

Zero tolerance. Period.

Earlier this month, famed astronomer Geoff Marcy's sexual harassment of female students was exposed. He has since resigned from the University of California, Berkeley, in the face of concerted pressure from peers and students. It is unconscionable for someone to use academic power to be a sexual predator, but the reality is that Marcy operated in an academic culture that turned a blind eye to such behavior.

In academic life, power comes from the perception that a person is more influential than that individual's peer group. This leads to invitations to give talks and to serve on panels and editorial boards—activities that further increase a person's influence. Such imbalances in influence are stark in the sciences, where students and postdoctoral fellows train under established professors as part of their career path. That a trainee's future is in the hands of an advisor is an important source of the power imbalance that provides opportunities for abuse. Recent research confirms that most sexual misconduct is perpetrated by men who outrank the women they prey on,* and science is a discipline where the faculty balance is tilted; most senior professors are male.

In my own field of anthropology, I have been aware of the problem of sexual misconduct, and I understand just how pervasive, insidious, and devastating this behavior is. Too many young women have been discouraged, and too many careers have been blighted, to just stand by and do nothing about a culture that fails to identify and call to account male colleagues who have behaved inappropriately. What can those like me, a senior tenured male professor—an “alpha male” in the academic world—do to change this?

Any professor who fails to recognize that exploiting academic seniority to solicit sexual favors is reprehensible has no place in academia. Senior male professors must make it clear that there are no “gray areas” and

lead efforts to ensure an ongoing zero tolerance policy in their departments.

Male professors have a special responsibility to be strong allies of the women affected by sexual misconduct. Many women who have been the target of inappropriate behavior, or have even heard of such incidents, believe that their careers will be jeopardized if they speak out. To work toward something for years, only

to have it derailed by an unscrupulous superior or by malicious rumor, is a frightening prospect. Equal academic opportunity will not exist as long as individuals have to adjust their careers to avoid exposure to sexual predation. Women must be supported by their male colleagues, especially those with the greatest influence, when they speak out, make formal complaints, or press criminal charges. We should not wait for traumatized junior colleagues to demonstrate the greatest courage before those with the greatest power show any.

At the very least, any scientist should think twice before collaborating with those who use their research reputation to harass female colleagues, and before inviting them to conferences.

Why? Because every paper they publish, talk they give, and conference they attend enhances the influence they have abused. If perpetrators are made to pay a professional cost, their influence will wane, depriving them of further opportunities to prey on women. More importantly, male faculty must report concerns to institutional authorities. The more frequently a department head or a dean learns of concerns, the more likely it is that behaviors will be recognized as a pattern of misconduct.

Sexual harassment in the sciences occurs in many circumstances and settings, but the silence of the past must be replaced by action. The untenured are brave to speak out, but powerful male voices must join in to make sure we level this particular playing field. Alpha males are the problem. Alpha males need to be part of the solution.

— Bernard Wood



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