



University systems allow sexual harassers to thrive

It's time for academic institutions to take responsibility for protecting students and staff, says Laurel Issen.

Harvey Weinstein, Roger Ailes, Geoff Marcy. From entertainment to academia, accusations of these people's abuses of power have helped to create a sea change in the numbers of people willing to discuss sexual harassment in the workplace. Much of the conversation has concerned condemnation of harassers and praise for those who come forward to talk about what they have seen and experienced. This puts an interpersonal frame on a systemic problem. Attention must also be paid to systems that allow harassers to thrive.

In 2006, I joined the Brain and Cognitive Sciences Department at the University of Rochester, New York, as a PhD student. This August, I joined other female graduate students and postdocs who contributed testimony to a complaint to the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission over sexual harassment, poor handling of investigations of our claims and discrimination. We described how we actively avoided Florian Jaeger, a professor in our department, because of his frequent sexual innuendos, pressure to have intimate relationships and other unprofessional behaviour. We were faced with the unfair and unreasonable choice of losing professional opportunities or exposing ourselves to profoundly disturbing encounters. (According to *The New York Times*, Jaeger has since taken a leave of absence but said this was not an admission of guilt.)

I knew this behaviour was not acceptable. I was also convinced that if I came forward alone, I risked retribution and the university would not take my claims seriously. I felt my best option was to warn other students privately and make it known that I would come forward if we reached a critical mass.

After I chose to move away to finish my dissertation, I learnt that in 2013 two colleagues had complained to the department chair about Jaeger's behaviour and given my name as someone who should be interviewed. I was not contacted. In 2016, other senior faculty members learnt of these claims and filed a second complaint to the university to investigate. This time the university first contacted me during an appeal, after issuing a report that cleared Jaeger. The first person to secure testimony from me was from McAllister Olivarius, a London-based legal firm hired by the plaintiffs. My former colleagues had found a powerful ally in getting their complaints taken seriously.

It should not have taken such heroic efforts.

In this regard, Hollywood and academia have troubling similarities. Both rely too much on mentor-protégé relationships, with few checks on individual power. In academia, there is scant protection for lab members. Graduate students and postdocs are viewed more as part of their supervisor's lab than part of the university community. By contrast, institutions have many incentives to protect their powerful,

permanent and often lucrative faculty members.

Administrators can reasonably assume that, if they ignore claims for long enough, they will never be held to account. People like me graduate or leave without a degree, the statute of limitations passes, and the harassers get promoted. Sometimes universities don't interview suggested witnesses or collect other evidence; in my view, this allows them to claim that they investigated complaints but found insufficient reasons for further action. (The University of Rochester has said it took the allegations seriously and that its investigation was thorough.)

Since completing my PhD, I've taken a position at a large company. There are still power differentials in such settings, and sexual harassment can occur unpunished anywhere. However, I've seen several practices that I think academia could learn from.

In my first week of employment, the company explained my rights to a safe workplace and gave me options for reporting concerns. As a graduate student, I had mistakenly believed that the only instances of sexual harassment that could be brought forward were the most egregious: assault or quid-pro-quo propositions. I was unaware of legal precedents involving pervasive harassment creating a hostile and unequal environment. I was also unaware of the standard of preponderance of evidence, and thought that every instance had to be recorded and irrefutable. Graduate students and employees should not have to be legal scholars to win protections.

Another problem is how much the fate of a graduate student or postdoc depends on a supervisor who controls funding for their position, when they can submit a dissertation or paper and what other opportunities they can apply for.

Power is less likely to be abused when it is more distributed.

My current company holds drop-in conference calls throughout the year, some of which are reserved for women only. We can discuss concerns off the record or even anonymously; topics range from standardizing the promotion process and improving diversity in recruitment, to discussing comments that have made us feel undermined or uncomfortable. People bringing concerns have options about whether and how they are reported outside the call. At the same time, leaders can become aware of even minor problems and address them (through discussion with staff and line managers, or through memos) before they become patterns that lead to a toxic work environment.

We used to consider those in leadership positions blameless simply by virtue of not being harassers themselves. We now expect better. ■

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