

Commentary: Harassment protection should not be just for students

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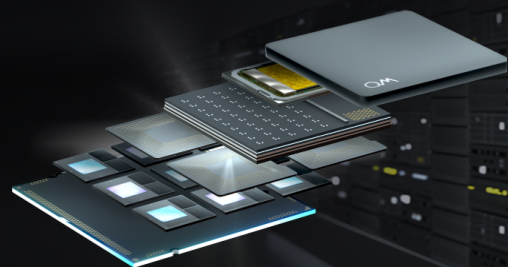
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Commentary

Harassment protection should not be just for students

I've been teaching college-level physics to life-sciences majors for several years.

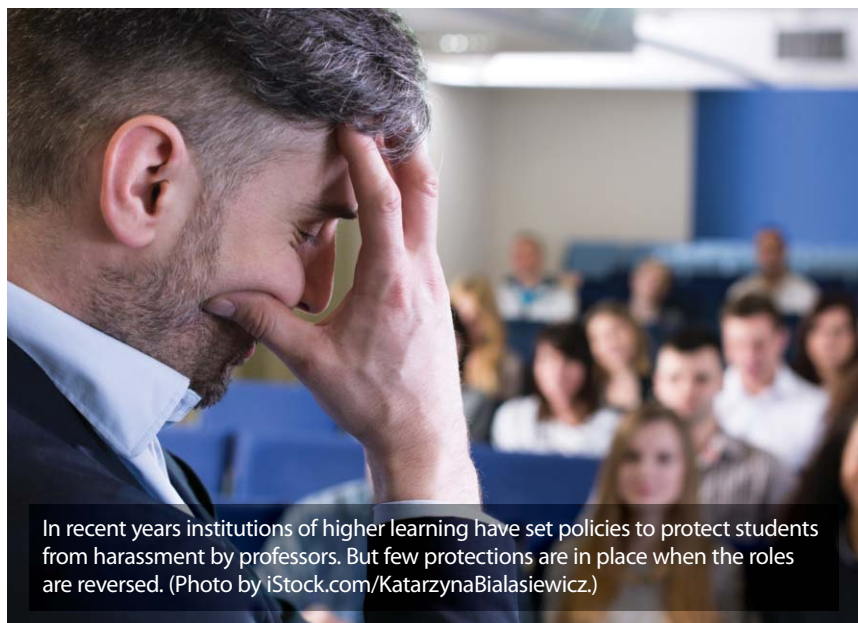
I routinely experience some form of disrespect, hostility, and even aggression. Student harassment of professors is an increasingly common occurrence, yet universities, departments, and even other faculty members turn a blind eye to the problem. At least two studies have documented the issue.¹

Most instances of harassment revolve around grades. The most common scenario is a student who pleads, insists, or demands that I change their grade or offer extra credit, or who blames me for ruining their future if I don't give in to their demands. Second are students who insist that I excuse them from, permit a make-up of, or allow an extension on a quiz, exam, or assignment. I get dozens of these emails each week, with tones escalating to rudeness and threats of aggression. Clearly, accommodation should be made in some instances, but "It's Mother's Day" and "I have to babysit my mom's dog" are not legitimate excuses.

I have been cornered and intimidated by students in my office and verbally abused in my classroom and in the hallways. I'm concerned for my safety. I have had my office broken into and have had anonymous, menacing letters left in my mailbox. Such direct personal harassment is in addition to a barrage of constant vitriolic remarks online, where I've been called a "bitch," a "slut," and worse.

I am not alone in being subjected to harassment by students. I know one professor who had tires slashed and another who had excrement mailed to their home. Harassment affects men and women, young and old, and it is underreported, particularly by untenured faculty and adjuncts. They—especially women and members of minority groups—worry that reporting harassment could jeopardize their careers. Although universities rightly have policies in place to protect students from professors, none protect professors from bullying by students.

Even when the harassment doesn't es-



In recent years institutions of higher learning have set policies to protect students from harassment by professors. But few protections are in place when the roles are reversed. (Photo by iStock.com/KatarzynaBialasiewicz.)

calate to malicious behavior and threats of violence, students often seem to see me as the enemy, to be thwarted or denigrated at every turn. When they don't get the grade they want, some will complain to the department chair and demand my removal.

