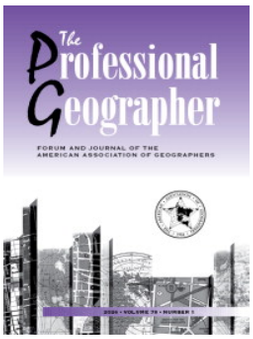

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Fostering Harassment-Free Geography Departments: Proactive Strategies for Departments and Their Leaders

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Drawing on the 2024 American Association of Geographers symposium titled "Strategies for Leading a Harassment-Free Department," this article offers practical guidance for geography departments seeking to prevent and address sexual misconduct, bullying, and retaliation. Harassment in academic settings is neither rare nor abstract; it can exploit power differentials, undermine professional contributions, and shield those responsible while discouraging participation and retention among faculty, staff, and students. As a result, such behaviors can undercut efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion within academic communities. This article presents an actionable framework for department leaders and faculty to foster harassment-free environments. The suggestions are grounded in scholarship from geography and related disciplines, as well as evidence-based practices implemented across a range of universities. The focus is on proactive leadership, prevention, and community-building strategies that support sustained cultural change rather than reactive, case-by-case responses. A central insight from the symposium is the importance of developing a departmental code of conduct. Department-level discussions can clarify shared expectations, prioritize safety, and address contexts unique to geography, including field work, study trips, and other off-campus settings where risks might be heightened. The article outlines key challenges facing departments, including preventing misconduct in field settings, addressing bullying and academic incivility, and promoting practices such as bystander intervention. It concludes by considering how department leaders can resist growing external pressures to overlook behaviors that erode trust and well-being, offering strategies to support inclusive, collegial, and ethically grounded academic workplaces both on campus and in the field. **Key Words: academic bullying, code of conduct, harassment.**

Harassment, bullying, and retaliation remain persistent and damaging features of academic life. These behaviors, often hidden behind institutional silences or handled through opaque procedures, can have profound and lasting effects on students, faculty, staff, and academic programs. Attention frequently focuses on sexual, gendered, and racial harassment, but harassment can involve any aspect of human identity and difference including, among many others, foreign-born members of a department, people with disability, and first-generation students and faculty. Any type of harassment can erode trust, undermine inclusion, and derail careers. Despite decades of attention, the academic workplace continues to be shaped by hierarchical power structures that make it difficult to report misconduct, hold individuals accountable, or prevent retaliatory behavior (Parizeau et al. 2016; Mansfield et al. 2019; Marín-Spiotta et al. 2023). Departments—the foundational units of academic life—often find themselves at the front lines of these challenges but they lack sufficient guidance or tools to respond effectively.

Recognizing the urgency of these issues, action has been taken on many levels. For instance, the American Association of Geographers (AAG) created the Harassment-Free AAG Task Force in 2018. Through the work of the Task Force, the AAG revised its *Statement of Professional Ethics* (AAG 2025b) and developed a *Professional Conduct Policy* (AAG 2025a). Institutional codes of conduct and antiharassment policies and trainings are also important steps forward, although they do not always address the nuanced, everyday realities of departmental life—particularly the interpersonal dynamics and urgent decision-making that often arise when problems surface. As a result, department leaders and faculty find themselves unsure about how to respond to concerns, especially when legal constraints, confidentiality, or fear of reprisal limit open discussion. Furthermore, cases of misconduct are rarely acknowledged publicly, making it difficult for others to learn from one another or build shared strategies of prevention and response.

In light of these ongoing concerns, the 2024 AAG Annual Meeting hosted a symposium titled "Strategies for Leading a Harassment-Free Department." This event created a space for department leaders, faculty, and administrators to share their experiences and approaches to fostering

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equitable, respectful, and safe departmental cultures. Participants emphasized that leadership, both formal and informal, plays a pivotal role in shaping the expectations, values, and everyday climate of academic units. Department leaders, in particular, are positioned to set the tone, model accountability, and establish behavioral norms that either challenge or enable harmful conduct. Department-level action can be useful in addressing a range of issues such as diversity (Darden et al. 2006; Solís et al. 2014; Chen and Eaves 2024), graduate education (Hawkins and Kern 2024; Solís and Ng n.d.), support for early career faculty (Solem et al. 2025), promoting principles of care and collegiality (Convening of Care Collective 2024; Skop and Li 2024; Naylor et al. 2025; O'Lear, Foote, and Budikova 2025), and harassment (Potter and Tinkler 2019).

