

Developing Department Presentations on Sexual Harassment

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The following guide outlines our process of developing a special presentation on sexual harassment for sociology faculty. This effort began with student, faculty, and administrator inquiries regarding departmental norms around sexual harassment. While our department had not witnessed a major sexual harassment scandal during that time, the broader implications of [#MeTooSociology](#), compelled many of us to reevaluate our department and acknowledge how power functions to silence those who experience sexual harassment. As an advisor-advisee team, we combined our collective expertise in sexual harassment and assault research and advocacy to address these concerns through a bottom-up and top-down approach. Our core objective was to create a presentation that used sociological research in law, gender, sexuality, race, and organizations to begin an ongoing conversation amongst faculty and students about how our departmental norms may be more or less conducive to sexual harassment and other forms of gender discrimination.

In doing so, we relied on work that began in the President's Initiative to Prevent Sexual Misconduct Department Development Committee (PIPSM-DDC) working group. Part of this group's mission is to establish helpful guidelines for faculty advisors and student advisee relationships. Using advisor-advisee relationships as the core context for discussing sexual harassment, our presentation identified norms and contexts that may foster opportunities for sexual harassment, highlighted the consequences and roadblocks graduate students face in reporting, illustrated how multiple identities present gendered and racialized challenges, and encouraged faculty to think about how we as a collective might continue this conversation and develop concrete steps for future improvement.

Before the Faculty Meeting

The sociology department faculty requested meeting time to address concerns regarding sexual harassment. Christopher Uggen spoke with department chair, Douglas Hartmann, beforehand to schedule a meeting time and discuss potential content for the presentation. In order to keep faculty engaged and avoid any liability or complaint issues, we discussed centering sexual harassment within sociology at large and avoided addressing any particular incidents with local faculty, students, or staff. Our primary objective was to discuss how we might be more mindful of circumstances that may lead to sexual harassment, rather than to address individual complaints. This emphasis also affirmed our sociological commitment to identifying and examining the social structures that inform harassment rather than targeting individual "bad apples."

Establishing Roles

As an established white male Regents Professor and an African American woman PhD graduate student, we felt it was vital to discuss the potential impact of power differentials and positionality that would be evident throughout the presentation. We discussed comfortability in presenting a sensitive topic to faculty, how to handle a potentially defensive or even hostile response, and strategies to avoid targeting individual students or faculty. Together we decided that the presence of another graduate student representative might ease tension. While faculty in our department overwhelmingly responded positively to the presentation, we do caution others in these positions to consider their department-specific power dynamics before involving others to participate - especially more vulnerable department members such as graduate students and junior faculty.

Collecting Feedback

Since the presentation would take place during a faculty meeting, we thought it would be best to collect graduate student questions and (general) concerns regarding sexual harassment so that Powell would not be the sole graduate student voice represented. Powell designed a Google Forms document that explained the purpose of the presentation, her role in the process, and why graduate student feedback was important to present to faculty. The form asked three separate questions:

1. What scenarios in graduate student and advisor relationships do you think might foster forms of sexual harassment?
2. What additional scenarios in faculty and student relationships (such as through TAships, RAships, or general mentoring relationships) do you think might foster forms of sexual harassment?
3. What related topics would you like us to cover during the meeting?

Poll instructions were clear that this presentation was not about personal or individual incidents regarding faculty or staff. Thus, we asked students to refrain from referring to specific people or events through these means. We emphasized that we were trying to sensitize faculty to existing department norms that may foster various forms of sexual harassment, with the mission of beginning some of the groundwork needed to improve understanding of appropriate boundaries in faculty/graduate relationships. We then posted anonymous student replies on one presentation slide to provide faculty a sense of what graduate students wanted to see moving forward in discussions around sexual harassment. Topics of interest and concern included:

1. Alcohol consumption in semi-professional spaces outside of the department
2. Appropriate ways to discuss issues of sexuality and sex in the classroom/course context
3. Unwanted touching
4. Expectations for travel and conferences with advisors
5. More explicit information on the process of reporting sexual harassment
6. Who are the mandatory reporters?
7. What is the investigative process like?
8. Sexual harassment from undergrads to graduate teaching assistants/instructors
9. Discuss in what context are sexual relationships between persons in different positions (i.e. grad student, adjunct prof, undergrad, and associate professor) permitted?
10. Sexism in assigned tasks for women and men graduate students

During the Meeting

Uggen began the presentation by providing the broader national, discipline-specific (i.e. Sociology), and university context around sexual harassment in graduate departments. He further discussed his work on several committees addressing these issues. He then introduced Powell, who presented three key themes: contexts/environment, reporting, and student concerns.

