

Academic community responds to harassment cases

Updated guidelines for professional behavior aim to improve the culture of science—and even the science that gets done.

When Geoffrey Marcy's repeated instances of inappropriate behavior with female students at the University of California (UC), Berkeley, over a decade became public, the news amplified and accelerated the already growing awareness of and attention to the problem of sexual harassment in academia.

A 2015 survey by the American Astronomical Society (AAS) Committee on the Status of Women in Astronomy finds the most common form of harassment to be gender based: 9% of respondents said they had been physically harassed and 32% reported they had been verbally harassed. In a 2014 survey on sexual harassment in fieldwork settings—in such areas as archaeology, anthropology, ecology, and biology—nearly 22% of respondents said they had been physically harassed and 64% said they had been verbally harassed. (To read more on those surveys, go to http://bit.ly/Richey_2015_Masursky_Talk and <http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/Journal.pone.0102172>.) As of late April, the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights was investigating 181 postsecondary institutions for possible violation of federal law in their handling of complaints about sexual violence and harassment.

Marcy, a high-profile extrasolar planet hunter, was forced to resign late last year after the astronomy community erupted in protest over his behavior and over UC Berkeley's lenient response. That and other cases have funding agencies, universities, and professional societies clarifying their stands on what constitutes ethical conduct and how to deal with transgressions.

Professional conduct

The governing council of AAS is on track to adopt a new code of ethics this month at the society's summer meeting in San Diego. The revision is the first to the ethics code in six years. The new document will complement the society's 2008



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DARA NORMAN, chair of the task force charged with revising the American Astronomical Society's ethics code, speaks at a townhall meeting on harassment last January in Kissimmee, Florida. A crowd of astronomers weighed in on an expanded code of ethics.

antiharassment policy, which says how AAS should respond to harassment allegations at conferences and other society-sponsored events.

The revised AAS code goes beyond sexual harassment to establish broad standards for ethical conduct. It denounces harassment on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, marital status, nationality, and other factors; defines expectations for sharing research results; presents guidelines for authorship; condemns plagiarism; and states that scientists have an obligation to participate in the peer-review process and to disclose conflicts of interest.

The main new elements in the code of ethics are clear definitions of harassment and bullying and an outline of steps the society should take to address complaints, no matter where incidents occur. "The AAS has a dog in the fight in any interaction involving astronomers," says Yale University astronomer and AAS president Meg Urry. But, she adds, "we don't intend to be the police. We envision this being invoked only rarely, in extraordinary circumstances, when other responsible parties have not stepped up."

The document spells out how AAS should handle allegations and the potential consequences for transgressors—from private reprimand to expulsion from the society. Crucially, to join or renew membership in AAS, and on registering to attend an AAS meeting, people will have to affirm that they have read and will abide by the code of ethics.

Transgressions

"There are a lot of gray areas," says Dara Norman of the National Optical Astronomy Observatory and chair of the AAS ethics task force charged with revising the society's ethics code. Everyone can agree that plagiarism and sexual harassment are bad, she notes, but there are subtle ways to steal someone's ideas, and there are nuances to scientific working relationships. "I think a lot of lesser transgressions happen all the time," says Norman. "And larger transgressions happen more often than the community is willing to admit."

Moreover, says Norman, anecdotal evidence suggests that "marginalized" people in the field, including women, minorities, and those not on the tenure

track, are disproportionately the targets of unethical actions. "I sure don't know of any records being kept on unethical behavior by scientists," she says. "A culture exists that condones unethical behavior by denying its existence and shirking responsibilities when it happens. A lot of the time it has to do with who has power and who doesn't."

In the hierarchical culture of academia, training is apprentice-like, notes Urry. "If you don't get the support of your adviser, your career is in jeopardy. That creates fertile ground for bad behavior." And, she says, faculty have for decades protected their own. "Young women have suffered." (See the story on page 32.) Astronomy is not unique in being plagued by sexual harassment and other unethical behavior; they occur everywhere. But Urry says that with the revised policy, AAS states publicly what its values are. The next step, she says, "is to try to get everybody to hew to those values."

Guideposts

American Geophysical Union president Margaret Leinen of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography notes that statements on ethics by professional societies serve at least two purposes: They spell out what constitutes appropriate behavior at society-sponsored meetings and events, and they strive to set standards of acceptable behavior across the field.

"We hold big meetings and want to provide a safe and welcoming environment at those meetings, at which science can thrive," Leinen says. "And the scientific society is a touch point for our members throughout their careers. We have the opportunity to help provide education and training on sexual harassment and discrimination and to create a climate in which it's safe to call out someone on bad behavior."

The American Physical Society (APS) in 2014 drafted a code of conduct for its conferences. The code was adopted last November and was put into effect for APS's big annual meetings in March and April. "The goal was to let people know we want to promote a professional environment and that there will be consequences if you violate the code," explains Theodore Hodapp, the society's director of education and diversity. People can report concerns to any APS employee, he says. "Staff have received training."

"The societies can have a really huge impact in this area," says Kevin Marvel, AAS executive officer. Especially in the sciences, he says, "people look to their member society to set guideposts for professional behavior." AAS takes the stance, he says, that having high expectations for professional and ethical behavior leads to "better and more inclusive science."

Increased scrutiny

Universities, too, are taking the issue of sexual harassment seriously, says Indiana University astronomer Caty Pilachowski. "Everyone I have spoken to [tells me] their university has instituted policies and training requirements for understanding what sexual harassment is and what we should and must do in the event we hear of a case." At Indiana, she says, faculty members must complete an online training course. At some schools, graduate students undergo training too. In 2011 Yale began circulating synopses to faculty, staff, and students every six months on reported harassment cases and the status of their investigation. The synopses are anonymous to protect both parties, says Urry, "but they show complainants and perpetrators that the university follows up on such cases."

"There is increased scrutiny and training," says Pilachowski. "I believe it started before Marcy, but the Marcy incident accelerated and raised the priority. Without the training, and in particular the publicity surrounding Marcy, I think most people would not have thought about the issue seriously. And I think the awareness will help reduce these incidents."

On 25 January NSF issued a statement reiterating that it will not tolerate harassment at grantee institutions. NSF joins other leading US scientific organizations, the statement says, "to emphasize its strong commitment to preventing harassment and to eradicate gender-based discrimination in science." Violators, the statement says, could lose NSF funding.

Joan Schmelz, deputy director of Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico, has fought sexual harassment and given an ear to victims for years. She helped bring together Marcy's victims to jointly make their claims formal. "Harassers thrive in the shadows," she says. "And we in astronomy have been shining a bright light on the problem."

Toni Feder

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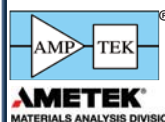
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