

'It's not worth reporting': Researchers allege ineffective 'U' reporting system for abuse

by Michal Ruprecht
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The University of Michigan prides itself on being one of the nation's top public research universities. Across all three campuses, 20,540 graduate students and 8,598 faculty members study and work at the University, many of whom are active in research. In addition, over 1,500 undergraduates participate in the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program at the Ann Arbor campus.

Despite the thousands of researchers, the University's anonymous reporting system received only seven reports in 2019 related to "issues arising in the research setting," according to University spokeswoman Kim Broekhuizen.

A Michigan Daily investigation found that flaws in the system deterred student researchers from reporting alleged abuse. The Daily spoke to three students who claimed the small size of their lab prevented them from using the University's reporting system to report alleged misconduct. The Daily also found that little oversight of research supervisors strengthens the hierarchical system in research labs.

Jason Altom, a graduate student in Harvard University's chemistry department, died by suicide in 1998. Two of the three suicide notes Altom left called for changes to the department that he felt could have prevented his death.

"Professors here have too much power over the lives of their grad students," Altom wrote in one of his notes.

After extensive coverage by The New York Times, Harvard's chemistry department adopted a series of changes, including a three-member committee to monitor student researcher progress and free, confidential access to a therapist. Since Altom's passing, journalists have uncovered alleged research abuse at other institutions like Stanford University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

In a report released last month, WilmerHale, the law firm hired to investigate former University of Michigan Provost Martin A. Philbert's sexual misconduct allegations, found he harassed women, including graduate students who worked in his research lab. Philbert made comments about their bodies, redirected conversations toward sex and insisted on receiving hugs.

In 2005, specific allegations of sexual assault arose in which one of Philbert's research assistants reported Philbert had "asked her for sex, to marry him, to run away together and to 'have caramel (sic) colored babies' with him." The report found "significant evidence that Philbert engaged in a wide range of sexual misconduct, including sexual harassment, for at least fifteen years."

Following the release of the report, University President Mark Schlissel wrote in a letter about the University's current reporting culture.

"The university has fallen far short of creating a culture that rejects harassment and misconduct and ensures that no one in our community fears retaliation for reporting," Schlissel wrote. "We will need an environment where it is safe to report, free from the fear of retaliation. It is appalling that we have been unable to accomplish this."

"You're completely at their mercy"

When an alum on the University's pre-med track joined a research lab several years ago, she did so for research experience and a letter of recommendation for medical school. She requested anonymity, citing fears of professional retribution. In this article, she will be referred to as Amanda.

Amanda claims that a superior in her lab verbally abused her.

Amanda said she had considered anonymously reporting the alleged abuse, but decided not to because she was afraid of being identified. She also worried she would not receive a letter of recommendation for medical school if she filed a report.

"Your advancement and pushing forward with your goals are so dependent on your (supervisor)," Amanda said. "I think you're completely at their mercy. I mean, I was."

Amanda's supervisor did not respond to multiple emails requesting a comment for this article. To protect Amanda's identity, The Daily has decided not to publish the name of the supervisor.

In an interview with The Daily, another student in Amanda's research lab corroborated Amanda's claims. This other student requested anonymity, also citing fears of professional retribution. She will be referred to as Mary.

Mary alleges the same supervisor verbally abused her. Mary reported this abuse in person to her department, an incident that Amanda independently corroborated.

"I felt like the department could have done more beyond just telling (the abuser) that (their) actions were wrong," Mary said. "(The abuser) could have just played dumb and acted like (they) didn't know that that wasn't OK ... but I guess I was just happy I got away from (them)."

Mary argued that anonymous reporting isn't a good option for student researchers — labs are small enough that those who report incidences of abuse can be easily pinpointed.

"I think there are a lot of situations where it's very obvious who's being mistreated," Mary said.

LSA senior Grace Tremonti said she has had a good experience with research at the University of Michigan, but experienced uncomfortable power dynamics in a lab at another institution. She said she has never reported the abuse.

"I definitely think that my willingness to report would depend on a lot of factors," Tremonti said. "Even if you do report it confidentially, and if they can pinpoint it to exactly who's experiencing that, then it could end up being hurtful to myself or whoever reports it, which is really unfortunate."

Among graduate students, a supposed "whisper network" exists that allows students to learn about the reputation of their labs before joining, according to two graduate students interviewed by The Daily. Both requested anonymity, citing fears of professional retribution. In this article, they will be referred to as Sarah and Gabrielle. The Daily independently corroborated the "whisper network" in an interview with a third graduate student. Sarah and Gabrielle said older graduate students frequently inform new graduate students about "risky" labs.

However, Gabrielle also noted some graduate students avoid informing prospective students about their superiors until after the students commit to the program.

“When you’re trying to get recruits to come into the program, you definitely sugarcoat it in the best way possible,” Gabrielle said. “There are those (superiors) that will make you stay over the holidays if they need something done ... so you need to know what you’re in for.”

Many University graduate school programs require students to choose a primary lab for the entirety of their degree program, which lasts five years on average.

Before Sarah joined her lab, she said she heard mixed rumors about her superior, but ultimately accepted the position, hoping she would develop a good relationship with her supervisor.

“I hate to say it like this, but I took a gamble when I was coming into this program,” Sarah said.

