

## **Future of Research Response to the National Science Foundation's request for comment on Reporting Requirements Regarding Findings of Sexual Harassment, Other Forms of Harassment, or Sexual Assault**

Future of Research (FoR) is an early-career researcher-led nonprofit that seeks to champion, engage and empower early career scientists with evidence-based resources to improve the scientific research endeavor. The hypercompetitive research system and the dependence on faculty for research and career development create a power dynamic that can facilitate exploitation and harassment. For the [approximately 45% of graduate students in science and engineering, and 55% of postdocs](#) on temporary visas that are tied to their employment status, this dynamic is even more skewed. Many early career researchers thus cannot report sexual harassment without endangering their careers and/or immigration status. We therefore applaud and support the National Science Foundation's proposed changes in [Important Notice No. 144 issued February 4th 2018](#).

Data illustrating the landscape and power dynamics that make academe an environment particularly conducive to sexual harassment of postdocs were discussed by [Future of Research President Dr. Jessica Polka](#) and [National Postdoctoral Association Chair Dr. Kate Sleeth](#) at the [Fourth Committee Meeting of The Committee on Impacts of Sexual Harassment in Academia](#) as part of a study at the National Academies of Sciences, engineering and Medicine. In particular, early career researchers fear that reporting sexual harassment will not result in institutional action; this leads to underreporting of such incidents.

This fear is well-grounded. As is discussed repeatedly, and most recently in the case of the [University of Minnesota](#), institutional protection of faculty who commit these offences is so prevalent that the term "Passing the Trash" has [been used in Congress](#) to discuss the phenomenon of quietly moving faculty who sexually harass others around institutions. Prioritizing protecting faculty who commit these transgressions, and failure to deal with reports of harassment appropriately for fear of loss of institutional reputation, is actively driving women out of STEM, and puts our entire enterprise at risk of losing talented scientists, and their science, as discussed in [Congressional testimony by Dr. Kate Clancy](#).

We therefore applaud the responsibility taken on by the National Science Foundation in protecting our community. By requiring reporting of sexual harassment findings and taking unilateral action to protect early career scientists, the NSF can contribute to providing a necessary counterbalance to the power dynamic experienced by this population within academic institutions. While institutions are slow to respond to the needs of the early career community, they may be more likely to respond to the mandates of funding agencies. Likewise we support the requirement for clarification of reporting policies at institutions.

We also advocate, however, that NSF require anonymous exit questionnaires of PhD students and postdocs funded from their grants and awards that go directly to the NSF, and are then

used in determining grant renewal or future award status. Critically, this mechanism bypasses the university, which has a clear conflict of interest in reporting transgressions. As discussed in a [recent announcement](#) that the Wellcome Trust in the UK will act in a similar manner to that proposed by the NSF, this move could incentivize universities “to settle complaints informally to hide problems. The requirement to report only upheld allegations is understandable, Chapman adds, but it risks missing researchers who resign before an investigation is completed. These people could be free to take up new positions and continue their bullying or harassing ways.” The NSF should avoid simply assisting in “passing the trash”. Graduate students have published a [zine](#) which includes this recommendation, including other actions required from the perspective of early career researchers. In addition, the NSF could require that the institution finish any investigation and submit the infraction to the NSF even if the Faculty resigns. This would reduce the ability to pass the trash.

We also ask that the NSF respond to any recommendations to federal funders in the upcoming [Impacts of Sexual Harassment in Academia](#) report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine. This is a time where much discussion has taken place about sexual harassment, but it is now the time for stakeholders such as the NSF to take action. We applaud them for doing so now, and urge them to continue doing so in the future.