Yet culture is not shaped by formal leadership alone. All members of a department—through mentoring, collaboration, peer interactions, and daily discourse—contribute to its ethical and interpersonal climate. A culture of respect cannot be achieved through top-down edicts alone; it requires a collective commitment to equity, inclusion, and accountability.

This article builds on insights from the symposium to offer an actionable framework for department leaders and faculty seeking to develop harassment-free academic environments. Grounded in the scholarly literature of geography and other disciplines, as well as evidence-based practices developed at a range of universities, this article highlights strategies for proactive leadership, community building, and prevention. Our goal is to support departments in making sustained, meaningful progress toward inclusive, collegial, and ethically sound workplaces—both on campus and in the field.

Importance of Addressing Harassment and Misconduct in Academia

Addressing harassment and misconduct in academic life is not only a legal and ethical obligation, but also a foundational step toward building equitable, inclusive, and intellectually vibrant departments. Scholars across disciplines have documented how harassment—especially gendered, racialized, and sexual—creates climates that silence marginalized voices and derail careers (Ahmed 2012; Marín-Spiotta et al. 2020). In geography, these dynamics are particularly acute given the discipline's continued struggles with whiteness, masculinity, and exclusion in both field and departmental settings (Kobayashi, Lawson, and Sanders 2014; Nelson et al. 2017; Eaves 2019; Chen and Eaves 2024; Sultana et al. 2025).

Research underscores the importance of proactive steps to ensure everyone can thrive without fear. These include fostering a culture of care, accountability, and mutual respect; establishing clear expectations for conduct; and ensuring robust, confidential reporting mechanisms (Clancy et al. 2014; Keashly 2021). Institutions that fail to act risk losing talented faculty, staff, and students—especially those from underrepresented groups—who face compounded forms of discrimination. As Marín-Spiotta and colleagues (2023) emphasized, exclusionary behaviors reinforce historical biases and contribute to loss of talent in the Earth sciences, a pattern mirrored in geography and many academic fields.

Confronting harassment is not only about compliance with administrative mandates, but also about changing institutional cultures. Departments often struggle, however, to address these challenges. Faculty might be uncertain about how to intervene, and departments frequently lack the tools to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics (Keashly, Tye-Williams, and Jagatic 2020). Cultures of silence and avoidance, what Ahmed (2012, 157–63) called "institutional passing," encourage those who experience harassment to avoid calling it out so as not to be targeted for more.

This article responds to these concerns by examining academic misconduct in its many forms, including harassment, incivility, bullying, and retaliation. Drawing from interdisciplinary research, geography-specific case studies, and discussions from the 2024 AAG symposium "Strategies for Leading a Harassment-Free Department," we offer concrete strategies for fostering ethical, inclusive departmental cultures. In *Academic Violence and Bullying of Faculty*, Miller (2024) noted that academic violence "includes a continuum of violence rather than violence that is only physical in nature" (6), underscoring the need to recognize and interrupt harm in its subtler, systemic manifestations.

We begin by identifying two major legal and conceptual categories of misconduct: (1) the hostile environment, which includes unwelcome verbal, physical, or visual behaviors that intimidate or degrade; and (2) quid pro quo harassment, in which individuals in positions of power demand favors in exchange for professional advancement (Einarsen et al. 2020; Kleinman and Thomas 2023). Importantly, harassment is judged by its impact, not just intent. Harassment can emerge in any configuration of roles, and individuals from any identity or rank can be both targets and perpetrators. Power dynamics—especially those shaped by race, gender, sexuality, class, dis/ability, and age—intensify the likelihood and effects of misconduct.

