

Severe and Pervasive? Consequences of Sexual Harassment for Graduate Students and their Title IX Report Outcomes

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Abstract

Sexual harassment of graduate students is prevalent, yet little is known about their experiences reporting sexual harassment to their university. We conducted interviews with 32 graduate students who reported sexual harassment to Title IX to understand how survivors' experiences of harassment align with report outcomes. Nearly all participants experienced severe, education-limiting consequences of the harassment and reported to ensure safety and restore educational access. Most reports were deemed unactionable and findings of responsibility were rare, demonstrating a disconnect between survivors' experiences and Title IX outcomes. Our analysis suggests that Title IX practitioners rely on notions of "severity" rather than harassment consequences.

Keywords

sexual harassment, sexual assault, title IX, reporting, graduate students

Sexual harassment of graduate students is a prevalent issue within institutions of higher education (Rosenthal et al., 2016). Graduate students often experience harassment from

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faculty and staff and other students (Rosenthal et al., 2016). While prevalence of harassment is high among graduate students of all genders, graduate student women consistently face the highest rates of sexual harassment from faculty, staff, and students; overall, 70% of women and 54% of men self-report being harassed while in graduate school (Rosenthal et al., 2016). Sexual harassment experiences have detrimental effects on graduate students' personal and academic wellbeing. For example, graduate student survivors often develop post-traumatic stress symptoms following harassment (Rosenthal et al., 2016). Graduate student women who experience harassment also report significantly diminished perceptions of safety on campus (Rosenthal et al., 2016).

Title IX is intended to respond to sex-based discrimination (e.g., sexual harassment), and students who have been harassed can report their experiences to university officials (e.g., the university's Title IX office). After harassment is reported, Title IX practitioners use a "severe and pervasive" standard to determine whether the harassment is "actionable" and should be formally investigated. This standard is an extension of the "severe or pervasive" standard derived from Title VII and Title IX case law (e.g., Davis V. Monroe County Board of Education, 1999). In the current study, we examined graduate students' experiences of sexual harassment, including the educational outcomes of the harassment they faced, and how those experiences align with the outcomes of their reports to the Title IX Office.

Sexual Harassment and Title IX

Sexual harassment takes many forms, including sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention, and gender harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1988, 1995; Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1991; Leskinen et al., 2011). *Sexual coercion* refers to academic or employment conditions that are contingent upon compliance with sexual acts and is often understood as "quid pro-quo" harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1988, 1995; Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1991; Leskinen et al., 2011). For example, a professor informing a student they will fail their class unless they perform a sexual act would be considered sexual coercion. *Unwanted sexual attention* captures a wide range of unwanted and unreciprocated sexual harassment behaviors, such as unwanted sexual advances, sexual assault, and rape (Fitzgerald et al., 1988, 1995; Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1991; Leskinen et al., 2011). For instance, a professor touching a student in a sexual manner would be considered unwanted sexual attention. *Gender harassment* refers to the expression of attitudes about one's gender (typically women) that are offensive, demeaning, or disdainful (Fitzgerald et al., 1988, 1995; Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1991; Leskinen et al., 2011). An example of gender harassment would be expressing the belief that women are less intelligent or competent than men. While all these behaviors constitute sexual harassment, they are often not viewed as equivalent in "severity." Cultural stereotypes about sexual harassment assume that some types of harassment behaviors (e.g., sexual coercion and rape) are more "severe" in their effects than others (e.g., gender harassment; Edwards et al., 2011). Countering notions that certain types of harassment

behaviors are more “severe”, large meta-analyses have found that all forms of sexual harassment predict psychological impairments (Chan et al., 2008; Willness et al., 2007). Further, experiencing harassment behaviors that are viewed as “less severe” is one of the strongest predictors of experiencing “more severe” harassment behaviors (Willness et al., 2007).

Within institutions of higher education, all forms of sexual harassment can constitute unlawful sex discrimination under Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972. Title IX is a civil rights statute which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in educational institutions receiving federal funding. Sexual harassment has been considered a form of sex discrimination for over four decades (*Alexander v. Yale University*, 1980). The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) is the governmental body that provides guidance to colleges and universities about how to comply with Title IX. For instance, OCR guidance has mandated that higher education institutions have a designated Title IX coordinator responsible for fielding reported sexual harassment and a formal grievance process for sexual harassment reports (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, 2011). Most colleges and universities have an office that the Title IX coordinator, and other Title IX practitioners (e.g., investigators) operate out of that is dedicated to responding to reports. These offices have many names (e.g., office of institutional equity and compliance), but we refer to them throughout as Title IX offices. Title IX practitioners in these offices are responsible for receiving and investigating reports and handling the adjudication process. Thus, when students are harassed, they can report to university officials responsible for responding to sexual harassment claims, such as the staff a university’s Title IX office. Reports that are formally investigated may result in sanctions for the respondent—or alleged perpetrator—if Title IX practitioners determine the respondent is “responsible” for the alleged misconduct (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, 2011).

However, not all reports made to Title IX offices will be formally investigated and adjudicated. When fielding reports, Title IX practitioners must determine whether the reported harassment is actionable (i.e., “counts” as sexual harassment and eligible to be formally investigated). Title IX practitioners use a standard defined by the OCR to decide whether reported harassment meets the criteria to be considered actionable and move into the investigation and adjudication process. For decades, the OCR instructed universities to use a “severe and pervasive” standard to determine whether harassment is actionable under Title IX, stating that conduct must be “sufficiently severe, persistent, or pervasive to limit a student’s ability to participate in or benefit from the education program, or to create a hostile or abusive educational environment” (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 1997). This standard was derived from Title VII case law. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination of employees on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin and the courts have consistently applied a “severe or pervasive” standard to determine whether sexual harassment constitutes employment discrimination under Title VII (e.g., *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson*, 1986).

