

Use science to stop sexual harassment in higher education

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Sexual harassment abounds in academia. We know this from a 2018 report published by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (1). As members of the committee who authored that report,* we have presented its findings to colleges and universities around the country. It has been deeply gratifying to see so many leaders want to address sexual harassment in their institutions. But according to a large body of social science evidence, the strategies that many of these same leaders are pursuing simply don't work.

Academia should lead and inspire change in other organizations. Instead, we have the highest rate of sexual harassment after the military (2). Several problems stand in the way of effective institutional response to sexual harassment: oversexualization of the problem, overreliance on fast fixes that fail to grapple with long histories of exclusion in the academy, and overemphasis on formal legal compliance. We need a radical redesign of anti-harassment efforts in higher education. This is a tall order, but decades of research can guide this work and brave leaders can implement it.

Not Just About Sex

The term “sexual harassment” is largely a misnomer. Most sexual harassment entails disrespect, not desire, and certainly not romance (3). There are the occasional come-ons: unwanted sexual advances, touches, kisses, or bribes and threats used to coerce sexual activity. But by far the most prevalent form of sexual harassment is the put-down, or what social scientists call *gender harassment*: comments, cartoons, jokes, gestures, and other insults to members of one sex/gender group (4, 5). Sometimes the put-downs are sexually degrading and crude, and other times they are contemptuous without sexual content. Women of color are likely to experience harassment that is based in both race and gender stereotypes (6). For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, harassment often includes comments about sexuality or gender presentation (7). The research record contains

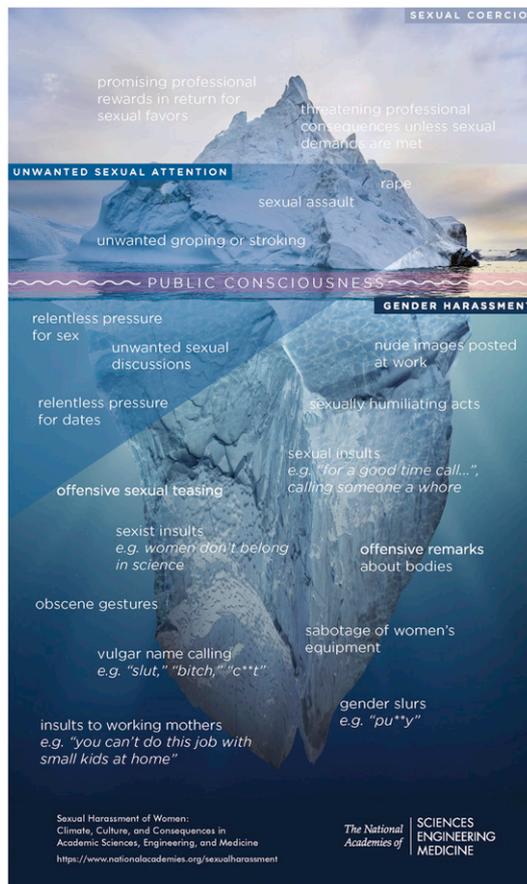


Fig. 1. Image from the National Academies report, illustrating how unwanted sexual touching, assault, and coercion represent only the “tip of the iceberg” of sexual harassment. Much more common is gender harassment—verbal and visual acts of gendered insult. Gender harassment lies below the water line, as it seldom breaks through to public awareness. Image credit: Reprinted with permission from ref. 1.

vivid accounts from targeted scholars who have avoided networking, resigned leadership positions, or turned down jobs because of sexual harassment (8).

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Most sexual harassment perpetrators are male and targets female, but not always. When men are targeted, the perpetrator is usually another man maligning them for being too timid, too sensitive, too gay, or in some other way not fitting the ideals of heterosexual masculinity (3). The goal of this conduct is to derogate or humiliate, often using scorn for anyone gendered feminine (or assumed to be feminine).

Why should we care about gender harassment? Research tells us why: Even when harassment entails nothing but gendered insult—absent any sexual advance—it takes a toll.

