

Two Movements Converge: #MeToo and Graduate-Student Unionization

By Nell Gluckman May 18, 2018



The newly renegotiated contract for the graduate-student union at the U. of Connecticut includes a list of actions that can be defined as sexual harassment, like repeatedly standing too close or massaging someone and giving sexually suggestive gifts.

In 2018 almost all colleges have robust procedures for handling complaints of sexual harassment and assault. They have Title IX offices, prevention and training programs, counseling for victims, in-depth policies.

Even so, when the #MeToo movement swung into full force last fall, it brought to light stories about unreported or unaddressed sexual-harassment and sexual-assault complaints at colleges and universities across the country.

Somehow the systems on those campuses hadn't worked for many students, faculty members, and staff.

Organizers of graduate-student unions, in a later stage of their own movement, see themselves as part of the solution. The unionization movement has [shifted gears](#) under a presidential administration that is hostile to labor, but union organizers have been making the case that they are well positioned to push for better procedures and to work as advocates for students with sexual-harassment complaints.

Union organizers say they are well positioned to advocate on behalf of students with sexual-harassment complaints.

The convergence of those two movements has been clear at Harvard University, where graduate students voted to unionize in April. The vote came two months after *The Chronicle* [published an investigation](#) showing that many women had been groped, kissed, or subjected to other inappropriate behavior by a prominent government professor, Jorge Domínguez, who [announced he would retire early](#), at the end of this semester. In 1983 Domínguez had been found responsible for sexually harassing a junior professor, Terry Karl, but years later he was promoted to vice provost while Karl left Harvard to avoid him. Other women said the incident had left them with the impression that the university would not take their complaints about Domínguez seriously.

“Seeing how little of a voice graduate students and even assistant professors had over an issue like this indicated to us that current structures are just really failing students and other workers in the university,” said Kay T. Xia, an undergraduate chemistry major. Xia [wrote a letter](#), published last week in *The Harvard Crimson*, arguing that the union would help support students with sexual-harassment complaints.

A Harvard spokeswoman, Tania deLuzuriaga, said in a written statement that the university had dedicated substantial resources to preventing sexual and gender-based harassment, including assault. The university has convened a Title IX Policy Review Committee and task forces on inclusion and belonging and the prevention of sexual assault, she said.

“Most recently, these efforts include the implementation of a universitywide online training module for faculty, staff, and students,” she said. Many people have already completed the training, but it will become mandatory for faculty and staff members in the fall. “While we have made significant progress over the past several years, we realize that there is still work to do and are committed to working together to proactively address concerns of sexual and gender-based harassment.”

In a recent letter, Harvard's provost, Alan Garber, said the university was prepared to negotiate with the union. He added that he would not negotiate about academic matters or agree to terms that compromise the academic mission, saying that “decisions such as who is admitted, how teaching occurs, and who teaches are academic judgments to be made by the university.”

Leading up to the union vote, organizers at Harvard campaigned on the issue of sexual harassment. The *Crimson* [took an exit poll](#) that showed that 85 percent of the people who disapproved of Harvard's handling of sexual harassment also had voted to unionize.

"This is an exciting moment where a lot of folks I know are realizing that sexual harassment and assault are fundamentally tied to workplace equity," said Niharika Singh, a public-policy Ph.D. candidate at Harvard. She helped organize the union and said that she had been put in touch with students who have filed Title IX complaints. "What's become obvious for us is how alone people feel in going through the procedural steps."

A New Role for Union Muscle

Singh was inspired by a case she heard about at the University of Connecticut, whose graduate students voted to unionize in 2014. A graduate student there had been told that there wasn't enough evidence to support her Title IX complaint accusing her adviser of sexual harassment, according to Steven Manicastro, a political-science Ph.D. candidate and president of UConn's graduate-student union.

In 2015 the student approached the union, which helped her file a grievance with the university and a civil-rights claim with the state of Connecticut. Manicastro said she had been close to leaving the university, but with the union's help, she was able to get a new adviser and keep her position.

"To me, this is a primary example of why it's important for graduate employees to have unions because they just give you access to resources you wouldn't have," Manicastro said. "There's a lot of skepticism around what unions can really do about this. They can put pressure on massive universities that a single graduate assistant would never really be able to do."

Stephanie Reitz, a UConn spokeswoman, said she could not discuss individual matters, but added that the university works with all complainants to provide accommodations to ensure a safe and productive learning and working environment.

"This is true even when a sexual-harassment claim doesn't rise to the level of a policy violation, the standard for which is based on state and federal law," she said. "In the case of a graduate student, an appropriate measure may be assignment of a new major adviser."

She added: "An individual accused of sexual harassment — even when found to have not engaged in such harassment — typically no longer feels comfortable working alongside their accuser."

When UConn's graduate-student union renegotiated its contract this year, sexual-harassment complaints were on the minds of bargaining-committee members, Manicastro said. The new contract includes a list of actions that can be defined as sexual harassment, like repeatedly standing too close or massaging someone and giving sexually suggestive gifts. It also includes a stipulation that when a complaint is filed with UConn's Office of Institutional Equity, the student will be told that support from the union might be available.

"At this particular moment, when workers and women are standing up and saying, We're not going to take this anymore, it's so important to have a vehicle with which to address it," said Julie Kushner, a director at United Auto Workers, the union representing graduate students at both UConn and Harvard. She said Columbia University's graduate-student union had also been pushing for more action to prevent sexual harassment.

William B. Gould, an emeritus professor at Stanford Law School, said that one of the first orders of business when unions form is to negotiate grievance procedures for employees.

"Sexual harassment can be and usually is taken up when employees are dissatisfied with what the employers have done," Gould said. He said it's unlikely that any new graduate-student unions will form at universities in the near future because President Trump's appointees to the National Labor Relations Board are likely to reverse the Obama-era decision to recognize such unions.

At Harvard the union formed a bargaining committee this week. The organizers plan to survey members and hold meetings to learn what graduate students want to see in their contract. For that reason, organizers couldn't say specifically whether they'd push for the kinds of provisions the UConn contract has, but already the union has [created a committee](#) to advocate for people who have experienced sexual harassment.

Ege Yumusak, a Ph.D. candidate in the philosophy department who is on the union's bargaining committee, said it's significant that graduate students will have a recognized organization behind them.

"We have a kind of power that we didn't have before," she said.

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