In *Davis V. Monroe County Board of Education* (1999) the Supreme Court also drew from Title VII precedent in ruling that sexual harassment in educational settings is

actionable under Title IX when it is “severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it can be said to deprive the victims of access to the educational opportunities or benefits provided by the school.” Although the specific wording in *Davis* differed slightly from the standard established by the OCR, the 2001 revised guidance clarified that the definitions are consistent, intending to capture the same concept, “that under Title IX, the conduct must be sufficiently serious that it adversely affects a student’s ability to participate in or benefit from the school’s program” (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). In 2011, the OCR released a Dear Colleague Letter providing further guidance and reiterating that more “severe” sexual misconduct (e.g., physical and forced) does not require a series of repeated incidents to constitute a hostile environment, and that one single incident of sexual harassment may be sufficiently “severe” to create a hostile environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, 2011). The Title IX regulations released in 2020 adopted the *Davis* definition verbatim, stating that actionable sexual harassment must be “so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it effectively denies a person equal access to the recipient’s education program or activity.” The 2020 regulations also included sexual coercion committed by an employee and sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, and stalking (as defined by the Clery Act and the Violence Against Women Act) in the definition of “sexual harassment” (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Following case law, the OCR has offered some guidelines as to what factors Title IX practitioners should consider when determining whether a report of sexual harassment is “severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it effectively denies a person equal access to education” (i.e., actionable), such as the effect of the harassment on the student, the type, frequency, and duration of the conduct, the identity of and relationship between the harasser and victim, age and sex of the harasser and victim, and the location and context of the incident (e.g., U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). While the OCR has asserted that factors like repeated incidents or incidents involving physical contact (e.g., sexual assault) are often going to be determined to be “severe,” there is no requirement that certain behaviors must be present for an incident to be “severe” (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2001; 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). When describing the 2020 regulations, the OCR explicitly states that gender harassment (e.g., verbal behaviors that convey insulting, hostile, degrading attitudes about a particular sex) constitutes actionable sexual harassment when it is “determined by a reasonable person to be so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it effectively denies a person equal access to education” (p. 440). Title IX practitioners are given the power to decide if reported incidents meet the elements of actionable sexual harassment. However, it is unclear how students’ experiences of sexual harassment align with the outcomes of sexual harassment reports. For example, it is largely unknown how student survivors’ lived experiences of harassment and the educational consequences of harassment align with Title IX practitioners’ actions in response to reports (e.g., deciding if an incident counts as actionable).

Current Study

In the current study, we addressed this gap by examining how the outcomes of graduate students' sexual harassment reports compare to survivors' lived experience of sexual harassment and its subsequent limitations on their education. We focused specifically on graduate students for several reasons. First, as previously mentioned, sexual harassment of graduate students is very prevalent (Rosenthal et al., 2016). Second, graduate student sexual harassment is an understudied problem. The vast majority of research on sexual violence in higher education examines this phenomenon only among undergraduate students with little research including graduate students in their samples or examining sexual violence experiences specific to graduate students (Rosenthal et al., 2016). The existing research on sexual harassment among graduate students is dated and has focused predominantly on examining prevalence rates (e.g., Schneider et al., 2002; Shinsako et al., 2001; Stratton et al., 2005). While these research findings have been essential for understanding how prevalent sexual harassment is among graduate students, past research has rarely examined the nature and consequences of sexual harassment for graduate students. Additionally, little is known about graduate students' experiences reporting sexual harassment to their university—their attempts to exercise their rights under Title IX. Understanding the reporting experiences of graduate student survivors is important as previous research finds that how people and institutions respond to disclosures of sexual harassment has major mental health implications for survivors (Campbell, 2008; Filipas & Ullman, 2001; Orchowski et al., 2013; Smith & Freyd, 2013; Ullman, 1999). According to Institutional Betrayal Theory, when members of an institution that depend upon the institution and expect the institution will respond with help and protection if harm befalls them, feelings of betrayal arise when they are harmed and the institution does not adequately respond (Smith & Freyd, 2013). Institutional betrayal has serious consequences for survivor wellbeing, as feelings of betrayal can exacerbate post-traumatic stress symptoms and negatively affect perceptions of safety (Rosenthal et al., 2016; Smith & Freyd, 2013).

Thus, the present study examined the experiences of graduate students who had reported their harassment to their university's Title IX office. In-depth qualitative interviews were used to explore participants' experiences of sexual harassment while attending their graduate programs, how incidents of sexual harassment affected their educations, and their experiences reporting their harassment to their university's Title IX office. There were two primary research questions driving the current study:

Research question 1. How do graduate student survivors experience sexual harassment and what are its educational consequences?

Research question 2. How do the outcomes of graduate students' sexual harassment reports align with their lived experiences and educational consequences?

Method

Participants

Participants were 32 graduate students attending graduate programs within the Big Ten universities who reported an experience of sexual harassment to their university's Title IX Office. Across the sample, participants were attending 9 of the 14 Big Ten universities. Just over 90% ($n = 29$; 90.63%) of the sample were cisgender women, 6.25% ($n = 2$) were cisgender men, and 3% ($n = 1$) were non-binary. Over three-fourths ($n = 25$; 78.13%) of the sample were heterosexual and approximately one fifth ($n = 7$; 21.88%) had a sexual minority identity (4 bisexual, 1 pansexual, 1 queer). Participants' racial/ethnic identity included White ($n = 24$; 75%), African American ($n = 4$; 12.5%), Latinx ($n = 2$; 6.25%), Asian American ($n = 1$; 3.13%), and Biracial ($n = 1$; 3.13%). Participants' average age was 25 (range 22–37).

Procedures

We first compiled lists of all graduate student organizations and listservs at each of the universities in the Big Ten (e.g., Graduate Student Government and English Graduate Student Association). Next, we compiled comprehensive lists of all of the graduate departments at all of the Big Ten universities and identified administrative personnel (e.g., department chair) as points of contact for each department. Our research team members then emailed the IRB-approved recruitment materials to the graduate student organizations and listservs and one administrative personnel member in each department, asking them if they would be willing to disseminate our materials. Our study recruitment materials included a brief description of the research and eligibility requirements, an invitation to contact the research team by email or phone to confirm eligibility and schedule participation, and a pdf flyer to be distributed to networks. During this process, individuals from two of the 14 universities within the Big Ten contacted our research team informing us that they did not want to distribute recruitment materials to graduate students at their institutions; one explained that they did not allow outside researchers to conduct research with their students and the other stated that they were conducting a climate survey.

