

Why GAO Did This Study

Sexual harassment is degrading and illegal. Studies show it has a negative effect on the ability of women to engage in research at the same level as men. Title IX prohibits sexual harassment and other forms of sex discrimination in education programs that receive federal funding, and federal agencies are required to enforce the law at universities they fund. In fiscal year 2018, the most recent year for which data were available during GAO's review, U.S. universities were awarded about \$27 billion in federal grants for STEM research. GAO was asked to review federal efforts to help prevent sexual harassment at universities that receive such grants.

This report examines, among other things, (1) how selected federal agencies receive, investigate, and resolve Title IX complaints; (2) the extent to which selected agencies have established an overall plan for their sexual harassment prevention efforts for university grantees, including for communicating and evaluating these efforts and (3) the extent to which selected agencies collaborate on efforts to prevent sexual harassment at universities they fund for STEM research. GAO reviewed agencies' relevant regulations and documentation and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 17 recommendations to the five agencies funding STEM research and DOJ, including to finalize and publish complaint procedures, establish goals and an overall plan for prevention efforts, and fully adopt two collaboration leading practices. The agencies agreed with GAO's recommendations and identified actions they plan to take to address them.

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SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN STEM RESEARCH

Agencies Have Taken Actions, but Need Complaint Procedures, Overall Plans, and Better Collaboration

What GAO Found

The five agencies GAO reviewed provided approximately 80 percent of federal science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) research grants since fiscal year 2015. From fiscal year 2015 through 2019, four of the five agencies received few complaints—including sexual harassment—under Title IX from individuals at universities. Inconsistent with federal regulations implementing Title IX, two of the agencies—the Departments of Energy (DOE) and Agriculture (USDA)—lack finalized procedures for complaints and thus cannot ensure they are consistently handling complaints. Sex-discrimination concerns—including sexual harassment—can also be raised by individuals outside of the Title IX complaint process (see table). However, only two agencies—the National Science Foundation (NSF) and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)—publicly communicate the option to notify them of concerns. The other three—DOE, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and USDA—received no concerns in fiscal year 2019 and may be missing opportunities to obtain information for Title IX oversight.

Number of Title IX Complaints and Sex Discrimination Concerns Received by Agencies						
Agency	DOE	HHS	NASA	NSF	USDA	Total
Title IX Complaints, FY 2015-2019	2	1	3	33	1	40
Sex Discrimination Concerns, FY 2019 ^a	0	93 ^b	0 ^c	47	0	140

Source: GAO analysis of information for fiscal years (FY) 2015 through 2019 from Department of Energy (DOE); Department of Health and Human Services (HHS); NASA; National Science Foundation (NSF); and Department of Agriculture (USDA) as well as interviews with agency officials. | GAO-20-187

Note: In fiscal years 2018 and 2019, three agencies received the same complaint. GAO counted it as a complaint for all three agencies.

^aAgencies receive sex-discrimination concerns—including sexual harassment—outside of the Title IX complaint process.

^bHHS's National Institutes of Health receives sex discrimination concerns—information not processed or investigated under Title IX—including sexual harassment concerns.

^cOfficials stated that NASA received one concern in FY 2019; however, it did not involve a university.

All five agencies have established grantee sexual harassment prevention efforts beyond those required by Title IX. However, none of the agencies have goals and plans for all of their efforts, and thus they lack clear ways to evaluate how well these efforts are working and to identify any needed improvements. They may also be missing opportunities to coordinate and integrate prevention activities.

Additionally, the Department of Justice (DOJ) reconstituted an interagency discussion group on Title IX in 2016, where all five agencies share information about their activities. However, DOJ has not fully adopted two leading practices for collaboration: agreeing on agency roles and responsibilities and developing mechanisms to monitor, evaluate, and report collaborative efforts. Officials at one agency said clarifying agencies' roles and responsibilities would improve the group. Adopting leading practices would help enhance and sustain collaboration.