Sexual harassment is endemic at U.S. universities and colleges, and the policies and procedures currently in place to prevent it are not working. That’s the searing takeaway from a report released in June by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Some research institutions are now seeking quantitative ways to measure and track the efficacy of their antiharassment programs—while others remain quiet.

More than half of the female faculty and staff in academia have been harassed, the analysis found. And more than 25 percent of female engineering students within the University of Texas system reported sexual harassment by faculty or staff, according to a 2017 survey cited in the report [see charts, opposite page].

Policies against harassment have been in place at academic institutions for decades. The problem, according to the National Academies report, is that institutions have mainly focused their efforts on complying with legal requirements spelled out in Title IX, the federal law that makes it illegal to discriminate based on gender. But while legal compliance prevents lawsuits, it does not stop harassment.

Title IX policies require schools to maintain systems to file and investigate complaints. This assumes that victims will file a formal complaint to campus police or the Title IX coordinator, allowing the university to investigate and document the incident in the institutional record. However, many victims do not come forward, fearing repercussions. Or they do not report through legal channels, instead reaching out to others in the department, says Erika Marín-Spiotta, a University of Wisconsin–Madison professor of geography who is leading a national initiative against harassment.

Universities don’t share data about such cases. This lack of data makes it hard to measure the outcome of an institution’s antiharassment efforts. “That’s part of the problem, and a challenge,” she says.

It’s sometimes possible to file anonymous complaints via an online system, but those reports also do not lead to legal action, says Karen Panetta, dean of graduate engineering education at Tufts University, in Medford, Mass. Also, for female faculty in engineering, it is difficult to remain anonymous given the small number of women in many departments. There should be more safe ways to file complaints, she says.

Title IX also requires schools to take steps to prevent harassment. But exactly how to do that is open to interpretation. A common step is to provide antiharassment training. But many universities don’t offer appropriate training or offer none at all, Marín-Spiotta says. UW-Madison held its very first mandatory harassment-prevention training for employees last year. If more data were available, it would likely show that current antiharassment training programs are not very effective, she adds.

Online training modules often prompt participants to imagine scenarios, such as being in an office cubicle, say, when in reality harassment in engineering and the sciences is more likely to occur in labs, in the field, or at conferences.

And training can backfire. Sociologists have found that antiharassment training can reinforce gender stereotypes, implying women are weak and men are predators, and that some men come out of required training with more cavalier attitudes toward harassment than when they entered.

A better alternative, Marín-Spiotta says, would be to focus on teaching bystanders how to intervene, which research shows is effective. With a US $1.1 million grant from the National Science Foundation, she is working with researchers, educators, and scientific...
society leaders to develop bystander intervention workshops for department heads, chairs, and faculty.

The primary goals of these training programs are to create awareness, teach people how to recognize the problem, instill a sense of responsibility, and practice appropriate responses. And they can be modified to suit the audience. “We can create scenarios relevant to engineering so it’s a lot more effective,” she says.

Several universities with top engineering schools, including the University of California, Berkeley, University of Michigan, and Cornell University, declined to answer questions for this story; several others did not respond. Meanwhile, other schools are stepping up to take charge. The University of Texas at Austin is revamping its approach, says Noël Busch-Armendariz, director of the university’s Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault.

Krista Anderson, UT Austin’s Title IX coordinator, says recent changes include increasing awareness of the Title IX office, coordinating a consistent harassment-prevention message across the university’s leadership, and talking about the university’s priorities, values, and goals. “We are also looking at the relationship between drug and alcohol use and sexual violence,” she says, “and promoting respect, consent, personal accountability, and healthy relationships.”

The institution will be measuring the effects of its own bystander intervention program and has already identified specific targets. These include the number of people who complete the training and the number of phone calls that come to the hotline. “We expect to see an increase in reports,” says Busch-Armendariz. “This is a positive thing. We should consider that a job well done.”

Other practices that could make a difference, according to the National Academies panel, include requiring research organizations to identify harassment as research misconduct, and discouraging consensual relationships where there is a power differential, say between a faculty member and a student. Stricter penalties would also help, Tufts’s Panetta says. “If you have a professor involved who is bringing in a lot of money and is a very prolific publisher, [university administrators will] treat that person with kid gloves, usually making him go to a training.”

Policy changes aside, what science and engineering really need is a deeper shift in culture. Only 20 percent of engineering graduates are female. Two years ago, tech companies released stats showing the dismal number of women in their ranks. Sexual harassment is one of the reasons for this. It keeps women away from the field, which is a costly loss of talent. “If you have people who are leaving the field because of negative incidents, then that affects engineering and science,” Marin-Spiotta says. —Prachi Patel

POST YOUR COMMENTS at https://spectrum.ieee.org/harassment1118

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<th>Types of sexual harassment experienced by female university employees</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not harassed 37.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender harassment 34.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>All three types 4.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unwanted sexual attention 4.7%</td>
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<td>Gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention 19.6%</td>
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SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM SCHNEIDER, SWAM, AND FITZGERALD 1997

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<th>Sexual harassment of students by faculty or staff</th>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>Crude behavior</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Unwanted sexual attention</strong></td>
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SOURCE: UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS SYSTEM

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