

Astronomy roiled again by sexual-harassment allegations

Caltech has suspended a faculty member for violating its policy against harassment.

Alexandra Witze

12 January 2016 | Updated: 13 January 2016

Concerns over sexual harassment in astronomy are once again in the spotlight, with new reports of harassment investigations at two US universities.

The California Institute of Technology (Caltech) in Pasadena has temporarily suspended a faculty member, without pay, after determining that he had committed gender-based harassment against two graduate students. *Science* [reported](#) on 12 January that the faculty member is theoretical astrophysicist Christian Ott, which *Nature* can also confirm.

When asked whether he was the faculty member in question, Ott told *Nature* that he could not comment. "I've been instructed not to speak with journalists," he said. Caltech officials, citing privacy issues, told *Nature* several times that they could not confirm or deny any information about the faculty member's identity.

And on 12 January, US Congresswoman Jackie Speier, a Democrat who represents a district in northern California, read a statement on the floor of the House of Representatives revealing the results of a 2004 harassment investigation at the University of Arizona. The case involved an astronomy educator who has since moved to the University of Wyoming.

Speier announced that she would introduce legislation aimed at requiring universities to inform other universities of the outcome of a disciplinary proceeding. "It's time to stop pretending sexual harassment in science happened a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away," she said.

The new revelations confirm that harassment is a widespread problem in science with only some of the instances now coming to light, says Joan Schmelz, an astronomer at Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico and [longtime advocate for women in astronomy](#). "You can't just sweep this stuff under the rug, declare it confidential and hope that no one ever knows about it," she says.

Details emerge on two cases

The Caltech case went public on 4 January, when university president Thomas Rosenbaum and provost Edward Stolper [sent a campus-wide message](#) saying that the institute followed formal procedures to investigate harassment complaints involving two graduate students. "The faculty committee concluded, and the provost concurred, that there was unambiguous gender-based harassment of both graduate students by the faculty member," Rosenbaum and Stolper wrote.

The suspension of the faculty member — which includes a ban on accepting any new students — will extend through the nine months of the 2015–16 academic year, and the faculty member is also barred from campus. Contact between the faculty member and his research group is being monitored. He must undergo professional training in mentoring students before being allowed to return. The faculty member appealed the actions, Rosenbaum and Stolper wrote, but the appeal was denied.

Caltech officials say that all of the graduate students who worked for the suspended faculty member remain at the institution, and are progressing in their original degree programmes. BuzzFeed News [reported](#) on 13 January that one of the graduate students who filed a complaint against Ott is finishing her research at the University of California, Berkeley — but her degree will ultimately come from Caltech.

Ott's research topics include determining how massive stars explode in supernovae. He is part of the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (LIGO) that is hunting for these elusive waves, which were predicted by Albert Einstein. Ott's current US National Science Foundation awards total more than US\$850,000, and his publications include a *Nature* paper from November on magnetic structures in rapidly rotating supernovae¹.

Harassment training

Meanwhile, Speier's remarks on the House floor focused on another set of allegations, which involved Timothy Slater, an astronomy

educator formerly of the University of Arizona. The university opened an investigation in 2004 into reports of “sexually charged conduct” linked to Slater, including allegations of sexual jokes and visits to strip clubs. The report concluded that he had violated campus policies on sexual harassment.

Slater moved to the University of Wyoming in 2008. A statement on his research group's website said that he underwent management and harassment training at Arizona, and that training had been effective. “Dr. Slater has made no attempt to hide his role in, or the lessons learned from these events occurring more than a decade ago,” said the statement, which is signed by Stephanie Slater, who is Timothy Slater's wife and director of the research group. In an e-mail to *Nature*, Timothy Slater said that he had nothing to add to the statement and that no further allegations of sexual harassment had been brought against him since the Arizona investigation ended.

Stephanie Slater said that Speier's posting of the Arizona report had made witnesses, who are anonymized in the document, more easily identifiable. “If people think their statements are going to end up in the Congressional record, they're not going to give them,” she said.

Speier said that she was speaking publicly about the case because “these actions are symptoms of a larger problem, of how to effectively deal with sexual harassment in academia.”

Community response

Concerns about sexual harassment in astronomy came to the fore in October, when the news broke that an investigation at Berkeley determined that [exoplanet hunter Geoffrey Marcy had violated campus harassment policies](#). The university told Marcy to “abide by clear expectations concerning his future interactions with students” or face harsher terms including suspension or dismissal. He announced his retirement within days of the information becoming public.

At the American Astronomical Society meeting in Kissimmee, Florida, in early January, large posters in the registration area displayed the society's anti-harassment policy. At a town hall meeting during the conference, many astronomers — ranging from students to university faculty members to high-school teachers — testified that harassment was a major and long-running problem that hampered professional interactions and many young researchers' careers.

“There is a problem in our field and we all know it's there,” said David Silva, director of the National Optical Astronomy Observatory in Tucson, Arizona.

Meg Urry, the society's president and an astronomer at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, said that while harassment is not unique to astronomy, the Marcy revelations have brought the problem to wider public consciousness. “For some of us, over the past six months or so, the most distressing thing has been the readiness of people with power in our profession to try to protect their colleagues who are great scientists,” she added.

Universities and institutions have begun campus discussions about harassment. Caltech will hold a colloquium for graduate students and faculty on 11 February, an initiative begun by graduate students.

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2016.19153

Updates

Updated: Added details on the Ott case reported by BuzzFeed News.

References

1. Mösta, P. *et al. Nature* **528**, 376–379 (2015).