

# SUBMISSION TO THE TASK FORCE ON MISOGYNY, SEXISM, AND HOMOPHOBIA

## DALHOUSIE STUDENT UNION

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# Introduction

The Dalhousie Student Union is the largest student union in Nova Scotia, representing approximately 18,000 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students at all four campuses of Dalhousie University.

The Dalhousie Student Union welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the *Task Force on Misogyny, Sexism, and Homophobia*. Given the terms of reference of the Task Force, this submission will provide particular insight into the following questions under the Task Force's mandate:

- ▶ **What are the policies and practices of the Faculty and the University in respect of:**
  - **Tolerance for misogynistic, sexist and homophobic conduct?**
  - **Sanctions for such conduct?**
  - **Communication by the Faculty and students of incidents which could violate expected standards of conduct?**

- ▶ **What policies, standards and practices are in place at other Canadian universities to address the issues of misogyny, sexism and homophobia?**
- ▶ **What policies and practices could be put into place to permit University administrators to investigate anonymous complaints of harassment and discrimination and conduct investigations into allegations of systemic discrimination and harassment?**

The Dalhousie Student Union is committed to advocating for safer and more inclusive campuses free from violence, harassment, and discrimination. The DSU has raised many concerns regarding the actions of the university regarding recent incidents of sexism, misogyny, and homophobia, including the incidents within the Faculty of Dentistry. These concerns have included: the lack of action on systemic issues of concern

within the Faculty of Dentistry prior to December 2014, inadequate counseling services for students who experience sexualized violence, the absence of anonymous reporting mechanisms and a university Ombudsperson to address concerns with current policies, and inefficient outreach and communication to student groups, including the student union, on campus in responding to incidents, among others. While the DSU understands that the scope of the Task Force is focused primarily on the Faculty of Dentistry, this submission will also draw on the experience of the student union in addressing issues of misogyny, homophobia and rape culture in the broader university context.

We hope that the report and recommendations of the Task Force will be taken seriously by the University and students look forward to working with the Dalhousie administration and others to make our campuses safer places for students.

# Summary of Recommendations

1. Implement an acceptable process for anonymous reporting of discrimination and harassment.
2. Create an independent, arm's-length Office of the Ombudsperson or similar office that would:
  - ▶ Provide assistance to students navigating the University's many processes and advocate on their behalf;
  - ▶ Regularly review university policy to ensure it aligns with best practices and trends in complaints and issues; and
  - ▶ Report on trends in complaints, unfair elements of university policy and/or practice, and recommendations to be implemented.
3. Amend policy to commit the university to providing accommodations for students who have experienced harm as a result of incidents of sexism, misogyny, sexual harassment, and other forms of discrimination and harassment.
4. Provide accommodations for students who have experienced harm
5. Require that all faculty and staff at Dalhousie attend a mandatory training on sexism and misogyny in working and learning environments.
6. Require that all students at Dalhousie take an equity course as a part of their degree which that discusses the root causes of gender-based violence and intersecting forms of oppression.

# Background

In December 2014, officials of the Dalhousie Student Union were made aware of a series of Facebook posts originating from the Dalhousie Faculty of Dentistry when the posts were made public by various media outlets in Halifax.

In response to the Facebook posts, the Dalhousie Student Union undertook a number of actions including:

- ▶ Releasing a public statement;
- ▶ Doing dozens of media interviews;
- ▶ Supporting community-organized protests by attending and speaking;
- ▶ Co-organizing two forums on misogyny with the Department of Gender and Women's Studies and others;

- ▶ Co-organizing a town hall with several student organizations on how to address misogyny and rape culture on campus;
- ▶ Passing a resolution at the Dalhousie Student Union Council condemning the incidents and calling for a number of university actions on combatting misogyny and rape culture on campus; and
- ▶ Forming a "Working Group on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence" to continue ongoing student union-led advocacy and service initiatives to combat sexual and gender-based violence on campus.

In addition, the DSU participated in a number of activities related to the incidents within the Faculty of Dentistry that

were part of regular operations of the student union including representing students' interests at Dalhousie Board of Governors and Senate meetings, participating in the Committee for Dalhousie's Strategic Initiative on Diversity and Inclusiveness, and meeting regularly with senior administrators to discuss the Dalhousie Student Union's proposals regarding university services and actions to address misogyny, sexualized violence, and other forms of discrimination and harassment on campus.

# Strengthening Reporting Mechanisms and Policies

In the summer of 2014, female students had approached the Dalhousie Student Union for assistance regarding experiences of sexism within the Faculty of Dentistry. Students reported experiences of sexist comments, sexual harassment, and preferential treatment of male students in clinical settings. The DSU attempted to pursue these concerns through various channels within the university, but in order for the complaints to be acted on, the female students would have to reveal their identities. Ultimately, the students directed representatives of the Dalhousie Student Union to stop all actions related to the complaints.

