. Finally, the survey asked respondents to recommend actions that they felt would be most effective at improving the working environment at sea and in the field.

Sixty current or very recently graduated JP students responded to the on-line survey, out of a population of roughly 130, a 48% response rate. Of these, 34 were women and 26 men. All but four of the survey respondents had been to sea or out on field expeditions. Other information came from the detailed comments that students wrote in response to open-ended questions about their experiences. Seven students attended the

Committee's open forum at WHOI, and one attended at MIT. Despite the low attendance at the forums, discussion was revealing; several points were emphasized that had not come out in the survey responses, and additional detail was provided on specific incidents.

Based on the information it received, the Committee found evidence of unprofessional behavior based on gender and unwanted sexual attention directed at JP students while at sea on WHOI ships, other US academic vessels and on international or U.S. government vessels. Just over 50% of those surveyed reported positively to questions about experiencing inappropriate gender or sex-related behavior at sea and more than 20% reported instances of unwanted sexual advances. Female survey respondents reported experiencing inappropriate gender related behaviors far more often than men, and in more severe forms.

In the majority of cases, the students said that they chose not to report incidents of unwanted sexual attention. There was a range of responses to such behavior reported, specifically: ignoring the behavior, avoiding the person, asking the person to stop, asking someone else to speak to the person for them, or telling a co-worker, friend or family member about the incident. The survey respondents listed a variety of reasons for not reporting the behavior including: concern that the problem was not one that representatives could or would stop, concern about retaliation, embarrassment at being involved in the incident, lack of knowledge about where to complain, concern about the severity of actions that would be taken and concern about anonymity. It is important to note that the students said that in all three cases when the incident was reported, the behavior stopped.

Recommendations:

One of the primary missions of the MIT/WHOI Joint Program is to train the next generation of seagoing scientists and engineers. To do this effectively we need to ensure that going to sea is a positive, inspiring, and productive experience for ALL students.

Based on the discussion and recommendations of the Committee, which were specifically based on the recommendations suggested by the Joint Program Students, the following actions will be implemented:

- 1. WHOI will provide education for the science party at the start of every cruise about acceptable sex- and gender-related behavior.** On WHOI vessels, an explicit statement about professional behavior with respect to gender and sexual orientation will be included in the safety briefing given to the science party at the start of each cruise. This briefing will make it clear what behaviors are not acceptable, and how to report them if they occur. The briefing will promote awareness about gender equity, educate the scientific party (including JP students) about where to go with complaints, and remind the Chief Scientist of his or her responsibilities for maintaining a professional workplace.
- 2. WHOI will implement procedures to better educate the shipboard crew about acceptable sex- and gender-related behavior and policies.** Crew members will receive education and guidance in appropriate behavior with respect to discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation, including harassment.

3. **The Joint Program will provide education for the JP graduate students to recognize unprofessional behavior at sea and respond appropriately.** This education and guidance will begin during orientation of new JP students at WHOI and MIT and will include reminders and discussion during the annual Joint Program meeting.
4. **Improve the system for reporting unwanted inappropriate behavior and sexual attention that could constitute sexual harassment.** A new brochure has been developed describing the WHOI guidelines for dealing specifically with the seagoing environment and providing many options for reporting inappropriate behavior at sea. As with recommendation/action item number 3, these options will also be discussed during orientation of new JP students and during the annual meeting of Joint Program students.
5. **Publish information on sexual harassment written specifically for the seagoing environment.** As noted above, after consultation with MIT, WHOI has published a brochure focusing on the subject of sexual harassment at sea and at field sites. This brochure is intended to complement WHOI's Policy Against Harassment. It will be distributed to JP students and anyone else going to sea on WHOI vessels.
6. **WHOI will bring this document to the attention of the University-National Oceanographic Laboratory System (UNOLS) Office and Council and recommend that these, or similar, recommendations are implemented for all research vessels of the UNOLS fleet.** JP students and WHOI/MIT researchers in general go to sea on many different UNOLS ships. To help make going to sea a positive, inspiring, and productive experience for ALL JP students and employees, we recommend all UNOLS ships should implement educational sessions, information dissemination and reporting procedures comparable to those discussed here. This recommendation will be made by WHOI to the Research Vessel Oversight Committee of UNOLS at its April 2006 meeting.

Any employee, postdoc or JP student wishing to read the report may view it at WHOI at any one of the Vice President's offices, the Office of the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Officer in Human Resources, or the Ombuds Office. It is also available at the Office of the Associate Provost, Human Resources and Ombuds offices at MIT.