In response to my pleas for help from the administration, I've been told that this is the culture now that Trump is our president. I've been turned away from the Title IX office and multiple other offices that theoretically should help with harassment cases. Some administrators have become defensive, as if they are expecting a legal battle. Once, when I asked for an escort from the campus patrol, I was turned away because, I was told, they "don't have the resources." Certainly, a student would have been able to get such an escort on request. Even colleagues and administrators who show concern often have little idea how or whether they should help.

I think several factors are driving the recent level of harassment. First, many students have a consumer attitude in which they feel entitled to an education. They expect their professors to give them good grades because they or their parents paid a lot of money for tuition.

Second, physics is a difficult subject that most life-sciences majors view as an irrelevant obstacle to their degree or entrance to medical school. As a result, many students approach the subject with anger and resentment. In my classes, students are challenged to focus on the process rather than getting the "right" answer. They must engage their brain, develop a genuine understanding of the topic, and learn concepts so that they can apply them effectively to different problems. Study skills such as rote memorization and passive learning may have brought success in other coursework, but they are much less effective in physics. Students need to understand that physics is hard and requires time, effort, and effective study strategies.

Third, I maintain high grading standards despite the harassment. My role is to assign students relevant and challenging tasks, guide them in their learning of new knowledge and skills, evaluate their performance, and assign grades in a manner that reflects appropriate evaluation criteria. I have a responsibility to ensure that degrees handed out by my institution attest to substantive knowledge and expertise.

I love teaching, and I'm pretty good at it. Many of my days are filled with positive experiences and feedback. But on those days when I am subjected to student hostility, I wonder why I'm doing what I'm doing and how much more I can endure. Certainly, bad teachers exist, but I'm not one of them. I believe those of us who feel most deeply the effects of harassment are the ones who care the most about teaching. I'm tired of trying so hard, in so many ways, and still losing the battle. The workload makes me miss my family. I want to spend time with them in the evenings, on weekends, and on holidays instead of grading papers or preparing lectures or worrying about student demands and complaints.

At work, I am on guard. I'm afraid to talk privately with a student in my office with the door closed. I'm afraid that every word I say or write will be recorded and used against me. I feel demoralized, disheartened, and discouraged. I've experienced anxiety, depression, exhaustion, chronic stress, and stress-related illness. I know of faculty members who have resorted to alcohol and drugs because of student harassment. Some suffer from eating disorders. And I know of at least one who has attempted suicide.

Students who harass college professors should suffer serious consequences. But there are none. Administrators, department heads, and colleagues provide very little support. That lack across academia results in a toxic culture that would be unacceptable in any other industry, as pointed out in the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine study on sexual harassment.² While academia prides itself on being at the forefront of intellectual advancement, it remains one of the most hostile and toxic work environments.

The failure of academic institutions to address student harassment of professors has implications far beyond the learning environment. Our current policies shrug at unacceptable behavior. Because many of my students are in the pre-medicine track, the lack of consequences means that harassers will be treating patients. That can only lead to negative, even disastrous, outcomes.

References

1. A. P. Brabec et al., *Emporia State Res. Stud.* **52**, 1 (2019); A. May, K. E. Tenzek, *Teach. Higher Educ.* **23**, 275 (2018).

2. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine*, National Academies Press (2018).

Name withheld

LETTERS

US-IAEA uranium enrichment safeguards

An important safeguards issue related to uranium enrichment plants was omitted from David Kramer's Issues and Events story, "Controversy continues to swirl around uranium enrichment contract" (PHYSICS TODAY, January 2020, page 22).

Kramer notes an assertion by Centrus president and CEO Daniel Poneman that nuclear nonproliferation policy includes a red line requiring a "strict divide between civilian and military programs

and materials." Kramer observes correctly that the line has already been crossed with the production of tritium in US civil nuclear reactors.

As an office director in the Nonproliferation Bureau of the US State Department, I was involved in the interagency decision to allow that production. It was predicated on two assurances from the Department of Energy: that reactors serving that purpose would remain on the list of US facilities subject to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards, and that if the facility were selected for inspection, the agency's safeguards approach would be the same as used for comparable facilities in non-nuclear-weapons states that participate in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Note that the US sends the IAEA a list of all US nuclear facilities, excluding those associated with activities having direct national security significance. The IAEA is permitted to apply safeguards to any facility on the list, but it need not do so.

An important nuclear nonproliferation issue is whether the Centrus facilities would be eligible for the application of IAEA safeguards under the US-IAEA



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