Change the system to halt harassment

Universities and their senior staff must do more to deter, detect and punish all forms of inappropriate behaviour, says Joan Schmelz.

Sexual harassment is a vile plague on science. I know this because I am asked regularly for help and advice by women who have been harassed. And the problem has been laid out for the broader research community in a series of recent cases. The US National Science Foundation, among other organizations, has reminded universities of their obligations to investigate allegations of harassment and to punish perpetrators accordingly. Yet the system continues to protect the reputation of harassers and the institutions that employ them. It is not enough for affected individuals to speak up. They must also know that their complaint will be dealt with properly. Here are some suggestions that could improve this situation.

Everyone should know the law. Where sexual harassment is illegal, the bar for inappropriate behaviour is lower than some might think. In the United States, for example, harassment constitutes behaviour that is “sufficiently severe, persistent, or pervasive to limit a student’s ability to participate in or benefit from an educational program or activity, or to create a hostile or abusive educational environment,” according to the Department of Education.

Students, members of faculty and other university staff sometimes misinterpret these words to mean that severe, persistent or pervasive behaviours define a hostile environment. They do not understand that these terms can stand alone. Behaviour that many people might regard as being innocuous — but that is persistent, targeted or timed to have a negative effect — can limit the ability of a student to learn and is unacceptable.

Every university should have an office to which members of its community can talk anonymously about harassment — an ‘Office of Good Advice’. It must be fundamentally separate from the affirmative-action office, legal team and police force of the university — all of which are obliged to report apparent breaches of the law.

The Office of Good Advice should be well known to all. It should be staffed by professionals, and it should be the first result that is returned in a web search for ‘sexual harassment’. Anyone on campus who needs to talk about harassment should know which university employees will report incidents and which can keep such reports confidential.

Every university needs an Office of Good Advice. This is so that students need not fear that they will be pressed to make a formal, legally viable report at offices with legal responsibility, and because staff who are released from legal obligations are more likely to be able to listen with objectivity and sensitivity. Those who have been harassed might later report that they were asked intimidating and inappropriate questions that seem to undermine the validity of their complaint, such as: “Were you drinking?” or “Are you unhappy with your grade in his course?” No matter how good their

intentions, members of staff in offices who must uphold the law cannot help but be influenced by this responsibility and their knowledge of the requirements of an investigation.

The Office of Good Advice needs to keep track of multiple complaints against the same harasser. A university, by its very nature, has a fluid population of students and postdoctoral researchers. A way in which serial harassers can continue is by targeting one individual at a time, perhaps in a different class or a year apart, so that their targets never meet and are unaware of each other.

At present, reports of sexual harassment are filed under the name of the complainant, in part to protect the identity of the alleged harasser. One small step in the right direction would be to file the report under the name of the harasser. There is reason to be cautious, but the law — at least in the United States — makes it clear that universities should have

the flexibility to investigate allegations thoroughly.

Department heads must step up. They have the power to change the culture and to create an environment in which everyone feels able to do their best work. In fact, it is a fundamental component of their job description. Although they should embrace their responsibility, too many senior staff choose not to. They convince themselves that they are too busy: after all, they have reports to file, budgets to balance, proposals to write, postdocs to hire and students to supervise.

These senior figures should make themselves and their staff familiar with the local anti-harassment policy and available resources. They should post the policy and information on how to access the resources in a prominent place. Such actions

clearly demonstrate that the department considers the issue to be important and takes it seriously.

Department-wide meetings on the topic of sexual harassment should also be convened, with help from on-campus resources. The chair of the meeting and the university hierarchy should affirm that harassment will not be tolerated. The existing policy and resources should be discussed. Everyone should be encouraged to share their views on the workplace culture — with the group, in smaller, targeted meetings or anonymously.

What can everyone else do? We can project that we are safe to come to for advice, simply by interjecting with “I disagree”, when inappropriate or sexist comments arise in group discussion. This small phrase can go a long way. And if someone comes to you with a problem, do not immediately question their story. Instead, listen respectfully. You can be certain that if action is going to be taken, the appropriate questions will be asked in due course. ■

Joan Schmelz works for the Universities Space Research Association and is deputy director of the Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico. e-mail: jschmelz@usra.edu

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