

Societies can combat harassment

Imagine a student presenting a poster at a scientific meeting, thrilled when a senior scientist stops by to view the work. Chances are good, given the continuing underrepresentation of women at senior levels of academia, that the senior scientist is male. If the student is also male, he likely has no doubt that the senior scientist wants to learn more about the research. If the student is female, she may wonder: Does he want to get acquainted with my work, or me? This is the scenario that Meg Urry of Yale University, current president of the American Astronomical Society, posed during a session on “Forward Focused Ethics—What is the Role of Scientific Societies in Responding to Harassment and Other Workplace Climate Issues?” at the Fall Meeting of the American Geophysical Union in December 2015.

Scientific societies have an intrinsic responsibility in this regard. They sponsor meetings, workshops, conferences, field trips, and other offsite events that place scientists in close proximity for long hours in unfamiliar settings. Urry, who spoke out on the responsibility of scientific societies for taking action in the wake of the Geoff Marcy scandal, and other session speakers and panelists had excellent suggestions for promoting an environment free of harassment. Scientific societies need to widely disseminate policies that declare their intolerance for harassment of any sort. These must describe how violations of such policies can be reported, and to whom, and the process for investigating those violations. And societies should clearly prescribe what consequences could be levied against offenders: Immediate expulsion from the meeting? From future meetings? From the society? Ineligibility for honors such as fellowships and medals? Barred from publishing in society journals? Blocking offending scientists’ access to meetings, publications, and professional colleagues can be an effective means to limit professional advancement, especially when the relevant institutional employer is slow or somehow prevented from taking concrete actions. (For the policy of AAAS, the publisher of *Science*, see [\[meetings.aaas.org/program/code-of-conduct/\]\(http://meetings.aaas.org/program/code-of-conduct/\).\)](http://</p>
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Urry puts the responsibility squarely on senior scientists for the consequences of any personal relationships that develop with students, because it is always the student who pays the professional price if and when such relationships disintegrate. She suggested that unless the senior scientist is willing to change institutions to avoid an uncomfortable situation for the student if the relationship dissolves, don’t get involved in the first place. Many universities expressly forbid any relationships between professors and undergraduates.



“...it is always the student who pays the professional price...”

herself of her institution’s formal channels to raise a complaint, only to be told that she must have misinterpreted her senior colleague’s behavior on account of her unfamiliarity with the country’s language and culture. As her command of English was excellent, she asked if she should record future interactions to prove her claims. The response was that it would be illegal. This experience illustrates the continuing battles that women face in getting their concerns treated seriously.

Scientific societies are governed by scientists for scientists. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the officers, board, and council members of scientific societies to make sure that policies and procedures are in place to combat harassment in all forms during all society-sponsored events.

– Marcia McNutt



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