

Researchers discuss how to make universities safer environments for everyone

April 6 2023, by Richard B. Primack, Pamela H. Templer



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A major goal of most universities is to create a recruitment and hiring process that is welcoming and appealing to a diverse group of students, faculty, and staff. However, a workplace that is hostile to certain groups

can undermine any efforts to successfully make universities more inclusive and diverse.

As biologists, we set out to determine how other biologists view their workplaces in terms of diversity and inclusion. We were part of a team that surveyed members of the Ecological Society of America, most of whom work in universities, government offices, and nonprofits. The results of this survey, [published in *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*](#), provided a snapshot of [workplace](#) experiences during the year before the survey was taken.

When we look at the [survey data](#) in detail, we find that even workplace environments that appear good are not necessarily good for everyone all the time. While workplace climates for ecologists are positive overall (about 78 percent of the 384 completed surveys reported positive workplace experiences), hostile and exclusionary behaviors still occur surprisingly often, disproportionately affecting people who have historically been excluded from the discipline, including scientists of color, women, those who identify as disabled, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, pansexual, asexual, and other nonheterosexual (LGBQPA+) individuals.

These historically excluded groups experienced, on average, 50 percent more negative workplace experiences (sexual harassment, interpersonal mistreatment, insulting behaviors) than other people. In some cases, these differences were quite striking—far more women (12 percent) reported experiencing sexual harassment than men (5 percent), and far more people with disabilities (45 percent) reported experiencing insulting remarks than people without disabilities (26 percent). Overall, about one-third of all respondents experienced bullying (36 percent), devaluation of their work (35 percent), or insulting remarks (29 percent), all of which are very concerning. While the results of our study come from a nationwide survey, our own experience at Boston University

confirms that there is a mix of positive and negative experiences here, too, despite placing great emphasis on diversity during the recruitment process.

These hostile workplace experiences affect people's careers in powerful ways. Those who experience bullying, sexual harassment, and insulting remarks devaluing their work are far more likely to consider leaving their place of employment and even making a career change. And since historically excluded groups report a much higher level of such experiences, they are also 50 percent more likely to consider leaving their current institution and almost twice as likely to consider a career change.

The study also highlights the difficulty workers may face in dealing with a hostile workplace. Filing complaints doesn't solve the problem if leaders are unwilling to make changes. Only 17 percent of ecologists surveyed report they are satisfied with the outcomes of complaints they filed. Often nothing changes, and the filer is not told the results of an investigation. One problem when it comes to hostile behavior by faculty is that many deans and department chairs feel they have no real leverage to change the [behavior](#)—particularly when the faculty are tenured—unless it crosses the line into something that can be pursued legally, such as [sexual harassment](#) or racial discrimination.

These findings highlight the need to improve workplace climates and promote behaviors that create and sustain an inclusive, equitable, and safe workplace for all. Institutions should shift from primarily focusing on diversity only during recruitment and hiring to a greater emphasis on retention of diverse personnel, including the development of strategies to both promote positive workplace culture and reduce harmful behaviors directed at historically underrepresented groups.

After supplementing our review of the survey with discussions with

colleagues at BU and other institutions, we offer some recommendations for how universities, professional associations, and other employers of academics might address interpersonal mistreatment. These include: 1. explicitly promoting respectful and supportive behaviors so they are expected; 2. classifying hostile behaviors as official academic misconduct; and 3. using currently available tools to discourage and prevent hostile behaviors, such as delaying promotions or sabbatical leave, withholding merit raises and opportunities for teaching for extra pay, and preventing offenders from serving as principal investigators on research grants and stopping them from mentoring research students.

We believe that by taking these steps, institutions like BU can create a better workplace environment for everyone, and recruit and retain a diverse group of faculty, students, and staff.

Provided by Boston University

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