

## Ask Professor Sarah Bellum

Professor Sarah Bellum answers your questions on navigating the often-uncharged waters of early career development. Do you have a question for Professor Bellum? Send it to [sarah\\_bellum@biophysics.org](mailto:sarah_bellum@biophysics.org). Your privacy and anonymity are assured!



### Start Squeaking this Wheel!

**Q:** *I love graduate school, and my project is going really well, but I'm considering leaving with a master's degree because the work environment in my lab is so toxic. One graduate student has been saying things to me that might not be strictly considered sexual harassment, but they really bother me. For example, he talks about my "physical attributes." If I get upset and ask him to stop, he seems surprised, because he considers his comments to be compliments! This has been going on for almost a year now. I spoke to my advisor about it when it first started, but my advisor told me I was overreacting. I also spoke to the chair of my department's graduate affairs committee (a woman), but nothing came of that, either. Is this my problem? Meaning, should I just "get over it"? Or am I justified in getting upset? If so, what should I do?*

- Bothered in Boston

**A:** You know, every once in a while Professor Bellum temporarily deludes herself into thinking that times have changed. That by now we have all been exposed to so much "sensitivity training" that we all must have gotten the message (if for no other reason than to avoid viewing additional poorly-produced "sensitivity videos"). And in particular that young people in the next generation are so very fortunate to be riding on the wave of the substantial body of work done by their elders, who set up offices and watchdog groups to monitor and respond to sexual harassment and related situations.

And then, inevitably, Professor Bellum hears a story, typically from someone much younger than herself, that reminds her that, while the world is full of upstanding people trying their best to do the right thing, it is still also sprinkled with less than stellar examples of our species.

I see three less than stellar examples here: your labmate who is harassing you, your advisor, and the chair of your graduate affairs committee. Let us examine each.

Your labmate is sexually harassing you. Period. Read your university's sexual harassment policy if you are unsure.

These policies typically contain a description of harassment as "creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment." That is exactly what is happening when this graduate student makes comments to you regarding your anatomy. Sure, perhaps any one isolated comment could result from a misunderstanding or a cultural difference, and after that first comment it is in everyone's best interest to calmly clarify what is going on, giving the commenter the benefit of the doubt, or the chance to straighten up. In your situation, however, you have made it clear to your labmate that his comments upset you, and that you want him to stop. Yet these comments have continued for almost a year. This is inexcusable.

Professor Bellum is not an expert, but informally, she believes that sexual harassers fall into one of two general camps: predators or idiots. Predators tend to have temporary or long-term psychological problems, and their harassment can include physical or other threats. Your labmate sounds like an idiot: he thinks his inappropriate comments are complimentary, and he was unwilling or unable to stop when you pointed out that you do not appreciate his comments. Being an idiot does not make him any less of a harasser, but it does

affect what might be the best course of action for resolving his harassment.

Your labmate has behaved badly, but I am even more distressed by the behavior of your advisor and the chair of graduate affairs. At most universities, every faculty member has a formal responsibility to pass any and all reports of sexual harassment on to a department chair or another university administrator. Yet in your situation, it does not appear that this happened at all. Your advisor also has a moral responsibility to protect and defend each and every member of his laboratory, and create and nurture a laboratory environment that is respectful of everyone.

Keep in mind that building and maintaining a healthy laboratory environment is one of a long list of job skills for which the vast majority of professors never receive any training whatsoever, other than on-the-job (i.e., as a result of situations like yours). Nevertheless, dismissing your concerns as overreacting was completely inappropriate. First, it allowed the harassment to continue, rather than nipping it in the bud. Often, an "idiot" harasser will modify his behavior significantly once someone in a position of authority has pulled him aside and told him to knock it off or risk being ejected from the graduate program. This could

have made all the difference in your situation. Second, dismissing your concerns probably went a long way towards making you feel like you were making a mountain out of a molehill, even though you weren't. How can we expect young people to recognize, report, and avoid sexual harassment when we send them conflicting messages about what harassment is, and how it should be handled?