In total, 49 graduate students contacted the research team. The research team conducted a brief screening phone call with 41 students for eligibility (of the 49 who contacted the study, 16.3%, $n = 8$ did not respond to our screening request). The eligibility criteria included, (1) students who had enrolled in a graduate program at a Big Ten University, (2) were age 19 or over, and (3) had reported an experience of sexual harassment and/or assault to the university office that handles complaints. Seven (14.3%) of these graduate students did not meet our eligibility criteria after completing the screening questions and 34 (69.4%) were eligible and scheduled to complete an interview. The first, second, and fourth authors conducted the interviews, which took place either in-person (for students enrolled at the university where the researchers were

located) or over the phone. All of the interviews, whether in-person or over the phone, were conducted in a private room in the second authors' lab space. For the interview procedures, participants first provided informed consent to participate in the study and then completed a brief survey in Qualtrics, which included demographic questions (e.g., gender identity, race/ethnicity, university, and program). Depending on the participants' location, this survey was either completed in-person on a computer in a private room or on the participant's own personal computer. Next, we conducted semi-structured interviews, which included questions about survivors' harassment experiences, reporting decisions and motivations, accommodations offered, support received, outcomes of the report, and feelings about report outcomes. Participants chose pseudonyms to refer to their interviews, which are included throughout. Interviews were all audio recorded and lasted approximately 1 hour ($M = 72.63$ minutes, $\text{Range} = 30\text{--}123$ minutes). Participants were paid US\$20 for their participation. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board. During the course of the interview, it was determined that two of the 34 participants did not actually make a formal report to their university—both had reported to someone in their department, but the report never progressed further—so their interview data were removed from the final dataset. Thus, our final sample included 32 graduate student survivors who had reported their harassment experiences to their university's Title IX office.

Analysis Approach

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and potentially identifying information (e.g., names and specific university departments) was redacted from the transcripts to protect participant anonymity. We analyzed these data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis begins with an in-depth reading of all interviews. During this step, the first and second authors developed preliminary codes, which refer to words or short phrases that capture discrete pieces of information in the interviews. For instance, the code, "reporting motivation: personal safety concerns," captures a participant's reason for reporting the sexual harassment due to concerns about their own safety within their educational environment (e.g., "I was that scared... So that's kind of what led off to the process of me saying 'okay I need to report something, something needs to happen.'"). The first and second authors created a codebook containing a list of all codes, their definitions (and explanations of when a code is/is not applicable), and example quotes. Three trained research assistants applied the codebook to a sub-set of the interviews. This entailed research assistants reading an interview transcript, highlighting excerpts of text that illustrated codes, and identifying any complications with code application. The research team met weekly to discuss any codes that did not clearly apply to interview excerpts and made necessary edits to the codes and their definitions. The final codebook was refined through this iterative process. Next, the research assistants coded all of the interviews, which involved applying codes to excerpts of the interview text. Each transcript was coded once by one research assistant and then the code application was checked by another research assistant. The entire

research team met to discuss any questions and discrepancies in coding application between the two (which ranged from 0 to 15 across the transcripts) and any discrepancies were resolved through conversation until consensus was reached. All final codes were then applied to the transcripts in Dedoose version 8.2. Finally, we identified themes by analyzing the coded data for meaningful concepts and patterns related to our research questions. As the themes were identified, we checked them against the entire dataset, which involved re-reading transcripts to ensure that the themes fit participants' experiences and looking for evidence that did not fit our themes (there were no major discrepant cases).

Reflexivity Statement

All of the authors are cisgender women who have experience working with survivors of sexual violence and expertise in Title IX policy. One author has personal experience with the Title IX reporting and investigation process at a former institution. Our expertise in Title IX policy and experience working with survivors aided in our ability to probe for further details on graduate students' reporting experiences. For instance, when a participant was unsure whether Title IX pursued a formal investigation based on their report, the interviewer was able to ask specific questions about the process that helped gather accurate information (e.g., "Did they ask you to do anything or give them anything to help with their investigation?") Our analysis and perspectives of the data are also shaped by our roles as sexual violence researchers and educators. The first, third, fourth, and fifth authors also acknowledge that our perspectives are influenced by our experiences as graduate students with interest in university responses to graduate students' experiences of sexual harassment and assault.

Results

We identified three overarching themes related to participants' experiences following sexual harassment: (1) *Experienced severe consequences that hindered access to education* (2) *Reported to Title IX to restore educational access and benefits* and (3) *Disconnect between Title IX report outcomes and the harassment experiences of survivors*. All three themes and discrepant case analyses are described in detail below.

Theme 1: Experienced Severe Consequences that Hindered Access to Education

The first theme, *experienced severe consequences that hindered access to education*, was characterized by graduate students experiencing serious harms resulting from the sexual harassment they endured. These harms hindered their access to educational spaces and opportunities and limited benefits they might have otherwise received from their education. The participants who expressed Theme 1 experienced a wide range of sexual harassment behavior types (see [Table 1](#)), including gender harassment ($n = 8$),

Table 1. Harassment and Report Consequences.

School ID	Participant ID	Pseudonym	Harassment Type	Experienced Severe Consequences	Formal Title IX Investigation	Report Outcome
115	1	Genevieve	Gender harassment	Yes	No	
115	2	Trevor	Gender harassment	Yes	Yes	Not responsible
115	3	Emily	Sexual assault	Yes	No	
115	4	Sara	Unwanted sexual attention; Stalking	Yes	Yes	Responsible
115	5	Sam	Sexual assault	Yes	Yes	Responsible
115	6	Georgia	IPV	Yes	Yes	Not responsible
115	7	Aleena	Unwanted sexual attention	Yes	Yes	Not responsible
121	8	Kayla	Sexual assault	Yes	No	
121	9	Sara	Gender harassment	Yes	No	
121	11	Stacy	Gender harassment	Yes	No	
121	12	Mary	Unwanted sexual attention*	Yes	No	
124	13	Samantha	Unwanted sexual attention	Yes	No	
120	14	Megan	Unwanted sexual attention; IPV	Yes	No	
121	15	Melissa	Unwanted sexual attention	Yes	No	
115	16	Emily	Gender harassment	Yes	No	
115	17	Nicole	Gender harassment; Unwanted sexual attention; Sexual coercion	Yes	No	
121	18	John	Gender harassment	Yes	No	
121	19	Anne	Unwanted sexual attention	Yes	No	
118	20	Kathryn	Attempted sexual assault; Stalking	Yes	No	
114	21	Stephanie	Unwanted sexual attention; Stalking	Yes	No	
115	22	Heidi	Gender harassment; Unwanted sexual attention	Yes	No	
114	23	Laura	Unwanted sexual attention; Stalking	Yes	No	