Recognizing the pervasiveness of these behaviors can serve as a call to action. Next steps can include promoting inclusive norms, seeking training, and calling on campus experts who specialize in conflict resolution and Title IX compliance. As O'Lear, Foote, and Budikova (2025) noted, fostering

Table 1. *Best practices and action items for fostering a harassment-free department*

Best practice	Action items and key sources
Remain informed to foster a collective commitment to equity, inclusion, and accountability	- Stay current with key sources of information and policy on your campus and in your state, but also those at the national level such as the American Association of Geographers, Association of American University Professors, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and StopBullying.gov. - Share and discuss materials from these sources periodically to call attention to the importance of these issues, spur discussion, and improve department work. - Conduct annual reviews of departmental policies and practices related to harassment and misconduct, using feedback from climate surveys and incidents to make data-informed adjustments.
Develop and implement clear codes of conduct and keep them current	- Collaborate with faculty, staff, and students to create a comprehensive code of conduct outlining acceptable behaviors and reporting processes, including timelines when possible. - Integrate the code of conduct into department handbooks and communicate it through orientation sessions and regular training. - Purdue University (2023) departmental code of conduct serves as an example. - Many examples are available at ADVANCEGeo Partnership (2018), including https://serc.carleton.edu/advancegeo/resources/codes_conduct.html.
Address structural barriers to reporting, retaliation fears, and absence of privacy in off-campus locations, particularly in field settings	- Provide multiple and confidential reporting channels. - Departments should facilitate secure digital reporting mechanisms that allow immediate reporting from remote locations, thus supporting individuals who might otherwise lack resources or trust in the field. - Assign field-based safety liaisons (faculty, staff, and graduate students). Ensure liaisons understand the unique challenges of off-campus settings. Liaisons must be trained to handle reports confidentially and coordinate responses with department leaders and institutional authorities. - Useful sources include Copenheaver et al. (2023), Demery and Pipkin (2021), Ghamrawi et al. (2024), Gluckman (2018), Kelly and Yarincik (2021), Rudzki et al. (2022), Voss (2021), and Yarincik et al. (2023).
Address bullying and incivility proactively	- Swiftly recognize and address instances of bullying and incivility, using a transparent process outlined in department documents. This process should include clear consequences and support mechanisms for affected individuals. - Foster a culture of mutual respect through incorporating respectful communication and conflict resolution training into departmental meetings, speaker series, and events. - Useful sources include Griffin (2020), Miller (2024), Smith and Coel (2018), and Washington (2022).
Empower and support bystanders	- Implement training programs to empower bystanders to intervene safely and effectively when witnessing inappropriate behavior. - Develop clear guidelines and support systems for individuals reporting incidents, ensuring they understand the process and feel protected. - Develop university or departmental mentorship programs to support affected faculty. - Useful sources include Alwan et al. (2024), Griffith, Malone, and Shea (2022), Haynes-Baratz et al. (2021), McMahon (2015), and https://alteristic.org/green-dot-college2/.
Manage external stressors and support well-being	- Acknowledge that our educational institutions are products of oppressive systems. - Provide resources and support for faculty and staff dealing with external stressors, such as work–life balance programs and access to counseling services. - Create a supportive environment acknowledging the impact of external pressures on departmental dynamics and actively work to mitigate their effects. - Useful sources include Heidt (2023), Parizeau et al. (2016). Peake and England (2020), and https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/.

collegial workplaces requires active cultivation of trust and shared values—an ongoing effort rather than a one-time intervention.

This article builds a road map for such efforts. We begin with Table 1, summarizing best practices for departmental change, followed by sections on crafting a department-level code of conduct, preventing misconduct in field settings, recognizing and mitigating bullying and incivility, and implementing bystander intervention strategies. We conclude by exploring how external political and social stressors affect academic life and what departments can do to buffer their communities against harm. Together, these strategies support a cultural shift toward safer, more inclusive geography departments.

Department Code of Conduct

Ethical and behavioral standards play a key role in guiding group interactions, reinforcing organizational values, and encouraging accountability and

transparency across hierarchical levels in an academic unit (Osland et al. 2006). Codes of conduct are effective when they reflect both individual and group values, fostering an environment of trust and cooperation. It is important, therefore, that the code is created collaboratively by a cross-section of members of the department and updated regularly so it remains relevant. The process of developing and updating a comprehensive written code of conduct allows a department to work as a community to develop clear guidelines, expectations, and processes that are transparent, documented, and available for all to see. This collaboration, led by a group that includes faculty, staff, and students with a range of lived experiences, provides opportunities for feedback from the entire department and addresses issues raised by minoritized groups (e.g., first-generation students, foreign-born members of a department, people with disability, racialized and gendered minorities). This iterative process increases the likelihood that department members meaningfully engage with the code and develop shared standards. It provides a living document to communicate expectations and processes to new colleagues. Ideally, feedback on the code of conduct, with recommendations for changes, is solicited annually. At institutions with a well-developed research infrastructure, a departmental code of conduct could complement existing responsible conduct of research training and documents.