The National Academies report included an iceberg image to capture the different dimensions of sexual harassment (Figure 1). The bulk of the image lists examples of gender harassment as the most common form of harassment. Gender harassment lies “below the water line,” because it can’t be seen and seldom breaks through to public awareness.

Why should we care about gender harassment? Research tells us why: Even when harassment entails nothing but gendered insult—absent any sexual advance—it takes a toll (9). Over time, pervasive gender harassment can be just as detrimental to work and well-being as isolated instances of sexual coercion. When gender harassment is tolerated, it lays the groundwork for unwanted advances and sexual coercion (10).

Put-downs are trickier to confront than come-ons. Relentless pressure for dates or sex is an obvious violation of policy. Gender harassment is more difficult, for instance masquerading as scholarly criticism. Each individual act may seem too trivial to report, but the cumulative impact can be devastating. Should a woman file a formal complaint when constantly interrupted by men in meetings? When advised that having a baby causes “mommy brain” and will tank her career? When mocked while urinating at a field research site? And if she does complain, will anyone take her seriously? Sexual harassment is less about sexual conquest, more about contempt. It’s less about lechery, more about denials of dignity.

Most sexual harassment centers around contempt for women, not lust for them. Rather than roll out rules that scrub academia of all things sexual (11), our institutions should disincentivize contemptuous and disrespectful conduct. Unfortunately, many corners of academia are rife with rudeness (12). To determine whether their department is part of the problem, leaders can ask:

- Do job candidates have to run a gauntlet of abuse to show their worth?
- Are speakers constantly interrupted and “piled on” during their seminars?
- Do faculty members malign students or mistreat staff?
- Are wrongdoers widely known but never confronted by leadership?

- Is there a star culture, where some people are allowed to behave badly because they’re so brilliant, so famous, or bring in so many grant dollars?

To change course, the National Academies report recommends that institutions take active steps to cultivate cultures of respect. There are many ways to confront and curtail disrespect in academic life. For example, deans, directors, and department heads can:

- Issue explicit statements about belligerence being unacceptable at job talks. One can challenge job candidates to defend their ideas without resorting to ridicule.
- Hire leadership coaches for problematic faculty, helping them learn new ways of communicating and resolving conflicts.
- Include and weight assessments of interpersonal conduct in job interviews and performance appraisals. Better yet: Follow the advice of experts to avoid hiring toxic people in the first place (13).
- Withhold perks from those who are relentlessly rude. No more corner offices, primo parking spaces, or appointments to important committees.

In addition to prohibiting bad behavior, academic leaders can promote the positive. Universities have awards for excellence in research and teaching; how about accolades for improving departmental climate? (Though we shouldn’t disproportionately burden underrepresented faculty with award committee labor.) Institutions can implement respectful workplace programs, such as the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s Leading for Respect (for people in authority) and Respect in the Workplace [for all employees (14)]. Raising overall respect levels may make it more difficult for disrespect such as sexual harassment to seep in (15). These are long-term projects requiring sustained attention from campus leadership.

No Quick Fixes

This brings us to our next point: Everyone and their Associate Dean wants to find a fast fix for sexual harassment. We applaud academic leaders for wanting to solve this problem quickly. But sexual harassment, and its related forms of racial and gendered disrespect, are entrenched in long histories of exclusive and exploitative practices in the American higher education system (16). Many institutions initially excluded women. Some have yet to appoint a woman president, provost, or chair of a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) department. Even today, women of color are scarce across academia, and in STEM their numbers are declining (17).

Despite the historical complexities behind sexual harassment, organizations often seek simple solutions. They find consulting companies peddling an array of acontextual (often pricey) products: climate surveys, workshops, videos, apps, and online educational programs. Many of these consultants don’t have deep expertise in this area, and it shows. Off-the-shelf, one-size-fits-all products developed by nonspecialists are not the solution.

