



How business schools are teaching students about workplace harassment



ROSE LINCOLN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Asking a question is Urmi Samadar, of MIT, from left, Terelle Brown, volunteer, and Laura Koller of MIT at Daena Giardella's MIT Sloan sexual harassment workshop.

By [Katie Johnston](#)

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It all started when Jack told his pregnant co-worker, “I wish my wife looked that good at seven months.”

“Did I actually hear you say that?” another employee asked incredulously.

When Jack protested that it was an innocent compliment, the co-worker persisted: “It’s inappropriate, almost sexual,” she said.

The scene, portrayed by improv actors in an MIT Sloan School of Management auditorium last month, was part of a series of workshops at the school designed to help the next generation of business executives address sexual harassment in the workplace. Next spring, Sloan will offer a course dedicated to advancing equity and inclusion in the workplace that delves into responses to sexual harassment and conditions that allow it to fester.

As the #MeToo movement continues to reveal how ingrained sexual harassment is in corporate culture, business schools have started taking steps to teach future leaders how to deal with, and eradicate, such behavior. At Stanford Graduate School of Business, an [ethics course](#) recently looked into how to create a workplace environment where people are comfortable reporting sexual misconduct. Harassment at Uber is being examined in business school classrooms at Georgetown and Vanderbilt. Carnegie Mellon’s Tepper School of Business is developing virtual-reality training that will allow students to practice intervening when they witness harassment.

“People are waking up in business schools and realizing we’ve had a blind spot,” said Sloan senior lecturer and leadership consultant Daena Giardella, who ran the MIT workshops. “Teaching students how to respond to sexual harassment is not just a nice little soft skill to add on. I think it is actually now an imperative. We can’t have leadership without this being taught.”

Nationwide, women make up nearly 38 percent of MBA students, up from 26 percent in 2001, according to the Forte Foundation, a consortium of business schools and companies working to promote women in business. By 2030, that number is expected to hit 50 percent.

As more women pursue MBAs, business schools have tried to make them feel more welcome in the traditionally male-centric environs: increasing the number of female protagonists in case studies, scheduling more female speakers, and forming “male allies” and “manbassador” groups to support gender equity.

Now, with the steady stream of sexual misconduct claims set off by the Harvey Weinstein scandal, business schools are adding sexual harassment training to curriculums that are increasingly stressing ethics and values alongside finance, marketing, and economics.

In addition to its virtual reality training, Carnegie Mellon's Tepper School is planning a facilitated conversation series, with topics including the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, to teach students how to negotiate difficult situations. The SC Johnson College of Business at Cornell University held a well-attended session on the #MeToo movement in February as part of its "Fiery Topics" series. And at the University of California Berkeley's Haas School of Business, sexual harassment training for incoming students for the first time this fall will be conducted by current MBA students and tailored to include how leaders can create a workplace culture where sexual harassment isn't tolerated.

Northeastern University's D'Amore-McKim School of Business is going even further, overhauling its curriculum to, in part, weave issues facing working women into the fabric of its coursework, said dean Raj Echambadi. The school will take a two-pronged approach: teaching would-be leaders how to deal with sexual harassment while training future workers how to conduct themselves in the workplace.



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Tiana Veldwisch of MIT (left) and Evelyn Moore of Leslie University performed at an improv sexual harassment workshop.

In preparation for launching a new women's group last fall, the school asked female students to submit questions about concerns they wanted to see a panel address. Among the questions: "How do you effectively navigate a male-dominated corporate culture?" "What are some strategies to be taken more seriously in the workplace?" And "How do you handle situations when inappropriate conversations come up when working with a group of men?"

Echambadi was surprised. "I didn't expect to see this in 2018," he said.

While it's possible that business schools' sudden interest in sexual harassment may wane when the next hot-button issue comes along, said Elissa Sangster, executive director of the Forte Foundation, the male allies groups the foundation helped establish — now operating at 25 schools — have embedded the topic of gender equity into student culture.

At Sloan, students took matters into their own hands after the Weinstein scandal broke last fall. Realizing that they had the ability to start changing norms before they even got to the workplace, in December they organized a series of three improv workshops performed by MBA students. Each focused on different points of view: the person being harassed, a bystander, and an executive, all based on students' real-world experiences.

Giardella, the senior lecturer, facilitated the December workshops and held another one in April. Giardella has addressed sexual harassment in MIT improv workshops over the past five years but notes a greater sense of urgency now, with students asking more questions and sharing personal stories.



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As the scene with Jack and the pregnant co-worker unfolded last month, Giardella occasionally froze the action, calling out “Thought bubble!” and “Feeling bubble!” to get the actors to vocalize their characters’ internal dialogues, and rewind the scene to show different responses.

The key, said Giardella, who teaches a course called Improvisational Leadership, is doing something — even if it’s just interrupting the situation and walking away with the person being harassed — to show that certain behaviors are unacceptable.

“If we ignore it, we are basically saying, ‘Yeah, let’s continue that norm,’ ” she said.

The growing number of women entering the business world is bound to make a difference in the culture of traditionally male-dominated leadership positions. But simply having more women in corner offices and boardrooms is not going to change the culture, noted Faye Cheng, a Sloan MBA student who helped spearhead the December workshops.

“It’s possible that there might be organic improvement, but as a woman going into the workforce I don’t want to just bank on that,” she said.

Fellow Sloan MBA student Shamir Tanna, who is part of the school's Male Allies program, feels an acute responsibility to address sexual harassment.

“How can we really be part of the solution and fixing some of the systemic things that are going on?” he said. “We need to make it as important as any other topic that we learn here.”

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