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AAU Harassment Survey Shows Higher Levels of Faculty Misconduct Against Grad Students

By Theresa Defino

Although students remain far-and-away the largest perpetrators of harassment, assault and stalking against both undergraduates and graduates, teaching assistants and faculty are more likely to commit such incidents when the victims are “graduate/professional” students than when they are undergraduates, a new survey shows.^[1]

Overall, undergraduate students had “higher rates of harassment than graduate/professional students,” the survey found, with rates of 31.3% for undergraduates and 19.9% for graduate/professional students, according to a landmark, 33-school survey of more than 180,000 students commissioned by the Association of American Universities (AAU).

But nearly 25% of female graduate/professional students who reported being sexually harassed said the perpetrator was a “faculty member or instructor,” compared to only 5.5% of undergraduate women. Similarly, 6.5% of graduate/professional women who had been stalked “reported a faculty member, compared to 1.3 percent of undergraduate women.”

These data points are among those in the AAU report that compliance and oversight officials and others in leadership positions concerned with federal research support may find particularly noteworthy. Issued Oct. 15, the report comes on the heels of increasing focus by U.S. agencies and Congress on rooting out sexual misconduct among federally funded investigators.

AAU said the findings “will help...colleges and universities in their ongoing efforts to address the critical problem of sexual assault and other sexual misconduct.”

A total of 181,752 students at 33 institutions participated in the survey, which was conducted online. Undergraduates totaled 108,221; 73,531 were graduate and professional respondents. Public institutions accounted for 85,777, and 95,975 respondents were from private schools.

The survey is a follow-up to one conducted in 2015 but is not entirely comparable. That survey included 21 schools. Questions are also different in the two surveys.

“The results provide cause for both hope and continued concern,” said AAU President Mary Sue Coleman. “They reveal that, while students know more about university-sponsored resources for victims of sexual assault and misconduct, they still aren’t using these resources often enough. The results also show that rates of sexual assault and misconduct, measured by self-reports from students, have increased slightly since 2015, and that some groups of students—including women, non-cisgender students, and others—continue to be victimized at disproportionately high rates.”

AAU released only aggregate data and did not compare schools. However, each of the 33 schools surveyed separately released their own data that forms the basis of the report, a fact that AAU did not mention in its

announcement, nor did it provide a centralized posting of individual results.

However, *Inside Higher Ed* posted all 32 that were available as of Oct. 20.^[2] University of Florida President Kent Fuchs said in a column published Oct. 17 in *TheAlligator*, the student-run publication, that UF would release its “survey results and analysis as soon as available, which I expect will be early next week.”^[3] These were not yet released as of RRC’s deadline.

Slight Increase in Assault Reports

“The majority of the estimates discussed in this report varied significantly across the 33 schools,” the report states. “School characteristics—such as size, public or private, the number of crimes reported in the school’s Clery Act^[4] statistics, or climate/community measures—did not explain many of the differences. Some of the differences between schools are due to sampling error,” and “some of the differences may be due to different levels of non-response. However, there is little evidence that non-response can explain the high rates of victimization found in either the 2015 or 2019 surveys.”

The 2015 and new surveys were “designed to provide separate estimates for incidents involving two types of nonconsensual sexual contact (penetration and sexual touching) and four tactics (perpetrator’s use of physical force; victim’s inability to consent to sexual contact or stop what was happening; coercion of the victim; or contact which continued without active, ongoing, voluntary agreement from the victim),” the report explains. “The survey also was designed to provide estimates for incidents of sexual harassment, stalking,” and intimate partner violence (IPV).

This “level of detail provides campus administrators with the ability to tailor policies by these very different types of sexual assault and misconduct,” according to the survey.

For 21 schools that were part of the first survey, assault, or “the rate of nonconsensual sexual contact by physical force or inability to consent increased from 2015 to 2019 by 3.0 percentage points (to 26.4 percent) for undergraduate women, 2.4 percentage points for graduate and professional women (to 10.8 percent), and 1.4 percentage points for undergraduate men (to 6.9 percent).”