Take, for example, the Association of American Universities (AAU) Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct. Its developers had little background in the science of sexual harassment. Their online survey overlooked the most common form of sexual harassment: gendered put-downs. Each survey screen was emblazoned with the terms “sexual assault” and “sexual misconduct,” violating even the most basic standards of victimization research (standards elaborated in detail in Chapter 2 of the National Academies report). Appalled by this effort, 56 scientists signed a letter warning academic leaders not to fall for this fast and deeply flawed fix (18). Yet still they fell, not once but twice: 21 research universities participated in the AAU survey in both 2015 and 2019.

Problems also plague the online trainings that are now common on our campuses. Some trainings succeed at providing basic knowledge of sexual harassment definitions. Some tell you how to start the unpleasant process of filing a formal complaint. But brief, generic, online-only trainings do not effect lasting change in belief or behavior (19). And they can backfire by bolstering gender stereotypes and backlashes against women (20, 21).

Ill-informed trainings can amplify falsehoods about sexual harassment (22), such as the fiction that most harassment is about sex or romance gone awry. Some stoke the myth of false claims—the notion that women frequently fabricate or exaggerate wrongdoing. The truth is that women are far more likely to endure victimization than file a frivolous charge. Most cases are never reported. Moreover, this myth promotion can have disastrous consequences for women’s careers, with fears of false accusation leading worried men to avoid mentoring or even meeting with women. And to be clear, these men are breaking the law: Refusal to extend the same training opportunities across genders represents preplanned, patently illegal sex discrimination (23).

Not all trainings fail, however. As the National Academies report summarizes, science suggests potential for anti-harassment training to be effective, but it must be of higher quality and cost than the online options that many institutions have trotted out (1). To make meaningful change, these trainings should be conducted by a “live” instructor, be customized to the particular audience, involve attendees participating actively on interdependent tasks, and last longer than four hours (24). Such trainings do not come cheap, but if they effectively reduce sexual harassment rates, the expense is worth it.

Trainings and surveys should be grounded in the research record on sexual harassment. Louise Fitzgerald’s Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ) has long been the gold standard in sexual harassment measurement (4). The SEQ is one of many scientific tools contained within the Administrator Researcher Campus Climate Collaborative (ARC3) Survey (25). Developed through a partnership of social scientists and student affairs professionals, the ARC3 Survey compiles the best-validated instruments available for assessing sexual

harassment and other forms of gendered violence. This data-driven instrument is freely available to any university or college that requests it.

That said, institutions should not await survey results before taking action. Leaders should assume that sexual harassment is prevalent and empower subject matter experts and survivors to collaborate on institution-specific solutions. Institutions should use scientifically informed tools to evaluate those solutions and track them over time. There is no fast fix here. But there are people with deep knowledge. Let’s convene these experts, listen to them, and provide them with the resources necessary to reshape the culture of higher education.

Legal System Shortcomings

The problem of sexual harassment is compounded by years of inadequate legal doctrines (26). Like corporate America, most academic organizations have complied with civil rights obligations by crafting policies prohibiting harassment and procedures for reporting it (27). But baseline legal compliance does little to prevent sexual harassment. The legal system encourages a narrow focus on statutory violations, formal grievances, and official sanctions—all of which are relatively rare (1). When leaders funnel the majority of anti-harassment resources into a passive, legalistic complaint apparatus, they abdicate responsibility for institutional culture.

The most effective solutions to sexual harassment lie not in individual victims reporting or wrongdoers retraining. Instead, we should prevent sexual harassment by overhauling the structures of power that support it.

There are several consequences to an overly legal handling of sexual harassment. First, it makes universities risk-averse when it comes to resolving complaints. Because perpetrators tend to be more litigious than victims, the institution places more weight on the perpetrator’s likely counter-claims against its duties to the victim. Second, formal grievance procedures tend to filter who reports: those with the most dramatic and stereotypical cases, often involving physical assault (28). Gender harassment, once again, gets short shrift. Finally, an overemphasis on legalistic mechanisms means that, even when leaders are aware of bad actors, in the absence of a victim coming forward they feel unable to sanction them. This passive institutional pose forces individual victims to bear the burden of bringing perpetrators to justice.