An effective code of conduct should be clearly grounded in the context and reality of its departments, rather than a generic document. Although institution-wide documents are good starting points, department members are best poised to identify the issues and situations that are unique to their unit and its diverse members. This process can improve understanding and communication, enhance morale, and foster a collaborative culture that supports both personal and organizational growth. At the AAG 2024 symposium "Strategies for Leading a Harassment-Free Department," we used a Purdue University (2023) code of conduct as an example to foster discussion and to illustrate key points, but many other examples are available online (ADVANCEGeo Partnership 2018). Codes from geography and related departments stimulate discussion and ideas as a department develops a code that is grounded in its specific context and reality.

A departmental code of conduct provides a foundation for fostering a positive, inclusive, and productive environment. Creating clear expectations around behavior and ethics helps minimize conflict and enables productive negotiation and problem-solving, which are essential for maintaining a healthy organizational culture (Osland et al. 2006). By providing a framework of expectations and ethical standards, a code of conduct can lead to stronger collaboration, enhanced well-being, and greater academic output. When departments uphold clear behavioral guidelines, instances of discrimination, harassment, and unethical practices should decrease, whereas overall satisfaction and productivity should increase (Perez 2019). A department's code of conduct should align with broader university values. Many institutions have a statement of integrity or university code of conduct, or both, ensuring that all department members understand the role they play in fostering a supportive, professional, and collaborative atmosphere that is reinforced by the university at large.

A well-designed code of conduct includes several key elements. First, it should note that the department's research and education missions are strengthened by contributions from diverse perspectives, and that creating an equitable, inclusive, and supportive department culture benefits everyone. It should articulate values around respect, inclusivity, and integrity, and connect them to relevant university policies. Emphasizing these values is critical for setting the tone that interactions within the department should be professional and inclusive; collegial and respectful work environments increase collaboration and individual job satisfaction. A code of conduct should include proactive steps that address potential areas of concern and reduce chances of conduct violations, both addressing on-campus classroom and department settings and requiring signed agreements for behavior by participants in field trips and study abroad, with clear consequences if the agreement is not upheld.

Another core element of a code of conduct is a set of clear guidelines on communication and conflict resolution, outlining steps for reporting and addressing grievances and supporting a culture of constructive feedback. Conflict reporting and resolution guidelines must recognize that the power disparities existing in academia mean that the actions and words of more senior personnel often have an outsized influence, and that students and other early-career staff and faculty might hesitate to report conduct concerns. A code of conduct should thus empower all community members to recognize when behaviors are unacceptable and to speak up when support is needed. (More discussion of bystander intervention is provided later.) Departments with well-developed communication practices should see a reduction in misunderstandings and conflicts, which translates into smoother operations and less time spent resolving interpersonal issues.

A code of conduct should also include policies regarding alcohol consumption when representing the department on or off campus, as alcohol can increase the risk of unacceptable behavior. A total ban on alcohol might not eliminate the issue, but clear guidelines and penalties for misconduct must be outlined. The code should avoid vague

statements like "zero-tolerance policy" and instead provide specific consequences for violations that the department leader can implement. Working with the institution's human resources and legal departments is important so that any disciplinary steps or other consequences are clear and enforceable. Department leaders and administrators must actively engage in creating and enforcing these codes to ensure safe and inclusive departmental environments for all.

A code of conduct should clarify the department's stance on academic integrity and responsible research practices. With growing scrutiny over research ethics and reproducibility, a department code helps embed a commitment to ethical conduct and provides guidance on managing data, promoting academic honesty, using artificial intelligence, and preventing plagiarism. Addressing these issues explicitly in a code can strengthen the department's reputation and support compliance with broader institutional and governmental standards.

