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**2023 Public Description of Work for
Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in
Higher Education**

Columbia University

Columbia Anti-Bullying Initiative

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Relevant Rubric Area(s):

1. Prevention: Identifying and Reinforcing Community Values
2. Response: Improved Communication and Increased Transparency
3. Response: Addressing Gender Harassment and Other Harmful Behaviors

Description of Work:

In September 2021, Provost Mary Boyce convened a Working Group to discuss bullying and other abusive behavior and make recommendations on how Columbia University, as an institution, should address this problem. The working group consisted of faculty, researchers, postdocs, students, and administrators with a shared goal to develop recommendations to ensure an environment for learning, research, living, and working that is free from discrimination and harassment, and that does not tolerate abusive or intimidating behavior.

On February 20 2023, Provost Boyce provided an update to the community outlining initial steps to implement recommendations from the Anti-Bullying Working Group's report. Those steps are:

- Adopt the Working Group's proposed definition of bullying
- Establish a standing, University-wide Provost's Advisory Committee on Bullying
- Establish an interim, University-wide Referral Committee to receive and refer complaints
- Identify school- and unit-based points of contact to receive and help resolve complaints and work on issues of culture and climate
- Identify coordinators in the Provost's Office who can address problematic behavior as needed
- Continue to promote safe and inclusive research environments, in accordance with funding agency expectations
- Assess current resources, best practices, and opportunities for enhancing University programs

Relationship to Action Collaborative Rubrics

These steps, which are described in more detail below, will serve to reinforce an institutional commitment to promoting an environment that is free from discrimination and harassment. The Provost's Advisory Committee on Bullying will improve communication and increase transparency, especially regarding information and best practices to address culture and climate locally. Finally, both the efforts to better refer and resolve complaints centrally and at the school and unit level will serve to better address problematic behavior, with an emphasis on remediation and not punishment.

2023 Public Description of Work for Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education

Definition of Bullying

The University adopted the Working Group's proposed definition of bullying as a working standard for our various implementation efforts. That definition is as follows:

Abusive conduct or bullying is a pattern of unwelcome conduct that a reasonable person would find hostile, offensive, intimidating, disrespectful, degrading, or humiliating. For purposes of this policy, the terms "abusive conduct" and "bullying" are synonymous.

Bullying may take many forms including physical, oral, or written acts or behaviors. Calls, texts, emails, and social media postings can also constitute bullying, even if they occur away from University premises or outside of work hours.

In determining whether unwelcome conduct amounts to prohibited bullying, it is essential to consider the totality of the circumstances, including the frequency, nature, and severity of the conduct, the relationship between the parties, and the context in which the conduct occurred.

Provost's Advisory Committee on Bullying

A new standing committee to advise the Provost on bullying will be established. As envisioned by the Working Group, this will be a University-wide Advisory Committee whose membership is broadly representative of faculty, researchers, students, and staff, reflecting the full range of activities across all campuses. Members will serve defined terms to (as the Working Group put it) "increase the diversity of voices that can be heard on the Committee over time."

The Committee will not be involved in the resolution of particular disputes but will "address culture and climate on an ongoing basis. . . . Its mission [will] be to keep attention focused on the topic of bullying and abusive behavior, to serve as a continuing signal of the University's commitment to create an environment in which all can thrive. The advisory group [will] be charged with assessing progress toward achievement of that goal and recommending changes in policy and practice to move the University forward in that direction. . . . [It will also] be expected to serve as a University-wide coordination mechanism, facilitating the sharing of information and best practices across the various School-based efforts to address culture and climate, and paying attention to the experiences of other universities, scientific and research institutions and organizations generally."

In the near term the new Advisory Committee will undertake the following specific assignments:

- Consider the commentary on the definition of bullying as described above and how it might evolve over time – in particular, does more need to be said about the presumption of innocence, the distinction between actions that are inadvertently and unintentionally offensive to another individual and those that are repeated or are deliberately intimidating, or other points that have been raised in response to the Working Group report; and
- Convene focus groups in partnership with the Senate and groups representing faculty (e.g., the Policy Planning Committee of the Arts and Sciences), researchers, students and postdocs, to explore the nature and size of the bullying problem and to provide continuing feedback in aid of further implementation efforts.

2023 Public Description of Work for Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education

Interim Central Referral Committee

Pending creation of an Office of Conflict Resolution, we will establish an interim, central referral committee to which bullying concerns may be brought by any member of our community--student, faculty, researcher, or staff. This will be a standing committee (separate from the Provost's Advisory Committee described above) made up of current personnel with the necessary experience and expertise from the Provost's Office, the Office of General Counsel, and Columbia University Human Resources (CUHR).

The committee will have no authority to investigate disputes or recommend punishments. Its assignment will be to register complaints and steer the complaining party toward available resources, as appropriate, either at the unit level (see Unit-Based Points of Contact), in the Office of the Provost (See Coordinators in Provost's Office), or CUHR, with the emphasis on conflict resolution through consultation, coaching and "mediation" broadly understood.

Where a case is considered to be so serious that disciplinary action might be warranted, the committee will steer the matter to appropriate authorities (Deans, Office of the Provost, EOAA, CUHR, as appropriate). This committee is not intended to displace existing opportunities to seek redress for complaints that involve discrimination. Its mission is to help fill an existing gap and provide an option where abusive behavior does not involve protected-class discrimination.

Identify Unit-Based Points of Contact

Each School, institute, and central administrative unit will be required to identify the persons or team that can work on unit-level issues of culture and climate and also receive complaints, particularly from postdocs and graduate students, and consider possible remedial actions.

Coordinators in Provost's Office

Understanding that there will often be need for fact-finding and adjudication external to the unit in which the complaint originated, the Office of the Provost will identify and appoint coordinators in the Provost's Office who can themselves address allegations of abusive behavior while also helping to provide training and coordination for the unit-based resources.

Guiding Principles

These central and unit-based resources will be available to address specific complaints under the following principles:

- The standard to be applied will be the definition of abusive conduct or bullying set forth above, on the understanding that the definition may evolve over time in light of our experience with it.
- The emphasis will be on remediation of the problem, not punishment.
- Neither party to a dispute will be required to undergo face-to-face mediation without their consent.

2023 Public Description of Work for
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Promoting Safe and Inclusive Research Environments

The University has taken a number of steps to promote safe and inclusive research environments that are free from bullying and abusive behavior. Significantly, these steps are intended not only to meet our own standards but also those increasingly mandated by funding agencies. They include a new requirement that National Science Foundation-funded projects involving off-campus or off-site research must have a project-specific plan in place to address abusive behavior, including bullying.

Ongoing Assessment

In anticipation of other implementation steps to come, the Office of the Provost will convene one or more small working groups to:

- inventory existing policies and offices concerned with abusive conduct, their specific domains and limits of responsibility, and, as needed, identify possible redundancies with an eye to eliminating them;
- look into best practices and report promptly on actions we can take in the area of training – to expand on the steps we've already initiated through the Center for Teaching and Learning, including assessing what our peers are doing, looking for available training products, and exploring ways to provide training for all responsible for managing others (Department Chairs, faculty who manage labs, administrative managers, etc.) and for mentors as well as mentees; and
- identify opportunities to enhance the University's capabilities in restorative justice and collaborative-based conflict resolution strategies, understanding that these processes may be most appropriately pursued through broad and community-oriented conversation and guidance, rather than through individual mediation.

Website for further information (if applicable):

https://provost.columbia.edu/content/columbia-anti-bullying-initiative

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