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To cite this article: Sarah Young & Kimberly Wiley (2021) Erased: ending faculty sexual misconduct in academia: an open letter from women of public affairs education, Public Management Review, 23:6, 797-801, DOI: [10.1080/14719037.2021.1895576](https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2021.1895576)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2021.1895576>



Published online: 04 Mar 2021.



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INVITED OPEN LETTER



Erased: ending faculty sexual misconduct in academia: an open letter from women of public affairs education

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The #MeToo movement is descending upon the walls of the ivory tower. The day of reckoning has come for academia to end teaching staff¹ sexual misconduct. As women of public² and third sector³ education, we demand to be heard.

The issue of teaching staff perpetrating sexual misconduct is prevalent within academia, and more specifically, in graduate education programmes. In the United States (U.S.), 24.2% of women and 15.6% of men report being sexually victimized as undergraduates on a college campus in just the last two months (Jouriles et al. 2020); and, one out of every ten female graduate students report being sexually harassed by a member of the teaching staff (Cantor et al. 2020). This problem is not just isolated to the U.S. The Australian Human Rights Commission's (2017) National Report on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at Australian universities found relatively similar numbers with 21% of students reporting being sexually harassed in a university setting, with about 7% being victimized by teaching staff (p. 48).

Public and third sector education programmes are not immune. According to the grassroots, U.S.-based Academic Sexual Misconduct Database, public and third sector education programmes had 20 publicly documented, substantiated cases of teaching staff sexual misconduct since 2016 (Libarkin 2020). While that's only about 2% of all cases across all disciplines, that number is shocking given our field differentiates itself on the qualities of 'publicness' (Bozeman 1987) and our programmes are relatively smaller and newer than most.

Many associations and societies focused on promoting the practice and study of public and third sectors, for example the International City/County Manager Association and the Social Research Association, have ethical codes with explicit statements that require the highest personal and professional integrity. Yet, our education programmes are plagued by the same pass-the-harasser mentality as other disciplines. For example, in early 2020, a university investigation substantiated findings of sexual misconduct by a previous editor of a top ranked public affairs journal. As often happens (Cantalupo and Kidder 2018), the professor filed for early retirement before sanctions were applied. They subsequently applied for multiple other positions

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This editorial is a shortened adaptation of the full article by Drs. Young & Wiley, which provides a much more in-depth conversation regarding an overview of the problem and the recommended solutions. Please see the forthcoming *Journal of Public Affairs Education* (27) doi:10.1080/15236803.2021.1877983 for more.

in academia and were even initially hired at another top university. Like most cases of teaching staff sexual misconduct, that case received no press, was not publicly documented, and thus (to-date) is not listed in the Academic Sexual Misconduct Database (Libarkin 2020). Yes, this is only one example, but there are others. Just ask your female colleagues.

Programmes designed to educate future public and third sector employees need to be even more concerned than most higher education programmes about erasing teaching staff sexual misconduct. In many countries these sectors tend to have higher than average female representation (Andrews and Ashworth 2013), which equates to more female students studying public and third sector management. For example, in the U.S., sixty-three percent of the students in graduate public affairs programmes are female, more than almost any other educational field (NASPAA 2019). Graduate students face a high 'administrative burden' (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015) in that they are learners seeking access to an institution rife with cumbersome rules and practices while at the same time entering into unbalanced power dynamic relationships with advising professors (Young and Wiley 2021). In many cases, they must bear these costs in order to achieve their goal to graduate. Given that sexual assaults often go unreported (Jouriles et al. 2020), students shouldering such administrative burden are even less likely to report sexual misconduct by teaching staff.

Further, the smallness and newness of public and third sector graduate education programmes may make teaching staff sexual misconduct *more* prolific. The newness of the fields translates to fewer big-name scholars (as compared to hard science fields). The smallness of the fields means the titans are more recognizable. These factors combined may make a student fear retaliation even more, and negatively influence the likelihood they report misconduct.

Lastly, in many countries' victims have few legal protections and means of recourse. For example, in the United Kingdom more than a third of universities used nondisclosure agreements (NDAs) or threats of expulsion as a means to gag students from going public (Croxford 2020). In the U.S., recent policy changes to Title IX weakened protections for victims, which may unequally impact victims of sexual misconduct by teaching staff (Anderson 2020). In India, universities have Internal Complaint Committees, which have the right to try to force conciliation between the victim and their attacker prior to an investigation even occurring (*The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal), 2013, Act §1(1)(1)*). If an investigation occurs there are very few requirements on what it must include (Sakhrani 2017). The committee must provide recommendations to the university and complainants, but the university does not have to notify the victim about what, if any, outcomes were had. Finally, if the victim was unable to prove their complaint and the committee comes up with an adverse finding against them, they can be penalized and punished (Sakhrani 2017). Other universities across the world fail to have any real policy protections in place, leaving female students incredibly vulnerable to enduring sexual misconduct (Gray and Pin 2017).