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

School ID	Participant ID	Pseudonym	Harassment Type	Experienced Severe Consequences	Formal Title IX Investigation	Report Outcome
123	25	Fran	Unwanted sexual attention	Yes	Yes	Responsible
118	26	Jeff	Attempted sexual assault	No	Yes	Not responsible
123	27	Ashley	Unwanted sexual attention; Stalking	Yes	Yes	Responsible
114	28	Whitney	Unwanted sexual attention	Yes	Yes	Responsible
120	29	Maria	Unwanted sexual attention; Stalking	Yes	No	
123	30	Valarie	Unwanted sexual attention	Yes	No	
112	31	Cailin	Gender harassment	Yes	No	
120	32	Lauren	Unwanted sexual attention	Yes	No	
112	33	Zoe	Sexual assault; Stalking	Yes	Yes	Not responsible
111	34	Faye	Sexual assault	Yes	No	

unwanted sexual attention ($n = 15$), sexual coercion ($n = 1$), intimate partner violence ($n = 2$), stalking ($n = 7$), attempted sexual assault ($n = 1$) and completed sexual assault ($n = 5$). This suggests that all forms of sexual harassment resulted in severe consequences for survivors' educations. Common examples of how severe consequences hindered survivors' access to education included experiencing disruptions in their classes, their advising relationships, and their teaching assignments. The severe consequences of their assault experiences also limited survivors' access to educational spaces on campus (e.g., labs, offices, and libraries) as well as educational events and activities. These consequences are discussed in detail below.

Survivors often discussed experiencing course disruptions. Many disruptions arose from their harassers being involved in their classes as an instructor, teaching assistant, or student. For example, Stacy (011) was harassed by a professor who taught two of her classes and, while she was able to drop one of his courses, she had to remain in the other course, explaining "it was really, really tough to go back and see that person's face and to concentrate on the course." Similarly, Aleena's (007) perpetrator was a grader in one of the classes she was taking, which she described as having "a role in how I performed in that particular class...to the point where I thought that I was going to fail that class...I was put at a disadvantage academically." For students like Stacy and Aleena, taking a course with their harasser, who was in a position of power, hindered their ability to focus and succeed in their courses.

Other survivors experienced disruptions because their harassers were students taking the same class. For example, Sara (004) had to take multiple classes with her harasser, saying "having to sit across from a round table with him every day just made me dread going to class." Samantha (013) was forced to take a small discussion-based class with her harasser because "it was a required course that was offered once every 2 years." Even when measures were taken to separate graduate student survivors from their harassers in classes, survivors experienced disruptions that impeded their learning. For example, Fran (025) was removed from the classes her harasser taught, which left her feeling isolated and at a disadvantage: "I was extremely isolated from my peers because I no longer could go to class. It was kind of weird that I was getting all these online lectures when the courses were in person. And they had to find professors to grade my exams and that was really stressful." These course disruptions leave graduate student survivors at a significant disadvantage academically; whether they must drop courses, take incompletes on their records, attempt to continue on in courses alongside their perpetrators, or are separated from their peers, all of these scenarios limit survivors' educational opportunities and place a great burden on them to navigate these uncomfortable and harmful situations.

Survivors also frequently described disruptions to their advising relationships. For example, Anne (019) "ended up changing advisors completely in a different department" after being harassed by her advisor and Stephanie (021) ended her relationship with her co-advisor after being "publicly harassed in front of the lab." Nicole (017) also switched advisors after being harassed by her first advisor and described how detrimental this was to her graduate experience, explaining,

“I had to make a relationship with a new advisor...I had to change my whole topic in the field because of it...some of the advice I was given was like ‘you can’t do that particular type of [field] anymore because everyone will wonder why you didn’t do it with her.’”

Nicole went on to state, “that was really difficult for me...this is what I thought I would do for the rest of my life.” Graduate students’ relationships with their advisors are a key facet to succeeding in graduate school and beyond as advisors closely mentor their graduate students, teaching them how to do the specific research they are interested in and ensuring they are prepared to continue in that area after graduation.

Advising relationships were not the only relationships harmed by the harassment. Genevieve (001) described how she lost out on professional development opportunities after she spoke up about a faculty member’s sexually harassing behavior, explaining how before the harassment, “[he] used to extend invitations, like, ‘Do you want to work with so-and-so on this?’ ... to total radio silence.” Professional development opportunities Genevieve was benefitting from were no longer offered to her after she was harassed by a faculty member. Participants also discussed how harassment created harmful shifts in their relationships within their department more generally. Graduate students who were previously regarded as successful students began to be viewed quite differently within their departments. Zoe (033) stated that her harassment from another student “really shook my position in the department.” Mary’s (012) department head sent her an evaluation “stating that I would lose my funding if anything fell behind as a result of this case.” Mary considered her department’s actions “a slap in the face” as she was in “quite good standing” academically prior to her harassment. The harms survivors faced within their departments raised concerns about their ability to succeed academically.

Participants also described disruptions to their teaching assistantship (TA) assignments. Zoe (033) described going “through the trouble of getting my TA assignments switched” to avoid working for a faculty member who “went out of her way to employ [harasser] as a research assistant.” While Zoe had to switch her TA assignment, Mary (012) faced disruptions after being harassed by an undergraduate student in her class, stating “I would tell students that I had my office hours in a public space and that was really not negotiable, and I would also try to pick times where the computer lab was more crowded so I wouldn’t be alone in the class with students.” TA assignments are one of the primary ways in which graduate students learn teaching methods and gain experience in grading student work, providing feedback, and consulting with students when issues arise—which are all expectations they must be prepared to fulfill in their future academic positions. Further, if perpetrators or allies of perpetrators are teaching the classes survivors are assigned as TAs for, graduate student survivors are limited in their ability to learn how to teach certain classes that may be expected of them in future positions (e.g., statistics classes, introductory lecture classes, and seminars).