Given these events, representatives of the Dalhousie Student Union were dismayed, but not surprised about the various Facebook posts that were released. Under the current university processes, anonymity is not an option for students who make complaints or raise con-

cerns about discrimination or harassment. This can be especially concerning for students in smaller programs or faculties, where there may be risk of negative responses to their complaints.

Having a system for students to report incidents of discrimination and harassment while maintaining anonymity is an important part of ensuring that issues of misogyny, sexism, homophobia, and other intersecting forms of oppression are addressed on an ongoing basis. Complaints about experiences of sexism and sexual harassment within a faculty should receive due attention, especially if students in that faculty are concerned about the repercussions

of disclosure of their complaints to their peers and/or faculty and staff in the department.

Currently, the processes outlined under the Sexual Harassment, Student Code of Conduct, and Statement on Discrimination policies deal with grievances against individuals, but do not provide processes to address systemic or cultural issues within a department, faculty, or other unit of the university. A process that would permit students to report incidents of discrimination and harassment anonymously and ensure that those reports were investigated could help to identify systemic issues within particular faculties or departments.

## **RECOMMENDATION 1:**

Implement an acceptable process for anonymous reporting of discrimination and harassment.

Until 2013, the university maintained an Ombudsperson position, which had been a joint initiative with the Dalhousie Student Union. The role of the Ombudsperson was to ensure that students and staff received fair treatment in disputes involving the University or the Dalhousie Student Union.<sup>1</sup> The Ombudsperson provided advice and referrals, as well as acting as a mediator for disputes when needed. Unfortunately, the office was under-funded and under-resourced. The university first began providing this service in 1971. Despite the growing need for the service, the position always remained a part-time position that was filled by a student.<sup>2</sup>

Since the Ombudsperson position was cut, the Dalhousie Student Union has advocated that the University establish and fund an office that would fulfill a similar role, but with the needed resources. The office would be at arm's-length and be able to both provide assistance to students navigating the processes currently in place to address issues of discrimination and harassment, among others, and look more broadly at the fairness of university policy and practices.

More than two thirds of universities in the U15 have an Ombudsperson.<sup>3</sup> In Ontario, the province recently gave the provincial Ombudsman oversight over all universities.<sup>4</sup> There is a clear and established need for this kind of service within a university setting. Even at Dalhousie, some departments have their own Ombudsperson position.

By maintaining an independent office that can provide guidance on specific cases, investi-

gate complaints, and provide recommendations to address unfair policies or practices and gaps in policy, the university could prevent crises instead of responding to them. Such an office would also ensure that the policies in place are serving their purpose in practice and not just existing as words on a page. Students are not served by a solid policy if they are not informed about the policy and supported when they need to use processes contained in the policy.

## **RECOMMENDATION 2:**

Create an independent, arm's-length Office of the Ombudsperson or similar office that would:

- ▶ Provide assistance to students navigating the University's many processes and advocate on their behalf;
- ▶ Regularly review university policy to ensure it aligns with best practices and trends in complaints and issues; and
- ▶ Report on trends in complaints, unfair elements of university policy and/or practice, and recommendations to be implemented.

# Supporting Survivors

As a result of the very public conversation on misogyny and rape culture on campus that was instigated by the spotlight on the incidents of misogyny, sexism, and homophobia in the Faculty of Dentistry, many students came forward to discuss their experiences of sexual assault on campus and the university's response.

These disclosures revealed a number of concerning gaps in the supports available to students who experience sexualized violence and harassment, and other forms of violence and discrimination on campus. Students spoke publicly about victim blaming when seeking counseling through the Dalhousie counseling services and about having to remain in spaces, including classrooms and residence spaces, with people who had perpetrated sexual violence. While these anecdotes provide only a sliver of insight into the broader issue of sexualized violence, they revealed that there are students who experience harm that do not receive sufficient support from the university .

Currently, a student who experiences sexual violence or assault may pursue remedy under

both the University's Code of Conduct and the Sexual Harassment Policy. Neither of these policies, however, commit to providing accommodations for people who have experience violence or harassment. The Sexual Harassment Policy states "The complainant and the respondent are, at all times during any stage of these procedures, entitled to support and assistance from the Advisor, Harassment Prevention/Conflict Management in the Office of Human Rights, Equity and Harassment Prevention,"<sup>5</sup> but the policy does not provide any clear commitment for accommodations for students who experience sexual assault or harassment.

Students who experience harm because of incidents of sexism, misogyny, homophobia, or sexual harassment or assault may require an array of

accommodations including adding or dropping classes outside of the set deadlines, academic accommodations, changing residences, leaving residence with reimbursement, and/or changes to work schedules or jobs. Without a central commitment to provide accommodations, a student may have to disclose their experience to multiple people in university including professors, residence staff, staff in their academic department(s), and their employment supervisor. Wherever possible, the University should seek to minimize the number of people that a student must disclose their experience to. Instead, the University should commit to amending policy to clearly commit to providing students who experience discrimination, harassment, and sexual violence with accommodations in academics, residence, and employment.

