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Stop Hugging Your Postdocs—and Learn to Start Conversations That Prevent Harassment

The long fight against sexual harassment is shifting from compliance to culture.

After a whirlwind of committee meetings on preventing sexual harassment, I thought I had some good news for the faculty at Rutgers University, where I am vice president for academic affairs. Promotion and tenure committees could now officially consider conduct—and therefore misconduct—alongside metrics on teaching, research, and service. This radical change was possible thanks to previously overlooked language included in a "Statement on Professional Ethics" embedded within the university's policy on academic freedom. The statement specified that professors should "avoid any exploitation, harassment, or discriminatory treatment of students," and that "professors do not discriminate against or harass colleagues." This was readily incorporated into formal evaluation guidelines, and thus, faculty who had harassed or bullied students, postdoctoral researchers, or colleagues could, starting with the 2019–20 academic year, face repercussions in tenure and promotion decisions.

To my great surprise, this news was not greeted with universal enthusiasm. Many faculty commented that they did not feel comfortable assessing their colleagues' behavior. One chair, not in the habit of shying away from difficult issues, told me, "I know how to evaluate a research profile in my field. I have no idea how to evaluate a colleague's conduct, or how bad the conduct has to be in order to deny someone promotion or tenure."

According to behavioral surveys, academia is second only to the military in its prevalence of sexual harassment against women. Alongside violent sexual assault and offers of professional opportunities in exchange for sexual favors, the term "sexual harassment" covers sexually suggestive comments and unwanted sexual attention as well as language and behaviors that denigrate women as a group. According to a 2018 report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) entitled *Sexual Harassment of Women*, all these behaviors—even "mild" comments—undermine targets' health, work satisfaction, advancement, and productivity. And too many women are harassed out of science altogether, which, in addition to hurting the women themselves, also deprives science of the benefits of their talent and training.

A narrative legal history by Fred Strebeigh describes how the term "sexual harassment" itself can be traced to academia. In the 1970s, the head of a nuclear physics lab at Cornell University repeatedly, and sometimes publicly, groped, leered at, and propositioned an employee, Carmita Wood. After both university and government officials trivialized her experience, she connected with Lin Farley, a university lecturer collecting stories of women in the workplace. Farley and two colleagues recognized Wood's experience as pervasive and described it in a large mailing calling for help to build a legal case for sexual harassment as

a violation of civil rights. This effort, and "sexual harassment" as a phrase, was reported by *The New York Times* and subsequently entered the public lexicon.

A half-century later, every academic campus in the United States that accepts federal funds must have an official process to handle sexual harassment complaints in order to comply with Title IX, the federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on sex in education. And yet, according to the NASEM report, "Studies on sexual harassment from the 1980s through today continue to show that sexual harassment of women is widespread in workplaces and that the rates of sexual harassment have not significantly decreased."

This may seem like reason to despair, but academia changes slowly, and the conversation has recently begun to shift. Now instead of simply asking, "What sanctions do you impose?" many of us working on this problem are asking, "How do you create a climate where faculty understand what behaviors are unacceptable?" as well as "How can an academic community *effectively* hold its members accountable for sexual harassment?"

Cultural shift

Back in the 1980s, early in my career handling sexual harassment issues, I was alerted to a faculty member who was in the habit of congratulating his postdocs with hugs. After a postdoc spoke up, we soon had accounts of unwanted embraces from multiple current and former postdocs. It fell to me to tell the faculty member to stop hugging his postdocs. I remember he seemed genuinely surprised that his "fatherly" gesture of support was being negatively received. It struck me even then that academia lacked effective ways to set and transmit expectations of inappropriate behavior.

By the time the NASEM report came out in 2018, I'd been dealing professionally with sexual harassment in the academy for over 25 years. Most of the cases I became familiar with involved sexual harassment of graduate students and postdocs by tenured faculty. Enough time has passed that those graduate students and postdocs may now themselves be tenured faculty, yet harassment persists. It is clear that this problem is not a generational one that time will resolve.

The NASEM report had a particular resonance for those of us working in higher education. It was clear the report's authors knew their way around the inner workings of academia, recognizing both the "star culture" that sometimes accommodates egregious behavior as well as the need to move away from relying solely on academic output in faculty evaluations. The NASEM report also acknowledged that transparency around (admittedly sensitive) personnel matters had to improve in order to convince the community that harassers would be held accountable.

To me, the NASEM report represented a sea change in how to think about sexual harassment. And it has sparked a truly national conversation about the need to move beyond mere compliance to a focus on prevention and culture change. Within a year of releasing the report, NASEM invited academic institutions and professional associations to join its Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education and so commit to exploring and supporting ways to put a stop to sexual harassment. Members include national labs and many research-intensive public and private universities, such as Caltech, Harvard University, Michigan State University, and the University of Michigan, along with Rutgers University, where I am the university's current representative to the collaborative.

For two years, I cochaired a subgroup of the collaborative that considered how to respond to sexual harassment and misconduct. We knew that the sanctioning issue was only one part of the problem. Sanctions result only after a formal complaint, a thorough process of investigation, and a finding of a policy violation. But the vast majority of targets of sexual harassment do *not* file a formal complaint. Inappropriate behaviors may thus continue, bringing harm to other targets and creating a toxic environment in a department or lab. For that reason, it was important to explore effective early interventions—responses and actions designed to correct harmful behaviors before they escalate and result in a formal finding of a policy violation.

