

# The Paradox of Protecting Students

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January 9, 2018



While nearly every day brings news of someone banished from the entertainment industry — Harvey Weinstein, Garrison Keillor, Louis C.K. — the situation in the academy is very different. Only a small number of tenured faculty members have lost their jobs in the wake of allegations of sexual harassment and assault. Of course, this isn't a result of any lack of allegations. A [crowdsourced survey](#) on instances of sexual harassment organized by Karen L. Kelsky is at [1,900 responses](#) and counting.

Ellen Weinstein for the Chronicle Review

Those in power seem to be protected, defended, and, only if things get bad enough, placed on administrative leave. The *Chronicle's* coverage of recent cases is full of examples. At worst, faculty members, like senators, retire. When they are fired, it's often because they didn't have tenure.

It's been reported that Sujit Choudhry, a former law-school dean at the University of California at Berkeley, "was allowed to remain on campus even after a school investigation substantiated sexual harassment allegations. The settlement allows Choudhry, who is officially on a two-year sabbatical, to keep research funding and submit travel expenses." *The New Republic* reported that Stanford's Jay Fliegelman, during a two-year suspension without pay, "continued to live in a condo that Stanford financially supported. He was also given an office at the edge of campus to meet with students. Furthermore, the chair of the English department at another university tried to arrange a visiting appointment for him there." The University of Rochester's Florian Jaeger even apparently got promoted while the university investigated claims against him.

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It is not only that these cases often seem to have little effect on compensation or promotion. Perversely, in the current system, sexually harassing students can result in a significant decrease in workload and thus an easier job. One anonymous respondent to Kelsky's survey described how one harassing professor was required to keep his office door open at all times, and "female grad students in our department were encouraged to seek other advisors. His field had only one other faculty member, so she became the inevitable choice."

Like many women in academe, our careers have been shaped by similar events. Between the two of us we've attended or taught at ten different colleges and universities. Over the years, we have offered untold numbers of independent studies for women because the person teaching the course they needed was notorious; mentored questionable professors' advisees; given subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, advice to students to avoid certain professors. Both of us have sat on interminable committees so that specific faculty members could be excused. We have fielded endless complaints about these same faculty members. Even in the case of consensual relationships, there is also the time spent fielding the inevitable, and often justified, complaints of the students in those classes who are not sleeping with the faculty member.

On the list of the awfulness that is the result of sexual harassment in the academy, the workload that harassers put on their colleagues is not the most devastating. Yet at the same time, it is significant.

And it comes on top of dealing — again, like many female students and faculty members — with the environment of workplace sexual harassment: the undergraduate professor who would offer back rubs and stroke thighs and back without asking; the professor who slept with a different graduate student every year, and the ambient sexualized atmosphere that resulted; the professor who casually commented on women's bodies in the classroom.

Both of us feel that we negotiated moments such as these spectacularly badly. One of us just tolerated it. One of us complained to a female faculty member, who sympathized, explaining the options and how limited they were. She did not discourage the filing of complaints, but it

did not feel worth anyone's time to do so. Years later, we understand her reaction. She was, as we are today, caught in the same system.

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We are talking here about a sort of double harm. While male scholars accused of harassment may have reduced teaching loads, female scholars take on their offloaded duties, often without additional compensation. Female academics are thus not only victims of such harassment but also those whose scholarly and emotional work is needed to patch things up afterward. Recently, one of us was implicated in a sexual-harassment callout of a colleague at another university. A group of women circulated an online document in which they anonymously told stories about the colleague. One of us was mentioned as an enabler for talking with the harasser after an off-campus lecture. Following this callout (which has resulted thus far in no institutional response, and in the robust defense of the man by a number of his colleagues), we have been rethinking our relationship to workplace sexual harassment and noticing our complicity in it, even when we have attempted to support students within a structure that is profoundly broken.

Consider the difficulty of this work and impossibility of doing it well. If a student ever came to one of our offices and asked how she should go about reporting sexual harassment or assault, we would tell her, as we have been trained to do, that we must report anything she shares to the Title IX officer, and that we could also help connect her with the appropriate resources. But the online sexual-harassment training that we recently clicked through said nothing about the more ambiguous situations we routinely negotiate. Much of what scholars tasked with this labor know about our colleagues who harass is based on hearsay. When a student asks if the rumors are true, and we strongly suspect them to be true — what then? To what office does one send the student who complains about the perceived favoritism given to one of her peers who is consensually sleeping with a faculty member?

Women who have navigated the risk of sexual harassment and gone on to careers in the academy understand intimately how broken the system is. Perhaps they themselves have been broken by it. They, like us, may have seen firsthand how a complaint can hurt the person who complains far more than it does the harasser. That is why female professors laugh in fatigue when colleagues make cynical jokes about a colleague moving in with a student. That is why they do not encourage students to rush to Title IX offices. That is why we attempt to work around the system to the best of our ability, often taking on more work, and still failing the students we try to support.

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A *New York Times* [article](#) reported that Harvey Weinstein told Sandeep Rehal, an assistant tasked with obtaining and dispensing erectile-dysfunction drugs for him before he allegedly went to harass women in hotel rooms, that "this is Harvey Weinstein University, and I decide if

you graduate." It is hard to read that and not cringe with recognition. As pathways to tenure vanish for younger scholars, power on campus is consolidated among those who still have it. They decide who gets to graduate, who will be supported in the profession, who will be enabled, helped along, recommended.

These patronage networks, more important than ever, matter at every point in an academic career. They are diffuse, larger than any one institution — evidenced by how often the academic conference appears in Kelsky's spreadsheet as a site of sexual violence and predation. When we have talked with an accused harasser, we've done so because it is to some extent part of our job, and shunning powerful men is not something we have felt free to do. We have wanted to succeed, to continue publishing, to remain viable in the profession.

Every time we have taken on additional advising or independent studies to help a student, we have done so because we wanted that student to succeed, to become part of the next generation of scholars. If we have exhausted ourselves with this reproductive labor, we have at the same time reproduced the same system these students will be forced to help others navigate later on, should they be fortunate enough to secure economically sustainable work in academe.

Until this system changes in significant ways, until harassers — even those with tenure — can and do lose their jobs, the rest of us will continue the Sisyphean task of doing additional work to support rather than dismantle a system that hurts both students and ourselves.

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