

Subtle Sexism Undermines Amherst

The recently released Report of the Ad Hoc Committee to Study the Conditions of Work for Faculty Women at Amherst College identifies a discomfort, anxiety and marginalization of women faculty in the Amherst community. Specific institutional policies, as well as less concrete attitudes were cited in explanation.

The conditions of women faculty undeniably affect the student body. Qualified women scholars may be hesitant to join an institution with such a reputation. Also, faculty uneasiness is not divorced from classroom or advisory behavior, nor should it be. However, we find it inappropriate to judge the accuracy of the report since it discusses areas of faculty concern rarely seen by the student body (i.e., committee work, tenure decisions, faculty social life.)

Nevertheless, the report does raise issues of great concern for the student population: What are the conditions for women students at Amherst College? Has co-education been successful and complete?

Whereas the report states that the school's institutional policies inhibit the integration of women faculty, we believe that they do not do so for women students.

In terms of formal policy, co-education has been largely successful: the population is almost 50% women, admission is gender-blind, women have equal access to every dorm, event, and in past years, fraternity. A good faith effort has been made by this institution to allow women to share in its academic excellence, for so long offered only to men.

However, we acknowledge that co-education is not yet complete, and will not be complete, until what we imprecisely define as a subtle undertone of sexism is eradicated. Like all latent discrimination, this sexism is unintentional and extremely hard to pinpoint, examine or discuss. Still, we agree that somehow it is easier to assimilate here if one is a man.

Unfortunately, we live in a society characterized by varying degrees of sexism. Thus, much of this ambience is not Amherst-born but an echo of the sentiments of the world surrounding Amherst. Still, blaming all on society is letting Amherst off too easily.

For there remains at the College an ingrained tradition and structure founded on Amherst, the all-male institution. These male-oriented traditions of intellectual and social behavior (of which rowdy beer bashes are an excellent example) are accessible to women but make many of them (as well as many male students) uncomfortable.

Two happenings from Homecoming are fine examples. The failure to showcase women's sporting events (women's soccer, field hockey and rugby did not have scheduled events) during Homecoming weekend meant that the festivities and crowds supported only male athletes. Also, the obvious preference of the Homecoming audience for The Glee Club over the Women's Chorus and Mixed Choir, is not entirely based on talent, but also tradition. As a result, many women felt excluded and unappreciated.

Unfortunately, solutions are even more difficult to determine. Awareness and discussion are a first step. Attitudes, not just numbers, must change.