Bullying and Harassment

The Problem: Bullying and harassment are, unfortunately, commonplace at all stages of academia, fueled by intense competition for positions and the deeply hierarchical structure of research groups and university departments. For these same reasons, it can be especially challenging for junior scientists to recover from episodes of bullying, particularly when future letters of recommendation or hiring decisions may depend on the perpetrator. When bullying or harassment does occur, intervention in the moment is often limited, and reporting or grievance policies,whether through an institution or collaboration, are frequently unclear about both protections and potential consequences.

Recommendations:

- **Establish and enforce actionable codes of conduct.** Departments, collaborations, and research groups should maintain explicit, enforceable codes of conduct that clearly define expected behavior and outline consequences for violations. Reporting mechanisms should be transparent and accessible, and, where feasible, centralized databases should track substantiated reports to help identify repeated patterns of misconduct and potential misuse of reporting processes.

- **Ensure clear and consistent onboarding regarding grievance procedures.** One of the major barriers to reporting misconduct is bureaucratic opacity. Universities and departments should ensure that all incoming students, staff, and faculty receive clear guidance on codes of conduct and grievance procedures via robust onboarding processes.

- **Promote bystander-intervention training.** Departments should encourage–and facilitate–participation in bystander-intervention training to help community members identify bullying behaviors and safely intervene in the moment. Senior researchers, in particular, should feel empowered and responsible for stepping in on behalf of more vulnerable colleagues.

- **Recognize that bullying can extend into letters of recommendation.** As letters introduce opportunities for subjective and biased language, hiring and promotion committees should receive literacy training to to identify red-flag language that may stem from bullying or retaliation. There should be a standardized mechanism for applicants to indicate when they have chosen not to solicit a letter from a direct supervisor due to bullying or harassment.

- **Create independent support structures.** The community would benefit from an external, confidential help desk–staffed by trained volunteers–where individuals experiencing bullying or harassment can seek guidance and resources outside their home university.

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