How do we stop a cycle of sexual misconduct in public affairs education programmes?

As a field, we have acquiesced into complicity and complacency about misconduct instead of living by our tenets of accountability and transparency. How can we forge

a new path? As policy scholars, we come back to policy solutions within the framework of the socioecological model.

- **Individual level solutions:** *Build upon mentoring relationships as a protective factor.* A relationship with a senior teaching staff member may help improve the chances that a student will disclose. Another strategy is to teach and practice effective bystander intervention approaches.
- **Programme or department level solutions:** *Develop department culture and policies that actively prohibit and punish sexual misconduct.* Programmes can also develop meaningful check points and easy-access, anonymous disclosure methods to help identify issues. Then make sure everyone, especially the students, knows about them.
- **University level⁴ solutions:** *Strengthen university policies to improve reporting and sanctioning.* Background check incoming teaching staff specifically for sexual misconduct. Mandate reference requests disclose sexual misconduct findings for previous teaching staff.⁵ Close loopholes that allow teaching staff facing sanctions to retire early. Commit to stronger sanction practices; terminate when called for and due process has occurred. Universities must ensure teaching staff uphold their ethical responsibilities, instead of simply letting them walk away.
- **Association level solutions:** *Take a no tolerance stance.* All professional associations need a code of ethics; one that clearly states that sexual misconduct will result in both membership termination *and* cessation of all publication, conference, and award privileges. Accrediting associations should require schools to report findings of misconduct. Associations also need to be proactive about safeguarding graduate students by protecting them at events where they are most vulnerable.
- **Government policy solutions:** *Develop policies and procedures that break the cycle of misconduct.* The European Union is currently being petitioned to create the European Office and Ombudsmen for Academic and Research Matters to ‘supervise, provide information to victims of harassment through the provision of resources, raise awareness of harassment and the ways it can be tackled, and provide training for institutions about good practices’. We strongly support this petition and urge other countries to do the same. Other legislation should also be considered, such as the U.S.’s State of New Jersey Statute § 18A:6–18, which creates easier avenues to terminate teaching staff for egregious morale violations. Policy should be enacted prohibiting the use of NDAs that take away the victim’s future right to name their attacker. Other policies can be put in place to provide protection for victims, mandate sanctions, and develop national databases of teaching staff reports that have substantiated findings⁶ that HR can use for background checks.
- **Societal level solutions:** *Change the culture.* Sexual misconduct is rooted in all facets of academia. Most resources are dedicated towards eradicating sexual assaults committed by students. We must take responsibility for the role teaching staff play in this epidemic and collectively normalize the conversation about university sexual misconduct.

Sexism is systemically embedded in academia. Public and third sector education programmes must work together to break down the complicity and complacency that

have pervaded the discipline since its inception. For too long, we relied upon an underground whisper network of individuals who work behind the scenes to protect our students (Ahmad 2020). These women deserve credit and respect for carrying our collective burden. Now we demand real solutions. We demand institutional collective action across all levels to eliminate the dangers of these sexual predators.

Notes

1. We use the term 'teaching staff' as it is the most universally generalizable. We use the term to refer to all professors, lecturers, tutors, and all others that teach within higher education.
2. While the boundaries of what is 'public' varies by on country, we use the term to refer to government and publicly controlled organizations.
3. The non-profit, or voluntary sector, is referred to by several terms throughout the world. For the purpose of consistency and neutrality, and aligned with the International Society for Third-Sector Research, we refer to this as the 'third sector'.
4. We recognize that for some universities these recommendations may involve a government-level policy change. We include the recommendation within this section as the administrative body responsible varies widely, but it applies most closely to the university-level.
5. In some legal systems such as the U.S.'s, qualified privileges legally protect negative references provided in good faith.
6. Finalized reports should be redacted to protect the victim and the complainant, but still readily identify the perpetrator.

Acknowledgement

We greatly appreciate the significant contributions of trailblazer Dr. Frances S. Berry in supporting and amplifying this message.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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