



November 3, 2021

Marie A. Bernard, MD
UNITE Co-Chair
Chief Officer for Scientific
Workforce Diversity
National Institutes of Health
Building 31, Room 5C35
Bethesda, MD 20814

Alfred C. Johnson, PhD
UNITE Co-Chair
Deputy Director for Management
National Institutes of Health
Building One, Room 102
Bethesda, MD 20892

Lawrence A. Tabak, DDS, PhD
UNITE Co-Chair
Principal Deputy Director
National Institutes of Health
Building One, Room 126
Bethesda, MD 20892

Dear Drs. Bernard, Johnson, and Tabak,

The Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) commends progress National Institutes of Health (NIH) has made thus far in promoting safe, diverse, and inclusive research and training environments. Efforts from the Advisory Committee to the Director (ACD) Working Group on Changing the Culture to End Sexual Harassment, UNITE Initiative, and Office of Scientific Workforce Diversity play critical roles in ending all types of harassment to foster and retain a skilled scientific workforce. These separate programs have distinct overlap in desire and responsibility to eradicate all harassment and support talented, diverse scientists. FASEB hopes to see increased congruency between intramural offices on efforts to improve the biomedical research environment.

Individual Title IX harassment cases typically require compelling evidence to result in an official finding of policy violation; going through this complaint process can be arduous for victims. For these, and a multitude of other reasons, a [majority of harassment victims](#), even those [employed at NIH](#), may not report incidences of harassment. Many of the recommendations in the [Final Report on Changing the Culture to End Sexual Harassment](#) focus on increasing reporting from victims such that extramural Title IX offices and, if appropriate, NIH are aware of the problematic behavior. However, this passive method may produce lackluster results due to the persistence of reticence to report harassment in the general population, including those in scientific research environments.

Recently, there have been several high-profile sexual harassment cases involving “superstar” Principal Investigators such as Pier Paolo [Pandolfi](#), MD, PhD, Francisco [Ayala](#), PhD, and David [Sabatini](#), MD, PhD. In the latter case, the Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research deployed a diversity, equity, and inclusion survey. Based on those survey responses, the Institute proactively investigated the environment and ultimately Sabatini resigned. Subsequently, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute terminated his employment as an investigator. Rather than wait for one of the 39 Sabatini laboratory members to come forward and put themselves in the vulnerable position of filing an official case with the Title IX office, Whitehead Institute leadership took the initiative upon themselves to examine the laboratory environment. While only a single case, this is a clear demonstration that climate surveys can be informative tools to address harassment in research environments.

In 2019, the NIH Office of Scientific Workforce Diversity developed and implemented an intramural [workplace climate and harassment survey](#). During the December 2019 ACD meeting both Francis Collins, MD, PhD and Hannah Valentine, MD stated that NIH intended to release the survey for use by the extramural community. National utilization of the same survey would allow for robust and meaningful data collection and comparisons across different institutions. Although survey questions are publicly available in the [Survey Implementation Guide](#) and [Supplementary Frequency Tables](#), this format lacks utility for broad uptake by the extramural community. FASEB appreciates recent attention to the intramural survey as a resource to evaluate workplace climate in the [Open Mike blog](#) and as an addition to the [anti-sexual harassment website](#). However, further communication to external stakeholders may be necessary to ensure university offices that deploy climate surveys know these resources exist. Additionally, reporting on the Sabatini case indicates that the Whitehead Institute survey provided an option for written comments, which NIH may want to consider in the next iteration of the survey. Furthermore, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine recently released the [Guidance for Measuring Sexual Harassment Prevalence Using Campus Climate Surveys](#); considerations from this guidance may also be taken into account when evaluating the current instrument for extramural use. Prioritizing widespread uptake of a survey for use to identify workplace climate and harassment concerns may help NIH more proactively address the pervasiveness of harassment in research and training environments.

FASEB encourages staff and volunteers invested in the UNITE Initiative, ACD Working Group on Changing the Culture to End Sexual Harassment, and Office of Scientific Workforce Diversity to collaborate towards providing the extramural community a standardized survey instrument to assess and address concerns about workplace climate and harassment. Once accomplished, NIH may also consider promoting this survey as part of best practices in funding opportunities such as training grants to achieve widespread uptake. With concerted effort, NIH can be the leader and standard-bearer in intentionally surveying environments for unwanted behaviors and initiating investigations without relying on an individual named complainant coming forth to file an official Title IX case.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Patricia L. Morris". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Patricia L. Morris, MS, PhD
FASEB President

Cc: Michael Lauer, MD, Deputy Director for Extramural Research and Francis Collins, MD, PhD, Director