In addition to serious educational disruptions, participants experienced serious limitations in accessing educational spaces. After Aleena (007) was harassed while alone with her perpetrator in their research lab, she

“ended up relying on somebody in my lab...asking them to, ‘Please as much as you can, don’t leave me alone and I’ll adjust to your schedule. Please let me know what time you’re coming in. Please let me know how late you’re staying ... I don’t want to be alone in this room.’”

For Aleena, concerns that the harassment would continue and escalate limited her access to her lab space, working only when a trusted lab mate was present. Prior to the harassment, Aleena described working in her lab for many hours alone, often into the night, but that no longer felt like a possibility for her. Samantha (013) would “always have the door locked” when she was in her office, adding that “for a while everywhere I went in the building I would rarely go alone.” Because Samantha did not feel safe in her office or academic building, she asked building staff to escort her from room to room so she would not have to be alone. Genevieve (001), described how she had to go out of her way to avoid her harasser in the departmental building,

“One time I saw they were going into our building, and I knew we’d end up on the elevator together. So, I explicitly walked extra slow ... it was ten degrees outside, but I waited outside ... so that we wouldn’t be on the same elevator.”

For Genevieve, waiting outside in the cold was preferable to sharing an enclosed campus space with her harasser. Labs, office spaces, and departmental buildings were not the only educational spaces whose access was limited due to the harassment. After being harassed in the campus library, Kathryn (020) explained, “I don’t really feel like I can walk around campus by myself ... I’ll avoid the library completely.” Although Kathryn understood she may need to do research and check out books from the library, she no longer felt safe doing so.

Graduate student survivors also experienced significant obstructions in their access to academic events and activities. Participants discussed avoiding attending departmental events where their perpetrator may be in attendance. For example, Cailin (031) explained, “I don’t go to these events anymore because I was uncomfortable and I don’t want him to come up and talk to me like this again.” Similarly, Ashley (027) experienced disruptions to her involvement in graduate student organizations, saying “I used to be involved in a certain graduate student organization ... but I couldn’t do any of that.” Ashley was passionate about being involved in student organizations, but after her harassment experience, she felt safest withdrawing from these once-loved activities. Graduate students are expected to attend academic presentations and discussions within their departments, and these events are designed to supplement their education by providing opportunities to learn from and engage with their academic colleagues. When

survivors avoid these events to avoid coming into contact with their perpetrators, their access to the educational benefits of these activities is greatly limited.

In addition to the harms survivors experienced in their direct educational environment, survivors also experienced severe emotional and mental health consequences that further hindered their access to education. Laura (023), for example, worked in the same department as her harasser and discussed how she felt constantly “panicked” and wondered “what if I ran into him in the hallway, would he try to talk to me? Would he try to corner me? ... he had a key to my office.” Megan (014), who experienced intimate partner violence from another graduate student, described feeling “hyper-vigilant and scared to be on campus” and how that constant fear affected her life as a graduate student:

“I thought about working remotely, trying to teach online and living somewhere else ... I just want to go about my job, but my job is where my [harasser] used to work. It’s incredibly easy to find course schedules. If he wanted to find me, it would take less than five minutes to figure out where I am ... and if something happens, well then, I’m dead.”

Other survivors also discussed that they considered leaving the university due to fear for their safety. For instance, the idea of continuing her graduate education was frightening to Samantha (013), stating that “the thought of finishing my degree there was scary to me.” After being continually publicly harassed by her assaulter, Sam (005) felt so embarrassed that she no longer wanted to continue her education, stating that she “wanted to get away and just let people forget about me.” Participants also detailed feelings of being emotionally depleted and unable to continue on in their work. For example, Georgia (006) stated that she was, “so emotionally drained. Everything else was such a task. It was such a task to do my work. It was such a task to do everything ... and I mean, grad school is already a task in itself.” The debilitating fear, hyper-vigilance, and emotional exhaustion these participants experienced after their assaults made participating in their graduate program extremely difficult.

Many students described significant mental health consequences resulting from sexual harassment experiences, including developing and worsening anxiety, depression, and/or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These mental health consequences severely interfered with these students’ access to education. For example, after being harassed at a conference, Anne described “having pretty severe anxiety attacks ... It was very difficult to focus and concentrate and look forward to going to school and classes.” Stephanie (021) experienced a delay in an important degree milestone, stating that “It did affect pushing back my candidacy because I got pretty depressed.” Similarly, Kayla (008) stated that she “went into a depressive episode and kind of dropped off the grid.” After being assaulted by a student Sam (005) “took six credits of incompletes and barely finished the class that I needed.” Both Whitney (028) and Zoe (033) had difficulties remaining engaged in their graduate classes and had to take incompletes. Zoe explained how “some professors really just didn’t understand it or weren’t willing to really give me as much leeway as I was asking for.” Having to extend degree milestones, drop classes, take incompletes, and ask for support from professors

who were not willing to provide support all added educational hurdles for graduate student survivors who were recovering from the traumatic experience of sexual violence.

Several participants explicitly described how their mental health was inextricably connected to a hostile educational environment. Emily (016) was harassed by her advisor and described how, “when I know she’s in the office, I’m uncomfortable because I don’t know what to expect from her at any given point ... I’ve had periods of heightened anxiety and depression.” Similarly, Megan (014) explained how her post-traumatic stress has become inseparable from her education because her perpetrator is on campus: “according to my doctor, my [PTSD] symptoms aren’t going to get better until I move and I know for sure that he’s not going to pop up ... my work and this anxiety and stress is really one in the same.” For these participants, the mental health consequences they experienced from the harassment were long-lasting and hindered their access to educational spaces and opportunities.

