

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-583T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2017, U.S. universities were awarded over \$15 billion in federal grant funding for STEM research. Federal agencies are required to enforce Title IX—a law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex in education programs receiving federal financial assistance—including at universities they fund. Sexual harassment is not only degrading and illegal, it has a negative effect on the ability of women to engage in research at the same level as men. GAO was asked to review federal efforts to help prevent sexual harassment by STEM research grantees.

This testimony is based on ongoing GAO work and provides preliminary observations on selected agencies: (1) availability of staff and budget to address sexual harassment complaints at universities they fund for STEM research; (2) efforts to establish and communicate policies and procedures for university grantees on preventing sexual harassment; and (3) steps taken to promote information sharing and collaboration among agencies to prevent sexual harassment at universities they fund for STEM research. GAO selected five federal agencies that together funded approximately 80 percent of STEM research from fiscal year 2015 through 2017, the latest data available. GAO reviewed these agencies' relevant regulations and documentation. GAO also interviewed agency officials as part of GAO's ongoing work.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making recommendations at this time but will consider making them, as appropriate, as it finalizes its work.

View [GAO-19-583T](#). For more information, contact John Neumann at (202) 512-6888 or [neumannj@gao.gov](mailto:neumannj@gao.gov).

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# SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN STEM RESEARCH

## Preliminary Observations on Policies for University Grantees and Information Sharing among Selected Agencies

### What GAO Found

Based on preliminary information, the availability of agency staff and budget varies across the five selected agencies for efforts to address sexual harassment complaints at universities that use federal funds for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) research. While four of the five agencies received three or fewer sexual harassment complaints from individuals at grantee universities from 2015 through 2019, changes to agency grantee policies or requirements could impact the number of complaints an agency receives and the amount of resources an agency needs to address them.

The five selected agencies have established and communicated sexual harassment prevention policies to university grantees to varying degrees. Agencies vary in how they have:

- **Provided detailed policies to grantees on sexual harassment.** Three agencies—the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Health and Human Services (HHS) National Institutes of Health (NIH), and the National Science Foundation (NSF)—have communicated relatively detailed policies on sexual harassment by issuing multiple forms of guidance, such as grantee policy manuals and best practices documents. In contrast, the Department of Energy (DOE) and Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) communicated through more general documents, including policy statements that do not specifically address grantees.
- **Modified grant terms and conditions.** Two agencies are modifying the terms and conditions of grants to require grantees to report sexual harassment. NSF now requires grantees to increase transparency by reporting findings of sexual harassment to NSF, and NASA plans to implement the same requirement.
- **Evaluated effectiveness of grantee policies.** To date, the five agencies have not evaluated the effectiveness of their grantee policies and procedures to prevent sexual harassment, although two agencies are in the process of planning such evaluations.

Based on our preliminary analysis and interviews, all five selected agencies have taken some steps to promote information sharing and collaboration among agencies on the prevention of sexual harassment. But they also noted challenges to these efforts, such as the lack of information on sexual harassment cases. These challenges may increase the risk that universities or agencies are unknowingly funding researchers with a history of past sexual harassment findings. The White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy has taken steps to create an interagency working group by establishing a joint committee in May 2019 under the National Science and Technology Council with NIH, NSF, DOE, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology Directors. The committee plans to address challenges in the research environment, including the lack of uniform federal sexual harassment policies.