We knew we were taking on a big task. Many academics consider themselves to be independent entrepreneurs or contractors, with their primary loyalties to their disciplines or labs rather than their departments or institutions. Often this translates into a reluctance to intervene in a colleague's (or friend's) business. It's essential to remind faculty about what constitutes inappropriate behavior and to give them the tools to talk to their colleagues when they witness it.

In the meantime, I had been pursuing change at Rutgers. After the NASEM report came out, Rutgers' senior vice president for academic affairs and I, encouraged by several members of the faculty, wanted to explore how we could implement the report's recommendations at our institution. Concerned that the usual route of creating a large task force would lead to years of talking about the problem with little action, we decided instead to create a small, nimble committee of no more than a dozen people. But word got out and—to our surprise—people clamored for spots: faculty who'd studied harassment, Title IX staff who dealt with student sexual assault, graduate directors who faced problems in their own programs, and diversity leaders who were working to create more inclusive cultures. We had tapped into a wellspring of people eager to make positive change, and quickly brought in nearly 50 people, organized into six smaller subcommittees.

The Rutgers Committee to Prevent Sexual Harassment moved at the speed of light, at least for academia, and produced a report with recommendations in about six months. I was happily surprised at both the efficiency of the effort and the magnitude of what the committee recommended—for instance,

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changing policy so that treatment of colleagues could be included in faculty promotion and tenure decisions. But I soon learned, or rather was reminded, that it's much easier to change policy than culture.

Learning to talk

Along with their general discomfort with discussing their colleagues' behavior, some faculty have expressed more specific concerns. What if they criticized a colleague for misbehavior and he filed a grievance against them? Couldn't including criteria of "professionalism" or "civility" turn personnel decisions into a sort of popularity contest, or penalize women or underrepresented groups if colleagues feel they don't "fit in" with the dominant culture? We are still working through these and other concerns, but I firmly believe that the decision to include conduct in promotion and tenure evaluations was absolutely the right one.

Socializing the changes has been challenging, especially given the COVID-19 pandemic. Usually the most productive conversations that occur when I work to introduce new programs are not part of the public discussion, but instead happen when faculty buttonhole me after the meeting to share their concerns and experiences. These essential scaffolding conversations are hard to bring into virtual spaces.

But in the quiet conversations I've been able to have, one message has come through: while faculty want to create a welcoming and productive climate in their departments and labs, most simply don't know how to do it. Universities must give them the tools, and the scripts, to enable them to make it happen. And a welcoming culture should boost academic excellence as well; promising new faculty members, postdocs, and graduate students will think twice about joining a department or lab with a reputation for having a toxic environment.

This will be a much broader effort than changing promotion and tenure criteria. One pilot underway is to ask departments to develop a "Statement of Shared Values" customized to their own circumstances and culture. Department-specific statements would allow for addressing particular situations that occur in some academic fields, such as international field work, community internships, and clinical placements. But to be most effective, these documents must be developed through an inclusive process that fosters community among and between faculty, students, and staff, while at the same time producing a tool for intervention when inappropriate behavior occurs.

Along similar lines, we're making plans at Rutgers to translate strategies for "bystander intervention" developed by student affairs professionals into tools that can be used by faculty who observe colleagues acting inappropriately. Promising models already exist at several other institutions. Florida International University has a five-step process to teach individuals to recognize inappropriate conduct and assess how to intervene. Perhaps best known are the "coffee conversations" going on at Duke Health Systems in North Carolina, patterned after efforts at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee. This method focuses on stopping inappropriate behavior before it reaches the level of a serious event and relies on trained volunteer "peer messengers" who hold brief, informal conversations with individuals whose behavior was reported as unprofessional. From 2015 to 2018, 60 faculty trained to deliver messages had over 300 initial conversations at Duke University Health Systems; repeat behaviors were reported for only 1.5% of faculty. NASEM reports that of 85 individuals who have had coffee conversations at Duke, follow-on discussions—"espresso conversations"—were necessary for only three.

But all these programs are relatively new, and there is much work to be done to assess how well they work and under what circumstances. More research is needed on whether formal sanctions are effective in preventing repeat harassment, and if they are, which sanctions are most effective; on which early interventions seem to be most effective in correcting so-called low-level harassment and why; and on which approaches are most effective in creating inclusive, welcoming academic climates. Additionally, more research is needed to explore links between a positive culture and academic excellence.

Even as the evidence base accumulates, expanding bystander and other interventions may take an extra push. Perhaps we can learn some lessons from the way conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion have infused many of our institutions. In my experience, those conversations have become increasingly frank and productive, but academia still has a long way to go before faculty are able to talk about sexual harassment as effectively. We have to flip the script and talk affirmatively about the climates we want, not focus solely on the behaviors we object to.

Sexual harassment is still pervasive in academia, but we know what work has to be done, and there are more and more of us eager to do it. For the first time in my long history working on these issues, I am cautiously optimistic.

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