

MU lacks single database for sexual harassment complaints

The multiple paths mean there is no system to keep track of the records.

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There are several places students can turn to report sexual harassment, but the absence of a single database for keeping track of complaints has sparked a discussion among faculty members.

"There is no simple answer to the simple question of 'What is the process for reporting sexual harassment,' " MU Equity Director Noel English said. "People can report in multiple places. Where they first turn for help is less important than that they get help."

English has been talking with the Diversity Enhancement Committee, led by Faculty Council member Leah Cohn, about ways sexual harassment complaints are reported and ways the information is kept. But the issue has not been brought to Faculty Council.

Cohn said a system for tracking sexual harassment complaints is not something the council would be responsible for establishing or maintaining. Any plans to establish a database at MU to track complaints are very vague at the moment.

There are many different places for people to report sexual harassment complaints.

"There is not a specific final place that a sexual harassment complaint will end up," English said.

Where complaints are sent varies depending on whether the complainant and accused are faculty, student or staff members.

"It may depend on whether the complainant seeks a formal or informal resolution," English said. "It may depend on the nature or severity of the allegations."

The process for tracking sexual harassment cases was brought to the Diversity Enhancement Committee due to concern there is no way to keep track of records at various places people can report complaints, Cohn said.

Other universities, such as Missouri State University, have methods to track previous sexual harassment complaints.

"The Office for Equity and Diversity at MSU maintains a database to track complaints made to the department," MSU Equal Opportunity Officer Jana Estergard said. "Student judicial matters are tracked by the Office for Student Conduct."

The files maintained by the MSU Office for Equity and Diversity are closed records and are not available to the public.

"The Office for Equity and Diversity utilizes our departmental database in our investigative work," Estergard said. "To determine if there were any previous complaints involving one or more of the named parties."

MSU has taken a number of security measures to ensure the security of its database, Estergard said.

"If an organization is establishing a single source database to track complaints, it is important that administrators, supervisors and managers report complaints they receive directly to the central reporting office," Estergard said.

MU students who are unsure of where to go for help can talk to people in the MU Equity Office, English said.

"My office, the MU Equity office, exists to make sure that people know they have options," English said. "And to make sure no one gets lost in the cracks simply because the system appears confusing."

Students can also report harassment anonymously, using the bias incident report on the MU Equity Web site, English said.

"Any student or faculty member or staff member who has a sexual harassment complaint can contact the Equity office and we will help them figure out how to proceed," English said. "Depending on the circumstances, that might mean a formal investigation or some other informal resolution."