At the same time, the survey found “significant increases from 2015 to 2019 in student reports of their knowledge about school definitions and procedures related to sexual assault and other sexual misconduct. The largest change was for knowledge of the definition, where there were increases of 11.5 percentage points for undergraduate women and 12.4 percentage points for undergraduate men.”

In addition to male, female, undergraduate and graduate categories, survey respondents were also grouped as TGQN, which stands for “transgender woman; transgender man, nonbinary/genderqueer, gender questioning and gender not listed.”

These groups reported “the highest rates” of some forms of sexual misconduct. For example, “among undergraduate TGQN students, 65.1 percent reported experiencing harassing behavior since first enrolling at the school, 21.5 percent with partners reported IPV and 15.2 percent stalking. Among undergraduate women 59.2, 14.1 and 10.0 percent experienced harassing behavior, IPV and stalking, respectively.”

Other findings of note:

- “Among all students, 41.8 percent of students reported experiencing at least one sexually harassing behavior since enrollment,” the survey showed. “Overall, 18.9 percent of students reported sexually harassing behavior that either ‘interfered with their academic or professional performance,’ ‘limited their

ability to participate in an academic program,’ or ‘created an intimidating, hostile or offensive social, academic, or work environment.’”

- “The two most common behaviors were ‘heard insulting or offensive remarks or jokes’ (27.0%) and ‘heard inappropriate or offensive comments about someone’s body, appearance or sexual activities’ (33.7%). Sixteen percent report having crude or gross sexual things said to them or feeling pressured to talk about sexual matters. Respondents reported social or online media were used to send them offensive materials (8.2%). Other forms of harassment included being repeatedly asked to ‘go out’ (e.g. have dinner, drinks, or sex) by a perpetrator even though the student had previously said no (11.2%).”
- “The prevalence rate of intimate partner violence was 10.1 percent among all students who had been in a partnered relationship since entering college. The range across schools was from 6.0 percent to 14.0 percent.”
- “Among all students, 5.8 percent reported experiencing stalking. Among the perpetrators, about one-third (31.1%) was someone the person recognized, 25.0 percent was a friend, and 32.9 percent was a previous partner.”
- “The rate of nonconsensual sexual contact by physical force or inability to consent for undergraduate women ranged from 14 to 32 percent across the 33 schools. Many of the differences in prevalence rates across schools are not statistically significant. Nonetheless, there is a wide range of prevalence rates across schools. These rates fall within the range of other surveys that have used similar criteria to define nonconsensual sexual contact.”
- “Approximately half the incidents of nonconsensual penetration by physical force or inability to consent involve physical force and half involve inability to consent. For example, among undergraduate women, 7.3 percent experienced penetration by just physical force and 5.4 percent by inability to consent.”

‘More Needs to Be Done’

All of the statements issued by schools included in the survey that RRC reviewed expressed concern about the findings and vowed to make changes to reduce sexual harassment and assault, although few offered any detailed initiatives. Many also scheduled campus-wide meetings and community forums to discuss the survey results and to consider new efforts.

“Incidents of sexual violence and harassment have considerable and long-lasting effects on individuals who have experienced them,” wrote Persis Drell, Stanford University provost. “One incident is too many. In confronting sexual violence and harassment, we face a chronic public health issue that demands solutions from multiple sources—from the university itself; from each of us as members of this community; and from institutions and citizens more broadly in our society. Despite many efforts at Stanford over the years, it is evident that much more needs to be done.”

Echoing that “our numbers remain distressingly high—and even a single incidence of sexual assault is too many,” Rebecca Blank, chancellor of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, said that UW is “committed to doing all we can to ensure a safe living and learning environment for all of our students. When sexual assault occurs, we will respond swiftly and with compassion, providing resources and support.”

1 David Cantor et al., *Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Misconduct*, Association of American Universities, October 15, 2019, <http://bit.ly/2BrCMvQ>.

2 Greta Anderson, “Top Universities Release Sexual Assault Reports,” *Insider Higher Ed*, October 16, 2019,

<http://bit.ly/2JauwEW>.

3 Kent Fuchs, “News that should prompt real change,” *The Alligator*, October 18, 2019, <http://bit.ly/2P465Na>.

4 20 U.S.C. § 1092.

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