Department members developing a code of conduct is a great start, but additional steps are required for it to become part of the fabric of the unit. As Lyken-Segosebe, Donald, and Braxton (2023) emphasized, a code of conduct might increase department members' sensitivity to ethical issues, but not actually promote ethical behavior without further reinforcement. In addition to presenting the code of conduct at orientations for new members of the department and at the first departmental meeting each year, department leaders and others should regularly reinforce positive conduct both individually (informally and in annual reviews) and in public settings such as departmental meetings and newsletters. When problems do occur, the leader should communicate that the code is being taken seriously, processes outlined in the code are being followed, and there have been consequences—all while maintaining confidentiality. A departmental meeting or a forum with students, for example, could include an informational item stating, "During this semester one or more conduct issues were addressed according to our code of conduct." Finally, an annual request for feedback on the code of conduct leads to committee recommendations for updates that address new or changing situations.

Field-Based Misconduct

As discussed at length during the 2024 Symposium, widespread underreporting of gender-based harassment underscores the need for departmental leaders to recognize and name inappropriate behaviors and to prioritize the development and implementation of comprehensive reporting mechanisms (Humbert and Strid 2025). Gender harassment, or hostility, aversion, and denigration, are among the most pervasive, yet least identified and reported forms of sexual harassment in academic settings (Fairchild, Holyfield, and Byington 2018). This type of harassment, often manifesting through insults, demeaning remarks, or disrespectful nonverbal interactions, is particularly damaging in field-based settings. Harassing behavior can invalidate participants' experiences and exacerbate feelings of isolation or exclusion. These interactions contribute to a hostile workplace or academic climate, undermining the well-being and academic productivity of affected individuals and groups (Sue and Spanierman 2010).

Department leaders might overlook the issue of misconduct that occurs off-campus and will encounter significant challenges in addressing and mitigating harassment behaviors, especially during field-based courses. The entrenched norms and power structures within field settings can create environments that allow harassment to flourish. Field work has hierarchical structures, often physical isolation, and unique stressors that make participants particularly vulnerable to misconduct (Voss 2021). The power dynamics of field work can enable senior personnel to exploit their authority and deter students or colleagues from reporting incidents (Gluckman 2018; Mansfield et al. 2019; Marín-Spiotta et al. 2020). Underrepresented groups, including women, people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and international students, face heightened risks of harassment in field environments (Marín-Spiotta et al. 2020). Educating personnel on these power dynamics empowers all participants to assert their rights and ensures that senior staff understand and uphold equitable treatment standards (Ghamrawi et al. 2024).

A concerted effort is needed to raise awareness of the potential for harassment in field settings and to ensure that faculty, staff, and students are equipped to identify both its overt and subtle forms. A proactive approach, including training to recognize and name these behaviors, is essential for fostering a safer, more inclusive environment where all individuals feel empowered to participate fully in academic and field-based research settings (Marín-Spiotta et al. 2020). Antiharassment policies in these settings must be absolute, visible, and paired with actionable enforcement plans. Program leaders should make clear statements at the beginning of each field program, establishing action items on harassment reporting and enforcement protocols (Copenheaver et al. 2023). Leaders must address structural barriers to reporting, such as fear of retaliation and the absence of privacy in field settings, and abandon the vague language of "inappropriate" or "unprofessional." Instead leaders should identify, name, and confront sexual harassment, bullying, and incivility directly. Off-campus academic programs need clear, multiple-pathway reporting structures, including anonymous options, that instill confidence

among participants and mitigate fears of retaliation. Effective reporting frameworks include detailed definitions of what constitutes sexual misconduct, tangible examples of violations in off-campus environments, and explicit consequences for such behaviors. Detailed policies and targeted training are vital for reducing risks and enhancing reporting mechanisms in these settings (Copenheaver et al. 2023).

For successful implementation, training programs should emphasize the identification, handling, and direct consequences of harassment, tailored to field-specific contexts for all participants, before excursions begin. In the field, include a refresher on reporting, and require participant surveys after field work. By acknowledging and naming harmful behaviors, institutions can lay the groundwork for more effective reporting and a stronger culture of prevention. Universities can transform field environments into spaces that prioritize respect, equity, and safety after adopting these comprehensive, research-informed strategies. This proactive approach, grounded in policies that address the unique vulnerabilities of off-campus and field settings, enhances the quality of experiential learning and ensures that field work remains an enriching experience for all participants.