Theme 2: Reported to Title IX to Restore Educational Access and Benefits

The second theme we identified was that graduate students who experienced sexual harassment and assault *reported to Title IX to restore educational access and benefits*. Several students realized that the harassment would not stop, and their education would continue to be obstructed if they did not act. For example, Megan (014) hoped that her colleagues who were “men in positions of power” would intervene on her behalf, but when they did not, she realized “help is not on the way ... I’m going to have to intervene on my behalf.” Stephanie reported to the Title IX office because “I kept asking him to stop and he wouldn’t. I kept hoping that there would be some sort of resolution that wouldn’t escalate things, but he wasn’t stopping.” When discussing why she reported, Georgia (006) explained, “I can only handle so much, and I can only keep lying and keep this façade but for so long it was time for me to say something.” For participants like Megan, Stephanie, and Georgia, the goal of reporting was simple: make the harassment in their educational environment stop because nothing else would.

Survivors also discussed how they reported to ensure they could safely access their educational environment. For instance, participants described reporting due to their fears for their safety on campus. Maria (029) stated, “I was that scared ... that’s what led to the process of me saying ‘okay I need to report’ ... something needs to happen.” Heidi (022) expressed a similar sentiment, explaining that “the final straw making me report was when he told me that he’ll just feed me alcohol to loosen me up a little bit. So, that just scared me.” Participants also expressed concerns that the harassing behavior would escalate over time and reported to ensure there would be official documentation “in case something else happened” (Lauren, 032). Sam (005) echoed these fears, explaining that she was afraid for her safety because her perpetrator “owns a lot of firearms.” These graduate students believed that reporting to Title IX could remedy the serious safety threats that existed in their educational environment due to their harassers.

In addition to ensuring a safe learning environment for themselves, many also reported to ensure a safe environment for others. For example, Aleena (007) felt great concern for her personal safety in her lab space and explained that “I don’t want anybody else to go through what I went through.” Cailin (031) echoed this concern, stating “I didn’t want anyone having to go through what I went through.” After being harassed in a campus library, Kathryn (020) reported to her university’s Title IX office because she “was more worried that this wouldn’t be a one-off thing ... I just didn’t want this to happen to someone else.” When considering reporting, both Sam and Stacy also wanted to keep their harasser from preying on others, stating “I can’t let him do that to a younger girl, because I have no doubts that he would ... I really had to protect people at this point” (Sam, 005) and “I wanted to make sure that this particular professor doesn’t behave this way with anyone else” (Stacy, 011). After experiencing sexual harassment and its severe consequences, these participants recognized the threat their harasser posed to the campus community and reported to the Title IX Office with the expectation that their university would intervene and restore educational safety and access for themselves and others. Thus, Theme 2 depicts how the survivors in our sample used university Title IX office reporting processes as they are intended—after experiencing harassment that had severe educational consequences (e.g., feeling unsafe in university offices, labs, and classrooms), these survivors reported the behavior to the Title IX Office to restore their educational access.

Theme 3: Disconnect Between Harassment Consequences and Title IX Report Outcomes

The third theme demonstrated *a disconnect between the harassment consequences and Title IX report outcomes*. Specifically, graduate students experienced severe consequences that limited their educational access and benefits, but these consequences frequently did not align with the Title IX Office investigators’ determinations regarding their report—it did not “count” as actionable sexual harassment. This pattern was evident in a few ways. First, there was a clear disconnect between the frequency of Theme 1 (*experienced severe consequences that hindered access to education*) among our participants and the outcomes of their Title IX reports. [Table 1](#) visually summarizes these data, depicting the harassment behavior participants experienced, the occurrence of Theme 1 (i.e., severe consequences experienced), whether the Title IX Office chose to pursue a formal investigation, and the Title IX report outcome.

Experiencing severe consequences limiting educational access and opportunities was extremely prevalent in this sample. As [Table 1](#) depicts, all but one of the ($n = 31$, 96.9%) survivors in our sample described experiencing severe consequences from their harassment experiences that limited their educational access. Yet, most ($n = 22$, 71%) of these participants’ reports were not formally investigated by Title IX staff. Of those who experienced severe consequences that limited access to educational benefits and activities, 9 (29%) had their sexual harassment experiences formally investigated. Of these 9 investigations, 5 perpetrators were found “not responsible” because the reported

behavior was not deemed actionable as sexual harassment or investigators felt there was “insufficient evidence,” and 4 resulted in a determination that the perpetrator was “responsible.” Sanctions included a warning, an enrollment ban after the perpetrator already graduated, and two expulsions.

The pattern of findings in Table 1 suggests that Title IX office decision-making regarding sexual harassment reports was reflective of the *type of behavior* reported rather than the effects of the harassment on their education. Formal investigations were pursued for one case of gender harassment (12.5% of the total), 5 cases of unwanted sexual attention (33.33% of the total), 3 cases of stalking (42.9% of the total and all co-occurred with unwanted sexual attention or sexual assault), zero cases of intimate partner violence (0% of total), zero cases of attempted sexual assault (0% of the total), and two completed sexual assault cases (40% of the total). Of the formal investigations that were pursued, only reported incidents of unwanted sexual attention ($n = 4$, half of which also involved stalking behavior) or completed sexual assault ($n = 1$) resulted in a finding of “responsibility” for the perpetrator. This pattern suggests that formal investigations were pursued more frequently for stereotypical and/or stereotypically “severe” forms of sexual harassment (e.g., completed sexual assault) and less frequently for less stereotypical and/or stereotypically “severe” forms of harassment (e.g., gender harassment), despite the fact that survivors experienced negative educational consequences resulting from all forms of harassment.

More importantly, this finding was discussed explicitly by participants in their interviews. For instance, Aleena (007) experienced serious detriments to her education after a postdoctoral researcher cornered her in the lab and demanded sexual acts from her, but she explained that:

“The finding was that the perpetrator did not violate the student code of conduct because their action was not ‘severe’ and it did not ‘interfere with my ability to benefit from the educational opportunities at the university.’ I call that bullshit because it definitely has very, very real repercussions on my ability to be successful.”