Key Topics of Discussion

In order to identify the contexts or situations that foster opportunities for sexual harassment, we divided several scenarios into high-risk contexts and other potentially risky contexts. For some, these examples may seem pretty commonsensical, but each scenario was based upon recent examples of patterns observed by academics across the discipline. High-risk contexts included:

1. Sexual innuendos or jokes

2. Sexually-charged comments (referring to students as “sexy,” “cute,” or “hot”)
3. Sexual shaming (referring to students as “sluts”)
4. Unwanted physical contact
5. Sending lewd images
6. Sexually intimate/romantic relationships with graduate and undergraduate students
7. Quid pro quo sexual relations (transactional)

Not all of these contexts explicitly violate university policy (e.g. romantic relationships between faculty and students). But our goal here was to really think about *environments* and develop shared understandings around risks and norms. Thus, these various contexts contribute to the sexual exploitation of less powerful groups regardless of formal policy.

We also wanted to create space to talk about those circumstances that perhaps aren’t inherently exploitative, but might be viewed as coercive for students in certain contexts and go undetected by faculty. These “other potentially risky contexts” included:

1. Alcohol-related department events
2. Traveling with faculty (e.g. conferences, field research)
3. Meeting in hotel rooms
4. Sharing tents/rooms
5. Physical touching such as hugging
6. Intruding on personal space
7. Invitations to one’s home
8. Appropriate communication via texts, phone calls, and social media

As we discussed “high-risk” and “other potentially risky” contexts, we asked questions such as “Is it ever appropriate to touch a grad student...? Under what circumstances?” Our idea in asking faculty these questions was not to establish a right or wrong answer, but rather to surface different norms. Faculty responded in kind. They were very attentive, joined in on the conversation, respectfully engaged each other, and genuinely wanted to ensure the best possible professional relations between graduate students and faculty. It was also important for us to ask faculty whether there were contexts that we may not have included that could also fit under risky scenarios. One faculty member, for example, pointed out that men may face distinct barriers that are often downplayed because of mainstream assumptions of sexual harm. These comments were generative by creating an extended dialogue about why certain students may not report.

Of course, fostering an environment and relationship with graduate students where they might feel comfortable **reporting** is vital; yet the research is quite clear that most targets of sexual harassment do not make formal reports. As such, we decided to address how various organizational structures within universities and departments might prevent reporting of sexual harassment, especially among marginalized groups such as women of color and LGBTQ graduate students. Important points included:

1. Most graduate students don’t report sexual harassment
 - a. 25% filed a report (NASEM)
 - b. Whisper networks
2. May not recognize experience as harassment
3. Blame themselves for harassment

4. No guarantee of confidentiality and lack of control over the process
5. Power differentials in career status
 - a. Actively discouraged from reporting because of potential career damage
 - b. Access to funding, networking opportunities, and other forms of social capital
 - c. Faculty as gatekeepers to professional careers
 - d. Desire to avoid reputation as “that girl” or “victim”
 - e. Fear of retaliation
6. Intersectionality - not wanting to “air dirty laundry” in predominantly white spaces

To conclude the presentation, we included a list of academic resources with highlighted links for further reading. Immediately following the presentation, we sent a pdf version of the PowerPoint slides to faculty. Resources included:

1. 500 Women Scientists. 2018. “NAS Report on Sexual Harassment.”
2. Cantalupo, Nancy Chi and William Kidder. 2018. “A Systematic Look at a Serial Problem: Sexual Harassment of Students by University Faculty.” *Utah Law Review* 671-786.
3. Clawson, Rosalee A. 2019. “#MeToo from a Department Head Perspective.” *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 40(1): 184-189.
4. Harvey Wingfield, Adia. 2017. “How Universities May Facilitate Sexual Violence in Academia.” Conditionally Accepted.
5. McGuffey, Shawn C. 2018. “#MeToo and the ASA Working Group on Harassment.”
6. Brown, Nadia E. 2019. “Mentoring, Sexual Harassment, and Black Women Academics.” *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 40(1): 166-173.

Where do we go from here?

The purpose of this presentation was to start a conversation in our department about sexual harassment norms and how we might address them in the future. Subsequently, we identified several areas of departmental intervention in addressing sexual harassment (and other forms of gender discrimination). These areas of intervention include:

1. Graduate student orientation discussion on sexual harassment
2. Teaching assistants’ orientation discussion on sexual harassment
3. Establishing boundaries at the beginning of mentoring relationships
4. Having sexual harassment (and mandatory reporting) policies in syllabus to avoid confusion in disclosure
 - a. Provide access to confidential reporting (e.g. Aurora Center)
 - b. Encourage students to document incidents
5. Mission statement on website

We are currently in the process of creating and sending faculty and student instructors a model syllabus section that addresses sexual harassment policies and provides confidential reporting options. In spring 2020, we plan to work with staff and administrators about incorporating a discussion on sexual harassment into the Graduate Student Orientation and Teaching Orientation, as they are important sites for intervention and prevention.