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# A push for stronger sexual harassment policies at the University of California

By Beryl Lieff Benderly | Mar. 10, 2016 , 5:00 PM

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Recent, highly publicized **cases involving** sexual harassment by highly placed professors have roiled campuses in the University of California system. On 2 and 3 March, the unions that represent more than **6000 postdocs** and **13,000 student workers** on the system's 10 campuses joined in demonstrations and events to push for strong reforms in how the university handles sexual harassment and assault allegations. Events including marches, forums, speeches, rallies, and tables **were scheduled** at the Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, and Santa Cruz campuses.

These events follow on a **letter** providing detailed recommendations on protecting junior researchers that the union for postdocs—the United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, UAW Local 5810—sent in January to the office of the president of the University of California and the chair of the University of California Academic Senate.

Postdocs work in “one of the most vulnerable positions on campus,” the letter states. The success of a postdoc's appointment, which can only last 5 or 6 years, is evaluated by “the number of papers published, the authorship rank, the renewal of [the postdoc's annual] contracts, and other factions that fall entirely within the discretion of the [principal investigator (PI)]. A Postdoctoral Scholar cannot, at her own option, just pick up and change labs ... when confronted with sexual harassment by her PI.”

Because of this extreme dependence on a single professor, the letter continues, “[a] PI has tremendous influence over the career of a Postdoctoral Scholar. A Postdoctoral Scholar will need a recommendation from the PI when he or she leaves the lab, and a PI's refusal to provide a positive one could” ruin chances for other jobs. “Even more vulnerable when coming forward to raise concerns about faculty member misconduct” are the many postdocs working on nonimmigrant guest worker visas, who lose their right to stay in the country if they lose their jobs.

Postdocs therefore need and deserve “a clear complaint process, including protection from all forms of retaliation for the Postdoctoral Scholar throughout the sexual harassment and sexual assault investigation process,” the letter goes on. It also requests stronger sanctions for offending faculty members.

The university has recently instituted reforms including mandatory **online training** on sexual violence and harassment prevention for faculty members and staff and a **requirement to report** cases of sexual violence. But much more seems to be needed for postdocs and students to feel safe and protected, and the extent to which the university will heed the letter's advice on how better to address allegations of sexual violence and harassment by faculty members is not yet known.

Posted in: [sexual harassment](#), [equality](#), [Workplace Diversity](#)

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Are you kidding? I've been a professor for some 16 years, and despite being reasonably appealing (so I'm told), I have never been approached by a female student for anything beyond a cup of coffee. I can only suspect that this notion of "college girl with daddy issues falls for her prof" is played up in people's minds by Hollywood plots, while in reality it almost never occurs, and 99% of the harassment is instigated by faculty.

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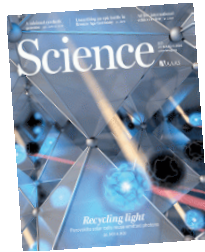


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