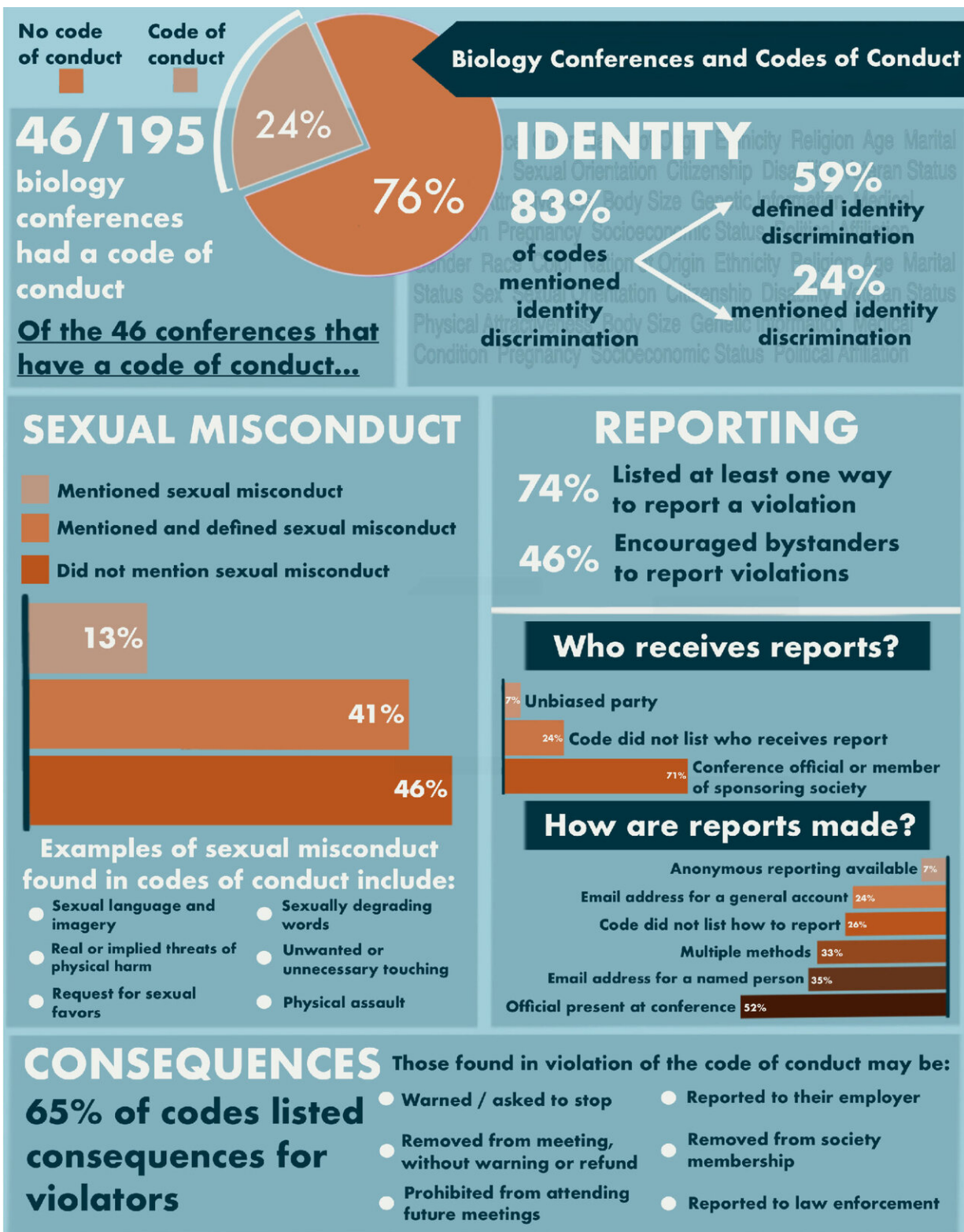


Academic conferences lack tools to prevent sexual misconduct, discrimination

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The Northwestern University team examined codes of conduct from 195 U.S. and Canadian biology conferences. Credit: Katherine Andrews

A new study has found that over three-quarters of biology conferences do not have codes of conduct. Half of conferences that do have codes of conduct fail to mention sexual misconduct, and many do not include methods for reporting misconduct and consequences for violators.

This lack of codes or incomplete codes contribute to a culture that can promote inequities and power differentials that harm historically marginalized groups, such as women and people of color.

In addition to examining the prevalence and content of 195 U.S. and Canadian biology conferences' codes of conduct, the study's authors also outline recommendations for how conferences can improve their codes in order to encourage collaboration, promote safety and support diverse scientists.

"Conferences tend to be a strange hot spot of misconduct because attendees are away from their home institutions in an informal setting," said Alicia Foxx, a Ph.D. student at Northwestern University and first author of the study. "Codes of conduct are really important for guiding behaviors. It sets a standard for how everyone should act in certain situations."

The study will publish during the week of July 8, 2019 in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. The research was led by Northwestern and the Chicago Botanic Garden.

After combing through guidelines from 195 biology conferences, the team found that only 24% of conferences have a code of conduct. Of that 24%:

- 83% mentioned identity-based discrimination

- 53% mentioned [sexual misconduct](#)
- 74% listed ways to report a violation
- 65% listed consequences for violators

"We didn't find a single [conference](#) that hit all the marks," Foxx said. "They all have room to improve."

Because of the mix of power dynamics, social events and alcohol consumption, academic conferences have long been hot beds for sexual misconduct, racism and identity-based discrimination. Foxx and her collaborators felt compelled to study codes of conduct addressing these issues due to their own and colleagues' [negative experiences](#). All six of the papers' authors have personally experienced incivility, unwanted comments about appearance or inappropriate personal contact at conferences.

"There are stories about women being drugged at conferences," Foxx said. "There are women who have had to barricade themselves in their hotel rooms to stay safe. One even had to jump out of a window. It is absolutely unbelievable that these things are happening."

This sort of mistreatment often leads women and historically marginalized groups to stop attending conferences and/or leave academia completely.

"Someone might not want to go back to a conference because they had a horrific experience that makes them uncomfortable," said Taran Lichtenberger, a master's student at Northwestern and co-author of the paper. "Then that hurts their career because they miss out on networking and presenting their work."

The study's authors emphasize that it is not enough for a conference simply to have a code of conduct. Robust systems of reporting are

necessary for enforcing the code and ultimately changing conference culture. Some conferences told attendees to report misconduct to the president or CEO or the hosting organization. But because people in positions of power have a stake in how the conference is perceived, they cannot always act impartially. Strong codes should include information about impartial, anonymous reporting channels.

To help improve codes of conduct, the researchers make the following recommendations:

- Make codes apparent and easily accessible online or on-site
- Center the needs and experiences of historically marginalized groups
- Explicitly state examples of inappropriate conduct
- Provide clear and anonymous formal and informal reporting channels
- Establish a team of diverse and impartial reviewers of misconduct reports
- Create a clear, credible and transparent enforcement system with known consequences
- Provide protections against retaliation from the organization and the accused
- Improve the conference using reports and post-conference surveys
- List reporting contacts on conference communications

The study, "Evaluating the prevalence and quality of conference codes of conduct," was the result of a collaboration by Northwestern, Chicago Botanic Garden, Purdue University, Michigan State University and University of Southern California. Foxx is a PhD candidate in the Plant Biology and Conservation Program, a joint offering by Northwestern's Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences and the Chicago Botanic Garden.

More information: Alicia J. Foxx et al., "Evaluating the prevalence and quality of conference codes of conduct," *PNAS* (2019).

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