

**Year 3 Public Description of Work for
Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education**

University of Minnesota

Addressing Faculty Behavior in Graduate Education

Relevant Rubric Area(s):

(1) Prevention: Establish clear expectations of the graduate school, colleges, graduate programs, academic departments, and advisors to strengthen the faculty–student relationship; (2) Prevention: Engage in a robust education effort to inform stakeholders of relevant policies, procedures, and available resources that promote positive relationships; (3) Response: Establish clear mechanisms for reporting and investigating instances of unacceptable behavior and intervening and/or imposing sanctions when faculty engage in unacceptable behaviors. (4) Organizational Change: Leveraging the strengths of distinct stakeholder groups and creating partnerships between them.

Description of Work:

Developing and sustaining effective professional relationships between graduate students and faculty (both as advisors and as members of a program’s graduate faculty) is essential for graduate students to be successful. The majority of interactions between faculty and graduate students are positive, productive, and professional. Yet abrasive and abusive behavior that seriously affects students’ ability to work and learn does occur. Although infrequent, such behavior can have devastating consequences not only for the students directly involved, but also for the graduate program as a whole.

In fall 2021, the Provost of the University of Minnesota formed the Provost’s Task Force on Faculty Behavior in Graduate Education to carefully consider these issues, to report on their prevalence and impact, and to make recommendations aimed at eradicating abuses of power and other unprofessional graduate faculty behavior. Members of the task force included faculty, graduate students, a postdoctoral associate, and administrators from a range of relevant offices across the University. The task force evaluated where different constituents see needs and deficiencies in current policies and processes. Between December 2021 and March 2022, the task force consulted with a wide range of stakeholders, including various student organizations, governance committees, and relevant University administrators and offices. In May 2022, the task force submitted its formal report, recommending mechanisms that will create and sustain an environment of respect, professionalism, and accountability in graduate faculty behavior at the University of Minnesota.

Examples of problematic issues in student–advisor relationships that were most often mentioned by the consulted groups include delays in providing feedback, excessive criticism

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and belittling of student work, assignment of inappropriate tasks, unreasonable work hours, verbal intimidation, unwanted attention, offensive behavior, withholding of support, micromanagement, and the inconsistent provision of accommodations. Based on what the task force has heard through this consultation, it concluded that these issues most often are the result of unclear expectations, poor communication, tolerating abuse by others, and lack of transparency and supportiveness.

The consultation also suggests that (i) even where resources for students are available, students are often not aware of them, and (ii) the roles and responsibilities of those involved in reporting, investigating, and holding faculty accountable are often not clearly defined. Reasons students shared for not reporting also include fear of retaliation and the belief that no one would help them.

The task force concluded that the elimination of abrasive and abusive behavior in student–advisor relationships across the University of Minnesota system cannot be achieved by a single policy change or by intervention of one office or stakeholder only. It requires a multifaceted approach based on transparency, accountability, and trust. While accomplishing this goal is complicated, the task force was glad to report that there is broad consensus among all constituents with whom it spoke that elimination of abrasive and abusive behavior in student–advisor relationships should be an institutional priority. To enhance positive and effective behaviors in student-advisor relationships, the task force recommended the following:

1. Establish clear expectations of the graduate school, colleges, graduate programs, academic departments, and advisors to strengthen the faculty–student relationship
2. Develop guidelines and procedures that articulate and reinforce expectations for professional behavior expected of graduate faculty
3. Establish clear mechanisms for reporting and investigating instances of unacceptable behavior and intervening and/or imposing sanctions when faculty engage in unacceptable behaviors
4. Engage in a robust education effort to inform stakeholders of relevant policies, procedures, and available resources that promote positive relationships
5. Form a team to coordinate the implementation of the Task Force recommendations across multiple central administrative academic units and colleges

The Task Force submitted the report to the Provost who has it under consideration as a high priority initiative.

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