Addressing Bullying and Incivility

Workplace bullying is the persistent pattern of mistreatment and intimidation of an employee or group of employees. The actions could affect the well-being of these people. Workplace bullying can result from the misuse of power, such as when a senior faculty member belittles a junior faculty member, but it can happen between employees of any level of seniority. Sometimes faculty or students from underrepresented groups are bullied. Bullying can be blatant or it can be subtle. In any case, it degrades the work environment and can have long-term effects on employees including their physical and mental health, job satisfaction, and career success (Washington 2022).

Miller (2024) provided a comprehensive review of research on academic bullying and defined specific types of workplace violence common in institutions of higher education. Academic bullying involves incivility, which typically is low-intensity maltreatment among employees (Yamada, Duffy, and Berry 2018). Microaggressions, or insensitive statements about some part of a person's identity, might be inadvertent or one-time offensive comments. Often, though, incivility and microaggressions persist, intentionally targeting individuals of traditionally marginalized groups (Keashly 2021; Washington 2022), and progress into pervasive bullying behavior.

Miller (2024) identified this type of behavior as "academic violence and bullying" to acknowledge the continuum of types of demeaning behavior. She stated, "Academic violence and bullying operate like a weather pattern that requires certain components (victims, perpetrators, bystanders) in order to exist; these components are fluid in their contribution to the interpersonal violence and bullying in an academic setting due to systemic, relational, and individual factors interacting with one another" (Miller 2024, 6–7). Bullying in academic settings can be reduced by attending to the individual factors that create the storm.

Why do colleagues bully coworkers? Täuber and Mahmoudi (2022) explored the occurrence of workplace bullying as a strategic tool for career advancement, particularly in competitive academic and research settings. Individuals might engage in bullying behaviors to undermine colleagues, thereby positioning themselves for promotions and other forms of career advancement, or to avoid being held accountable for their own misconduct or incompetence. Junior faculty, and faculty and students from underrepresented groups, could disproportionately be the victims of bullying and this sort of incivility and insult can cause a biobehavioral response by the victim (Cortina, Hershcovis, and Clancy 2022). Täuber and Mahmoudi (2022) called for systemic change within organizations to discourage such tactics and protect the mental health and career prospects of employees. If department members and leaders are aware of the motives and have institutional support, they can better recognize bullying within an academic setting, address toxic workplace dynamics, and help mitigate this behavior through institutional reform. Ultimately the goal is to intervene and address bullying as it arises, and to develop a work environment that prevents this behavior from developing in the first place.

What can departments do to reduce or eliminate interpersonal mistreatment of faculty? Thankfully, publications on the topic and other resources are abundant to help initiate the process of developing a positive work environment (e.g., Keashly 2021; Griffith, Malone, and Shea 2022). Grandey, Beehr, and Hershcovis (2022) edited a collection of articles focused on preventing interpersonal stressors that undermine employee health and productivity in the workplace. As Grandey, Beehr, and Hershcovis (2022) stated, "incivility begets incivility" (3), and the articles in this publication help to break this cycle. Fostering a culture of mutual respect is integral to reducing bullying behavior. Modeling respectful communication with all colleagues is an important first step. Integrating conflict-resolution training into departmental meetings raises awareness of positive communication models and helps the group to develop best practices for interacting with one another. Another key is to recognize and

address instances of incivility and bullying swiftly, with a transparent process, including clear consequences and support mechanisms for affected individuals. A code of conduct, as mentioned earlier, can codify acceptable interactions and state the consequences of inappropriate behavior (Ferris, Deakin, and Mathieson 2021).

Those who are bullied and bystanders can all lean on campus resources. Some institutions have developed effective workplace bullying policies and procedures to deal with academic violence. At the institutional level, an equal opportunity office and a human resources department are places to start gathering information about how harmful workplace behavior is defined and addressed. These offices can help manage interpersonal conflict. The ombuds' office, if it exists on a campus, can field complaints, and address grievances of workplace violence and bullying. If individuals are willing to participate, an ombuds can try to resolve conflicts or advocate for changes to help improve processes and prevent future misconduct. These changes could be at the department, college, or university level and require careful planning, implementation, and maintenance (Miller 2024).