Legal interpretations of sexual harassment frame sexual harassment as a problem to be remedied one perpetrator at a time. Their goal is to root out the offenders (the “bad apples”) and reprimand them. But the most powerful predictors of sexual harassment reside in the context surrounding it: Sexual harassment thrives in domains distinguished by extreme gender imbalances, strong hierarchies and dependencies, and

leaders who tolerate (or, worse, perpetuate) sexism and misogyny (27). This is an institutional problem (one of “rotten barrels”), requiring institutional interventions.

The most effective solutions to sexual harassment lie not in individual victims reporting or wrongdoers retraining. Instead, we should prevent sexual harassment by overhauling the structures of power that support it. Begin by hiring more women and gender-diverse people, promoting them, and integrating them into every discipline and every level of our institutions (11). And then transform those institutions into spaces where all genders share power, authority, and respect.

To turn the tide on sexual harassment, we must go beyond the bare minimum mandated by the law. Higher education can help nudge the mandates in more useful directions, given that innovation within institutions is known to drive legal change. Judges may realize that what they have deemed reasonable compliance falls embarrassingly short. Universities should be our bravest institutions, developing and disseminating bold solutions to society’s most entrenched and systemic problems, even when the formal law would be satisfied with less.

Brave Leadership

We hope we’ve made ourselves clear: Many institutions get it wrong when it comes to sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is rarely about sex, so the preoccupation with sexual pursuit is misplaced. There is no fast fix here, because long and complicated histories lurk behind sexual harassment. It is comforting to assume that the law will solve this problem, until we realize how little the law actually has done to stop sexual harassment or repair the harms left in its wake. We need to heed the lessons learned through research and reshape sexual harassment prevention and response systems in higher education. This will require brave leadership, or what psychologist Jennifer Freyd calls *institutional courage* (29). Institutional courage involves bearing witness, being accountable, and offering meaningful apology.

Courageous leaders look at ways in which harmful histories persist in their institutions today. We are surrounded by symbols of academia’s exclusionary past, most visibly in portraits of white men and buildings named for white men. Women remain underrepresented—and women of color nearly absent—on the boards governing most institutions of higher education (30). Many campuses revere multiple male-dominated organizations, from fraternities to their football and men’s basketball teams: organizations that have been shown to breed sexual aggression (31).

We’ve seen what happens when we give a problematic history dignity and pride of place. What would it look like instead to bear witness to injustice, and then be accountable and apologize through new initiatives, new portraiture, new naming practices, and new (and more diverse) appointments to leadership? Most importantly, how can we transform our institutional cultures to be places of deep respect for all persons, no matter their sex, gender, race, rank, or other dimension of difference? If higher education leaders can find answers to questions such as these, we might begin to move the needle on sexual harassment.

Leaders can devise creative interventions that operate independently of the formal reporting system. These interventions should be earlier, broader, more educative, more preventative, and aimed at stopping gendered contempt and exclusion. They should not rely on victims coming forward. A department chair who insists that powerful men should stop interrupting women may seem to be nitpicking a common behavior. But such basic actions are the first step. They require us to rethink entrenched beliefs that equate aggressive behavior with scholarly excellence or public humiliation as a rite of passage. Let us drive these hidden cultural assumptions to the surface, question them, and incentivize different behavioral choices.

Leaders can confront negative behavior directly and decisively, without waiting for formal complaints and without giving litigious perpetrators grounds for a lawsuit. For example:

- Unit heads can have frank, private conversations with those who harass, insisting that the bad behavior cease.
- For repeat offenders: Restrict perks that are not entitlements, such as sabbatical leaves, discretionary funding, or the admission of graduate students to their labs. Award nominations could go unmade and promotions delayed (particularly to full professor, where timing is more discretionary).
- Impose unit-wide consequences, such as withholding faculty lines from problematic departments. Receptions and holiday parties can be defunded. Leaders should explain why these events have been suspended and spell out clear criteria for bringing them back.

We are calling on colleges and universities to be the brave agents of change we know they can be. Academia needs to become the place that other institutions look to for inspiration and to model their culture change. Let’s work together to create a more inclusive and just model of American higher education.

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