## RECOMMENDATION 3:

Amend policy to commit the university to providing accommodations for students who have experienced harm as a result of incidents of sexism, misogyny, and sexual harassment, and other forms of discrimination and harassment.

# Building Community Responses

The Dalhousie Student Union recognizes that preventing sexualized violence requires a groundswell of community support. In responding to the incidents of misogyny, sexism, and homophobia in the Faculty of Dentistry, the DSU attempted to provide space for students to come together, talk about their experiences, and offer ideas for collective responses to discrimination, harassment, and violence on campus.

As mentioned, the incidents in the Faculty of Dentistry brought to light a number of personal experiences of sexual assault and harassment at Dalhousie. The public dialogue about misogyny and rape culture also led to more conversations on campus about these issues. The reverberations of what happened were felt across

campus and the surrounding community. While support was obviously focused on the Faculty of Dentistry, students outside of that faculty also needed outlets to discuss their experiences and their ideas about creating a safer campus.

The university should work with the Dalhousie Student Union and other campus and community groups to provide forums for students to talk

about their experiences of discrimination and harassment, and provide input into the university's ongoing work to create a safer campus. There should be a number of avenues where students can contribute both openly and confidentially to the discussion. For example, the university could organize public forums and town halls, online surveys, and focus groups on issues of specific interest.

## **RECOMMENDATION 4:**

Develop a process for students to share their experiences of discrimination and harassment and provide input into addressing these forms of oppression on campus in partnership with the Dalhousie Student Union and other Dalhousie student groups.

# Preventing Violence through a Cultural Shift

At the root, eradicating misogyny, sexism, and rape culture on campus and in society will require a massive cultural shift. While universities cannot bring about this cultural shift alone, they can play an important role in this long-term work of creating a society free from violence and oppression.

Education has been an important and key component of the Dalhousie Student Union's work on challenging oppression and rape culture on campus. Within our operations, we have sought to educate students through public events, town halls, and campaign materials including posters, leaflets, and buttons. We have also worked to educate Orientation Week leaders through mandatory trainings and evaluations on diversity, inclusion, and consent. By creating visibility and integrating awareness about issues like misogyny, sexism, homophobia, and rape culture into the different activities of the student union, the Dalhousie Student Union is letting students know

that these issues are important and will not be tolerated.

The university should follow the lead of the student union and work with campus groups, unions, and stakeholders to develop training for students, staff, and faculty that address the root causes of gender-based and sexual violence and intersecting forms of oppression. This education can come in many forms including creating a standardized, mandatory training, or creating a degree requirement and

building a list of courses that would fill the requirement as is done for other degree requirements.

It is important to note that many students take ethics courses as part of their programs or, as is the case in the Faculty of Dentistry, professional ethics is part of other mandatory course requirements. These courses may be adequate to fulfill an equity-based degree requirement, but should at the very least be reviewed.

## **RECOMMENDATION 5:**

Require that all faculty and staff at Dalhousie attend mandatory training on sexism and misogyny in working and learning environments.

## **RECOMMENDATION 6:**

Require that all students at Dalhousie take an equity course as a part of their degree which discusses the root causes of gender-based and sexual violence and intersecting forms of oppression.

# Conclusion

Recent incidents on campuses across Canada have shown that sexism, misogyny, and rape culture continue to be pressing issues for colleges and universities. At Dalhousie, the incidents in the Faculty of Dentistry and

the less publicized incidents in Howe Hall, have spotlighted these issues on our campus, but these are not new issues.

Action in response to sexism, misogyny, and homophobia

in the Faculty of Dentistry must have an eye to making systemic changes that can prevent discrimination, harassment, and violence across campus in the future.

# Endnotes

1. "Call for an Ombudsperson at Dalhousie University," Dalhousie Student Union Equity & Accessibility Office: February, 2014. [http://dsu.ca/sites/default/files/documents/Call%20for%20Dal%20Ombudsperson\\_0.pdf](http://dsu.ca/sites/default/files/documents/Call%20for%20Dal%20Ombudsperson_0.pdf)
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. "What is Bill 8?" Ombudsman Ontario. <https://ombudsman.on.ca/About-Us/Who-We-Oversee/Bill-8.aspx>
5. Section 41, Dalhousie University's Sexual Harassment Policy, Office of Human Rights, Equity & Harassment Prevention: March 2012. [http://www.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/university\\_secretariat/policy-repository/SexualHarassmentPolicy.pdf](http://www.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/university_secretariat/policy-repository/SexualHarassmentPolicy.pdf)