Empowering and Supporting Bystanders

One tool to help reduce incidences of harassment and bullying is commonly referred to as bystander intervention training. The concept of the bystander effect comes from the literature in social psychology and refers to the infamous Kitty Genovese murder case in New York City in the 1960s (Darley and Latané 1968). It was initially reported that Ms. Genovese's neighbors failed to intervene as the young woman was stabbed to death outside her apartment building. We now understand that this case was reported incorrectly, and subsequent investigations did not support the hypothesis that bystanders remained inactive during the murder of Ms. Genovese. This story, however, has remained a trope in the social psychology literature and has discouraged research into the efficacy of bystander training (Manning, Levine, and Collins 2007). That trend appears to be changing and now research indicates that bystander training can effectively reduce workplace incivility and bullying in occupational settings (Kuntz and Searle 2023) and notably for university faculty (Haynes-Baratz et al. 2021).

Bystander intervention training is often offered on college campuses, typically to first-year students as a component of sexual-assault reduction programming, and to induce prosocial behaviors. Bystander intervention occurs when someone who witnesses an act of incivility or bullying intervenes to prevent further escalation or harm to the victim (Bennett, Banyard, and Garnhart 2014). Training faculty, students, and staff to recognize harassment and bullying, and how to intervene safely and effectively, can build a departmental culture where bystanders choose to react when they witness inappropriate behavior.

Bystander training might already be available on your campus. A variety of organizations offer bystander training modules including Ethena (https://www.goethena.com/), Vector Solutions (https://www.vectorsolutions.com/), and Traliant (https://www.traliant.com/). Alteristic.org offers the Green Dot program, which has been implemented by hundreds of colleges and universities in the United States (https://alteristic.org/green-dot-college2/). Going beyond these formal training programs, McMahon (2015) identified five key factors of campus environments that might promote bystander behavior: social norms, a sense of community, prosocial modeling by all members of the department, policies and practices, and the physical environment. Each of these aspects can be enhanced by thoughtful engagement at the departmental level. Events and traditions that build a sense of community can have long-reaching positive implications and are worth the time, effort, and resources needed to support them. Midday, alcohol-free, on-campus events that celebrate what makes a unit special can play this role.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine recognize the unique complexities of academic workplaces and encourage using an ecological framework to understand the conditions under which people are likely to intervene to prevent sexual harassment and bullying (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018; Kuhn et al. 2023). This approach makes explicit that complex power differentials exist on college campuses that vary by rank, race, gender, and class. Students and early career faculty might be afraid to intervene due to fear of retaliation. These differentials can also include allegiances between seemingly unrelated individuals or units. A college dean, for example, might have attended graduate school with a perpetrator and be unwilling to intervene. It is important to recognize that our ecological system also includes what occurs outside our campuses.

Understanding and Managing External Workplace Pressures

Higher education in the United States is still wrought with ongoing challenges concerning the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the Higher Education Act of 1965. Integration of our campuses might have removed structural barriers regarding access to the university, but it did not necessarily change human behavior. In the current political

climate surrounding higher education, campuses are under pressure to adapt to demands coming from both the federal and state level. In 2023, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2025) created a DEI Legislation Tracker that has recorded the proposal and adoption of state and federal efforts to prohibit diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, including the closing of campus DEI offices, changes to admissions and hiring practices, and removal of required courses. Departments cannot hope to become harassment-free without acknowledging the broader social and political environment in which they were formed and within which they continue to operate.

As the anti-DEI movement across the United States continues to unfold, its consequences are felt immediately. Briscoe (2024) found that although new legislation was often vague about implementation, institutions rapidly removed staff and restructured DEI offices. As a result, overcompliance caused harm to staff, students, and faculty. The Williams Institute conducted a study among LGBTQ+ faculty (Goldberg 2024) that found that nearly three quarters (74 percent) of their participants reported that changes in the political climate had affected their mental health. They also reported that 27 percent of participants described impacts on their physical health attributed to these external stressors (Goldberg 2024). Half of the faculty surveyed have considered moving because of the legislative changes and shifting climate around DEI initiatives (Goldberg 2024). With swiftly shifting organization norms, particularly in the context of a potentially volatile climate around higher education, it is increasingly important for colleagues, faculty, staff, and students to find community and belonging in the workplace.