Similarly, Anne (019) reported the harassment she experienced from her advisor to the Title IX Office but “they believed it was not sexual harassment because it had only happened once and it needed to happen more than once in order for it to be considered really, true sexual harassment.” The Title IX investigator(s) in Anne’s case did not consider one instance of sexual harassment from her advisor—a direct supervisor with a great deal of power over Anne and her career—to be actionable because it was not “pervasive.” After this determination, Anne questioned whether she should have “waited for things to happen more than once” before reporting. Thus, the Title IX Office communicated to Anne that she needed to be subjected to repeated sexual harassment from her advisor before they would consider it worthy of response. After the Title IX Office declined to pursue a formal investigation against her harasser, Samantha (013) left her graduate program to start over in a new program. After experiencing sexual harassment at her new institution (unwanted sexual advances

from a man in her department), Samantha's friend suggested that she report to the Title IX Office. However, she decided to put up with the behavior because "unless you have a situation that's 'really severe' or checks boxes for certain things ... nothing gets resolved." As evidenced by these examples, due to the current (mis) application of Title IX regulations regarding "severity," there is currently little incentive for survivors to report their harassment experiences to Title IX if the harassment behavior is not recurring or perceived to be "severe." In effect, instead of pursuing formal reports when survivors experience severe consequences that limit their educational access, survivors are clearly under the impression that Title IX practitioners are choosing which reports to formally investigate based on assumptions of harassment behavior "severity" and the number of times students have been subjected to the harassment behavior.

Discussion

When fielding sexual harassment reports, Title IX practitioners must use Title IX guidance to determine whether reported harassment is actionable. Sexual harassment is considered actionable when it is "determined by a reasonable person to be so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it effectively denies a person equal access to the recipient's education program or activity" (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). As first stated in their 2001 guidance, the OCR has not provided precise definitions of each element (e.g., listing types of behaviors that are and are not "severe"), instead Title IX practitioners are given the power to determine "whether the harassment rises to a level that it denies or limits a student's ability to participate in or benefit from the school's program based on sex" (p. 5). The graduate student survivors in this study shared a myriad of ways that their educations were negatively impacted by all types of sexual harassment, including struggling in their coursework, losing out on pivotal career training, avoiding educational spaces and opportunities that could be physically or emotionally dangerous to them, and sometimes leaving graduate programs altogether. These survivors also described reporting to the Title IX office to restore their educational access and benefits, which is the intended purpose of Title IX (i.e., to restore educational access and benefits to students whose educations have been limited by sex-based discrimination, such as sexual harassment). Yet, the responses to their reports suggest that Title IX practitioners may have been less focused on the way that graduate students' educational access and benefits were limited by the harassment they experienced and more focused on the types of behavior they experienced.

Our data showed evidence that Title IX practitioners tended to deem actionable, investigate, and sanction some types of sexual harassment (e.g., completed sexual assault) more than others (e.g., gender harassment), despite the fact that *all* forms of sexual harassment had a severe and pervasive impact on their ability to access, participate in, and benefit from educational programs and activities. Multiple participants explicitly discussed how their reported harassment was determined to not be actionable because the harassment behavior they experienced was not considered sufficiently

“severe” and/or did not occur repeatedly. For example, after a postdoctoral researcher harassed her in their lab space, Aleena was unable to work in the lab without supervision and had difficulty succeeding in a graduate class where her perpetrator was in a position of power over her, grading her assignments poorly as a form of retaliation for reporting the harassment. Despite Aleena clearly experiencing severe limitations to her ability to access, participate in, and benefit from the educational program she was enrolled in, the Title IX practitioner in charge of her case determined that the perpetrator did not violate the code of conduct with the rationale that the harassment was not “severe” and did not interfere with her ability to benefit from the educational opportunities at the university.

The decisions made by Title IX practitioners in these cases align with cultural stereotypes about sexual harassment and violence. Dominant cultural understanding of “severity” with regards to sexual violence is very limited, with certain types of sexually violent behavior seen as less “severe” (e.g., gender harassment) and other types seen as more “severe” (e.g., forcible penetration; Edwards et al., 2011). This conceptualization of severity makes its way into institutional responses to sexual harassment. For instance, in 1993 the U.S. Navy introduced a traffic signal model in a harassment training, which labeled appropriate behaviors as “green zone” behavior and some harassing behaviors as “yellow zone” behavior, including behaviors that are interpreted as “more ambiguous” or “less severe” and, therefore, may not constitute legitimate sexual harassment (which they labeled “red zone” behaviors; Department of the Navy, 1993). Nearly 30 years later, our data suggest that institutional actors’ interpretations of sexually harassing behaviors reflect subjective interpretations of the “severity” of the behaviors reported rather than the objective educational consequences of those behaviors.

The patterns of Title IX practitioners’ responses to reported harassment identified in the current study align with previous research finding that the majority of Title IX reports do not result in formal investigations or perpetrator sanctions (e.g., Richards, 2019). Additionally, the severe consequences of harassment experienced by the participants in this study are supported by research on the effects of sexual harassment on the wellbeing of graduate students (e.g., Rosenthal et al., 2016; Smith & Freyd, 2013). For example, many of our participants developed serious emotional and mental health problems following their harassment experiences, which is consistent with previous research finding that graduate student survivors often develop post-traumatic stress symptoms after being harassed (Rosenthal et al., 2016; Smith & Freyd, 2013). Participants experienced a wide range of harassment behavior in our sample; however, they all faced severe negative outcomes. This is consistent with research finding that all forms of sexual harassment and assault cause psychological harm and are experienced as trauma—even those that are viewed as less serious (Dworkin et al., 2017; Muldoon et al., 2016). Research on the prevalence of sexual harassment consistently finds that most sexual harassment takes forms that are stereotypically considered to be less “severe,” with gender harassment being the most common form of harassment (Langhout et al., 2005; Leskinen et al., 2011; Schneider et al., 1997). If Title IX

practitioners focus on behaviors over consequences, most harassment will not be deemed “actionable” and addressed through the Title IX investigation and adjudication process. Further, because women are the most common targets of sexual harassment (Cantor et al., 2020; Cortina & Berdahl, 2008; Rosenthal et al., 2016), disregarding the educational consequences of sexual harassment will guarantee women are disadvantaged in educational institutions across the country—a result that is entirely antithetical to the intended purpose of Title IX.