Sarah alleges her supervisor enforced unreasonable expectations and created a toxic work environment. The Daily spoke to another student in Sarah’s lab who alleged a similar experience.

Sarah’s supervisor said the allegation about the lab environment is not true, claiming their research lab is a “friendly, inclusive, intellectually and scientifically engaging space.” To protect Sarah’s identity, The Daily has decided not to publish the name of the supervisor.

Sarah said she had thought of reporting her supervisor, but she believed there was no system that could effectively hold her supervisor accountable.

“It’s not worth reporting because it’s an endemic relationship,” Sarah said. “This toxicity is endemic to academia. A lot of the failings of this relationship fall directly on the (abuser) and there’s really no system in place that is really going to work. Like what, they’re going to get a slap on their wrist? What’s going to teach them why they screwed up?”

She said she also believes underrepresented minorities are also deterred from reporting because they don’t trust those in power will understand discriminatory behavior.

The current system

The University-wide reporting system relies on the EthicsPoint software. According to the EthicsPoint website, softwares like these allow students to submit ethical violations, and reassess their report in the future to submit more details.

Any person affiliated with the University can anonymously report alleged abuse through this system. Some departments also have separate anonymous reporting systems. Each anonymous reporting system has its own protocol.

Broekhuizen said students are encouraged to use the University-wide system to report their concerns.

Tremonti said she learned about the University's anonymous reporting system at an optional student committee meeting in the Life Sciences Institute, but she said she hasn't heard of many students anonymously reporting.

“Despite the University's attempts to make (researchers) aware of how to report things, there are really grey areas where you don't know if reporting is going to compromise your work or if you should just stick it out,” Tremonti said. “In the end, it could just end up ruining your relationship with that lab.”

Students are also able to report using the [Rackham Resolution Office](#) and [Ombuds Office](#). According to the 2019 Ombuds [report](#), only eight graduate students used the service for “problems with advisor.” The Rackham Resolution Office said they were unable to provide any specific data to The Daily at the time of publication.

Michael Imperiale, associate vice president for research, said the University needs to take action if students are experiencing toxic environments.

“We obviously want our students to have great experiences when they're involved in research,” Imperiale said. “If there are environments that are not conducive to that, then we as an institution need to deal with that.”

Like Tremonti, when Sarah joined her program, she said she wasn't aware of the University-wide anonymous reporting system. She learned about her department's anonymous reporting system after attending an optional student committee meeting.

Inconsistencies within departments deterred Sarah from reporting her alleged abuse. For example, the Computer Science and Engineering Department currently has a [page](#) on their website with a list of resources for students and an encrypted anonymous reporting form.

Sarah's department claims to offer an anonymous reporting system, but she said it requires reporters to log in with their University unqiename and password.

The Daily obtained a link to the anonymous reporting form and confirmed Sarah's claim about logging in.

"The reality is that anonymous reporting is not anonymous at all, at least through my department," Sarah said. "There is a form ... but it requires you to log in through your University ID, so that's not exactly right. I have a very big problem with that for that reason, so I would never use it."

Paul Thaler, a partner at Cohen Seglias law firm, specializes in scientific misconduct matters. He said it's important to monitor the student-supervisor relationship so both the student and supervisor are protected from retaliation and false accusations.

"I don't like to hear about students being abused," Thaler said. "Nobody deserves humiliation or poor treatment. There is a power imbalance ... so the student might be fearful of speaking out because they don't want to alienate the professor, which could result in a bad grade."

Tremonti emphasized the need for the research community to have more conversations about the power dynamics present in labs. She also noted how changes to the culture won't happen immediately.

"Inevitably there's always going to be younger, really inexperienced people trying to learn how to do research," Tremonti said. "They are going to be put in really tough situations where they feel like they want to report something, but they can't because it will compromise them."

Sarah is hopeful for systemic change in research. She said a committee or group of individuals focused on addressing researchers' mental health concerns and abuse by superiors, like what Altom described in his note, could be beneficial. She also explained how more mental health resources should be made available to student researchers.

"It's a bit of a glorified apprenticeship and your relationship with your (supervisor) is a very important part of it," Sarah said. "I would hope that by forcing the discussion of why it can be so toxic, we can also improve the climate and make it better for people."

In August 2019, Rackham **launched** a mental health task force to better support graduate students' mental health. Meghan Duffy, the chair of the task force, wrote in an email interview with The Daily that a "community associate" may end up being one of the task force recommendations. Duffy wrote that a community associate wouldn't be a mental health professional, but instead someone already in the department who feels comfortable talking about mental health.

“I can’t actually ensure that everyone is doing well in terms of their mental health,” Duffy wrote. “What I can do is to try to ensure that my lab is a supportive environment and that people in it know that I care about their well-being.”

Although some universities are **recognizing** the struggles facing graduate students, Sarah still fears future students may work in toxic lab environments like hers. She believes those students shouldn’t have to suffer to pursue their passions.

“People who come into graduate school come in for a specific passion,” Sarah said. “There’s always that sort of, ‘I want to change the world in one little way or another’ ... They should not have to face such systemic barriers for success.”

The Daily has a tip line for these kinds of stories: tipline@michigandaily.com. This is a private tip line viewable by a small team of reporters committed to responsible reporting. The Michigan Daily is listening.

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