Departments must be aware of the burdens placed on faculty who are from historically excluded groups. These additional pressures are well documented in the literature (e.g., Sanders 2006; Kobayashi, Lawson, and Sanders 2014; Eaves 2019; Domingo et al. 2022; Chen and Eaves 2024; Naylor et al. 2025). Fortunately, institutions recently have placed more attention on student mental health. Yet, faculty and staff are facing challenges and crises of their own. Trying to prevent fatigue and burnout from the common stressors of academic life becomes exacerbated by external factors. We can support colleagues by being aware of, promoting, and participating in employee assistance programs such as counseling.

Departments can be places of community and belonging and shifting scale from federal and state support to community-level engagement can help our most vulnerable students, faculty, and staff endure what is ahead. Heidt (2023) provided the following tips for supporting one another: (1) seek training such as a mental-health first-aid course (e.g., https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/); (2) make connections in moderation, because excessive use of social media can lead to poor mental health, but it is possible to curate a supportive digital community; (3) speak up by normalizing the fact that everyone struggles, including yourself; (4) leave the office to demonstrate the importance of having a life outside of work; and (5) know the resources available at your institution, in your community, and through the 988 phone number for the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

Conclusion

Addressing academic misconduct requires a sustained commitment from all members of a department, including leaders, faculty, staff, and students. The insights shared at the AAG 2024 symposium "Strategies for Leading a Harassment-Free Department" reinforce the importance of reducing misconduct through clear policies, ongoing education, and a culture of accountability. Whereas legal and administrative mandates are a foundation for responses to harassment, it is the everyday actions of all members of our academic communities that shape the workplace culture and determine whether misconduct is prevented or allowed to persist.

A well-developed departmental code of conduct serves as a first step in fostering an inclusive and supportive environment. By creating and updating a code of conduct, departments can ensure that expectations are clear, enforcement mechanisms are transparent, and all community members understand their role in upholding professional standards. The effectiveness of such a document depends on active engagement, consistent reinforcement, and visible commitment from an entire department community. This dynamic document should be adapted to address emerging challenges.

Off-campus settings for research and learning pose special challenges requiring additional safeguards. The hierarchical nature of these environments can exacerbate power imbalances, making it essential for departments to establish clear reporting structures, assign field-based safety liaisons, and ensure that students and early-career researchers have multiple avenues for seeking assistance. Antiharassment policies in these settings must be explicit, actionable, and consistently enforced to create a culture of safety and respect beyond the campus.

Addressing bullying, incivility, and microaggressions is critical for creating a harassment-free environment. Whether subtle or overt, bullying can erode morale, mental health, and work productivity. Members of a department must be prepared to identify and intervene in cases of bullying, providing resources and support to affected individuals while

holding perpetrators accountable. By establishing transparent processes for conflict resolution and promoting a culture of mutual respect, departments can reduce workplace bullying and incivility and its negative effects.

In addition to codes of conduct, implementing best practices for harassment prevention and response ensures that departments have the tools to address issues proactively. Bystander intervention can equip individuals with the knowledge and confidence to respond to harmful behavior before it escalates. Regular workshops and discussions can reinforce expectations and cultivate an atmosphere in which faculty, staff, and students feel empowered to report concerns without fear of retaliation.

Finally, it is important to recognize and address external stressors that influence the academic workplace. Broader societal challenges, legislative and political interference, and increasing demands on faculty and staff contribute to workplace pressures. Universities must offer resources for mental health and well-being, create spaces for open dialogue, and develop policies that support work–life balance. To prevent burnout and fatigue, faculty and staff need to find community and belonging in the workplace and support for their well-being.

In sum, developing a harassment-free department requires a multifaceted approach grounded in policy, education, and cultural transformation. Through sustained commitment and collective responsibility, an academic unit can create environments that promote a healthier, more respectful academic community for all of its members. ■

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