In addition to exacerbating the negative outcomes survivors experience after being harassed, the institutional betrayal of students who come forward about sexual harassment may negatively affect overall campus safety by normalizing harassment (Rosenthal et al., 2016; Smith & Freyd, 2013, 2014). Research on sexual harassment in other contexts finds that organizational tolerance of sexual harassment is a very strong predictor of sexual harassment behavior (Willness et al., 2007). By failing to address the most common forms of harassment when reported, institutions of higher education demonstrate tolerance towards sexual harassment, which likely contributes to more sexual harassment incidents. Moreover, organizations that proactively develop, disseminate, and enforce harassment policies and procedures have the lowest rates of sexual harassment (Willness et al., 2007). Colleges and universities should respond to reported harassment in ways that clearly communicate that they will not tolerate such behaviors and will fully enforce their sexual misconduct policies. With regards to Title IX reports, this means considering the limitations to students’ educational participation, access, and benefits resulting from harassment when determining what is “actionable” and deserving of a formal investigation.

Implications for Policy

Our findings suggest that Title IX practitioners may need assistance and incentive to consider the educational consequences of sexual harassment in their determinations of whether reported harassment is “severe” enough to pursue a formal investigation. Universities might consider requiring Title IX practitioners to gather victim impact statements when fielding reports and use them to determine whether the reported sexual harassment has had an effect on the survivor’s access to educational opportunities and benefits. Evidence finds that Title IX practitioners often recognize the stakes of Title IX sanctioning on perpetrators and themselves (e.g., Manne, 2020; Cruz, 2021). For instance, research on Title IX practitioners’ experiences finds that due to concerns around being a neutral investigator who must empathize with all parties and the desire to avoid the appearance of bias toward either complainants or respondents (i.e., to avoid becoming the target of a lawsuit), Title IX practitioners numb themselves to the accounts of sexual violence being reported to them and construct respondents, or the accused, as “kids” following “scripts” and making “mistakes” (Cruz, 2021). Viewing respondents this way appears to help Title IX administrators empathize with students accused of committing sexual violence as it is much easier to empathize with a student who made a “mistake” than a student who is a “perpetrator” (Cruz, 2021). However,

Title IX administrators should be equally as concerned with how a refusal to intervene when sexual harassment is reported—including through initiating investigations and sanctioning—can limit survivors' capacity to excel in school or complete their degrees (Nesbitt & Carson, 2021).

Universities must combat the stereotype that some types of sexual harassment are “not that bad,” not only because it hinders survivors from reporting (Hlavka, 2014; Holland & Cortina, 2017; Holland et al., 2021), but also because it may affect Title IX practitioners' decision-making when survivors do report. To combat this, universities should institute trainings for Title IX staff that explicitly refute stereotypes about sexual harassment and assault and center survivors' experiences in describing why *all* forms of sexual harassment are harmful and have the potential to severely limit survivors' educations. These messages would also be useful in sexual harassment trainings for faculty, staff, and students. Still, we recognize that any benefit from these trainings will be undermined if Title IX Offices do not have the will or power to address all forms of sexual harassment that limit survivors' education. While universities work to improve their Title IX administrators' response to reports, they may also consider reviewing their sexual misconduct policies to ensure they are able to adequately address all forms of harassment.

Universities should also consider expanding campus resources that can repair the damage of sexual harassment on graduate students' educations. While many universities now have counseling centers and victim advocacy programs (LeViness et al., 2017; Richards, 2019) and Title IX regulations require the offer of supporting measures (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2020), the focus of these resources is often on undergraduate students. Our study illustrates the unique educational challenges that graduate student survivors face. For example, academic adjustments will be meaningless if a class in a small program is only taught by a graduate student's harasser or if postponing a dissertation-related task also means losing funding. Universities need to take on structural changes to enable graduate students' resilience after harassment, such as hiring more faculty who share the same specialty, so survivors are less dependent on their harassers for advising and creating funds for graduate students whose work has been slowed by sexual harassment or whose assistantship was compromised by harassment.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are limitations to the current study that must be considered. First, our sample was comprised of graduate students from nine universities at similar institutions (i.e., Big Ten universities). Thus, our findings must be considered within this specific educational context. There may be differences between institution types in response to graduate students' sexual harassment reports. Research on Title IX report decision-making and outcomes (e.g., actionable/not actionable, formal investigation/no formal investigation, “responsible” finding/“not responsible” finding, and sanctions/no sanctions) across various types of colleges and universities would help to establish patterns of institutional response to reported sexual harassment.

Additionally, our findings are limited in that they are derived solely from the perspectives and experiences of survivors. We can make broad inferences about Title IX practitioners' decision-making and what influenced it based on the patterns of survivor case outcomes, but we cannot claim to know exactly what factored into specific Title IX practitioners' decision-making in these cases because we did not speak with Title IX practitioners themselves. While gaining insight into survivors' perspectives about the Title IX process is essential, it is also important to gather information from Title IX practitioners about their perceptions of Title IX cases. Recent research suggests that Title IX practitioners are often less focused on understanding the effects of sexual violence on survivors' education and more focused on empathizing with respondents and considering the consequences for themselves (Cruz, 2021). However, additional research on the perspectives and decision-making processes of Title IX practitioners will help to further understand what factors are influencing their decisions.

Another limitation is the partial representation of men, sexual and gender minority, and racial minority graduate student survivors. Although we recruited graduate student survivors of all gender, sexual orientation, and racial/ethnic identities, our sample was comprised mostly of straight, white, cisgender women. Our findings may not fully capture the experience of graduate student men, gender minorities, sexual minorities, or racial/ethnic minorities who experience and report harassment. Research on the harassment and reporting experiences of graduate students from diverse backgrounds will help to understand how survivor identities are associated with consequences of sexual harassment and report outcomes.

Conclusion

The current study furthers our understanding of the sexual harassment and reporting experiences of graduate student survivors. Our findings indicate that regardless of harassment type, graduate student survivors frequently experienced severe limitations to their education and reported to Title IX to restore safety in and access to their educational environment. Further, our findings suggest a connection between cultural conceptualizations of "severe" harassment and decision-making around whether reported harassment is "actionable" and should be investigated. These findings identify the need for interventions to ensure Title IX practitioners consider limitations to survivors' education when deciding what "counts" as actionable harassment.

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