Yet there is also one stellar example of our species in this picture: YOU. You did exactly what you should have done in this situation. You first approached the harasser, and asked him to stop. When he did not, you reported the situation to your advisor. When no action was taken, you reported the situation to another faculty member in your department. That no action was taken is no reflection on you or the seriousness of this situation; instead, it indicates there is a flaw in how some people in your department view and/or handle sexual harassment. Hopefully, this is a local problem, because the next step you must take is to report this harassment to your department chair, or, if you suspect the chair's response will be similar to the one you received from your advisor, directly to your university office for sexual harassment. You can do all this quietly, posing hypothetical questions initially if you wish, but do not stop until you find someone in a position of authority who will listen to you and respond appropriately, as per the guidelines described in your university's policy on sexual harassment (most of these are available online).

Finally, your department chair must ultimately be made aware that an incident of sexual harassment was not handled appropriately by the faculty of your department. This notification can be made by you, or by the office that handles sexual harassment reports, but it must occur. Hopefully, bringing the mishandling of your situation to the chair's attention will result in the proper handling of any subsequent harassment incidents. And that would be a very nice legacy to leave for the students preparing to start their graduate studies, in your lab and others.

---

### **Profile** (Continued from page 3.)

at Wesleyan, is the assistant coach of the team. Mukerji is the team's faculty mentor, which works out well because the kids enjoy attending the games. Mukerji also enjoys recreational activities such as camping and hiking. While she was not terribly athletic as a child, she now runs to stay in shape. She also has an interest in the environment intrigued by experiments that can be carried out in the field. Hiking and camping, which she does in her free time, is an extremely attractive way to further her scientific knowledge.

"I cannot imagine not being a scientist," she states firmly. "I would have gravitated to something that would have been there," referring to the field of science. One thing is certain: Mukerji no longer has to prove her scientific skills. They speak for themselves.

### **Public Affairs** (Continued from page 8.)

Proteins and Molecular Tags, issued in early January. The Office of Science plans to issue a new solicitation in the coming months for one or more centers for bioenergy research. Centers focused on systems biology research into carbon sequestration and bioremediation are also being considered for future years.

Begun in 2000, the Office of Science's GTL program supports advanced research in systems biology aimed at harnessing the powers of the microbial world to produce abundant and clean energy, absorb carbon dioxide, and transform radioactively contaminated waste.

### **Roundup**

**Capitol Hill:** Congressman *Sherwood Boehlert* (R-NY), chairman of the House Science committee since 2001, announced his retirement from Congress. He has been a member of Congress for 21 years. Under term-limit rules set by the House Republicans, Boehlert would have had to step down from his post as Chair of the Science Committee at the end of 2006.

The next chairman will be selected in January 2007. Likely successors, if Republicans retain the majority in the November elections, are Congressman Ralph Hall (R-TX), Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) and Vern Ehlers (R-MI). If Democrats regain control of the chamber, Ranking Member Bart Gordon (D-TN) will most likely become the chairman.

The Science Committee oversees the National Science Foundation, NASA, and the Department of Energy.

**OMB:** If confirmed by the Senate, *Rob Portman* will become the new Director of the Office of Management and Budget. Portman has been serving as the U.S. trade representative, a position he took following his resignation from the House in 2005. The Ohioan takes over the budget job from *Josh Bolten*, who was recently named the new White House chief of staff. The staff change at the top of the Budget Office mid budget cycle leads to Portman defending and pushing for a budget that he did not create.

**NIH:** The Public Access Working Group, an advisory panel to NIH responsible for the implementation of the 2005 public access policy, is calling for all articles based on NIH-sponsored research to be made available via PubMed Central within six months of publication. Currently, the NIH asks principal investigators to voluntarily post such articles on PubMed Central within a year of publication. NIH Director *Elias Zerhouni* will make the final decision. The Biophysical Society currently provides free access to all edited papers after twelve months. Unedited accepted papers are freely accessible upon acceptance.