

News in focus



The Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Massachusetts.

BIOLOGIST EXITS PRESTIGIOUS POST YEARS AFTER VIOLATING SEXUAL-HARASSMENT POLICY

The incident raises important questions about how institutions handle accusations of harassment that occurred at different universities – particularly in the #MeToo era.

By Amy Maxmen

For the past few years, graduate students applying for a prestigious summer course at the Marine Biological Laboratory (MBL) in the harbourside town of Woods Hole, Massachusetts, have been quietly warned about the course's co-director – Richard Schneider. In 2013, an investigation at his institution, the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), found that he had violated its sexual harassment policy.

Although media reports in 2017 had published some details of Schneider's case,

the situation was discussed only in hushed tones among researchers involved with the MBL embryology course. That changed in mid-January, when a young developmental biologist, Carolyn Dundes, tweeted: "Was super stoked to apply to an MBL course this summer but an ally informed me that the course co-director violated UCSF policy on sexual harassment."

Two days later, Schneider resigned. On 24 January, he was replaced as co-director.

This comes as a relief for some scientists and alumni affiliated with the course who have been uncomfortable ever since Schneider's

violation was made public in 2017 – a few months before the first summer course that he co-directed. (Because directorships last for five years, it was expected he would finish in 2021.) In the past few years, scientists who have participated in the programme have quietly grappled with what to do. Some worried that Schneider might repeat the offence; others felt guilty by association; and some simply wished it had been addressed head on. Dundes found it troubling enough to abandon plans to apply.

"It's horrible – every summer, the students find out," says one instructor, who asked for anonymity to protect against retribution.

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Several other scientists who have taught or taken the course spoke to *Nature* on condition of anonymity for the same reason that they didn't speak up earlier: the MBL embryology course is taught by high-ranking biologists who wield significant influence in their fields. Early-career researchers say that speaking up could cost them collaborations, grants or jobs.

The head of the MBL, developmental biologist Nipam Patel, declined to comment on whether he had received complaints about Schneider from students or visiting scientists in previous years. However, he says the MBL has policies barring harassment of all types at the institute.

The public discussion about Schneider and his sudden departure reflect a growing concern about sexual harassment in academia. And they raise important questions about how institutions handle accusations of harassment that occurred at different universities. Many, including the MBL, lack policies about vetting candidates for previous misconduct, which can be especially difficult given that attitudes and discussion about the subject have changed in the past 2.5 years.

"Academic institutions are struggling with how to deal with allegations that predated the #MeToo movement," says Debra Katz, a civil-rights lawyer specializing in sexual-assault and harassment cases at the firm Katz, Marshall & Banks in Washington DC. The hashtag #MeToo went viral in October 2017. And now, at the MBL and elsewhere, Katz says, "Students are responding to the cultural shift, and saying, 'No, we don't want to be in close proximity with someone who has harassed other students in academia.'"

The investigation

The MBL discussion concerns a covert sexual relationship between Schneider and a graduate student, which began weeks after she joined his lab in 2008, at the age of 22. The details of their sexual relationship are described in a report by a committee that investigated a complaint the student filed to UCSF in 2012. UCSF provided a redacted version of the report to *Nature*.

The student, who requested anonymity to protect her from stigmatization, told *Nature* that the physical relationship started when Schneider invited her to a party at UCSF. They drank alcohol, then went to a strip club, where the student says their first sexual encounter happened – and this is substantiated in the investigation report. "At the time, I felt like he valued me scientifically," she recalls. "I felt like this is what a fun scientist would do."

For the next two and a half years, Schneider and the student had a sexual relationship that they kept private. The student says she experienced mounting anxiety over the relationship. "I didn't realize how dependent I was on his approval – what conferences I could go to,

what projects I could work on, my references," she says. "He was my thesis adviser, I couldn't graduate without his approval."

In 2012, she asked for formal mediation because she could no longer work in Schneider's presence. She says that Schneider told her that if others found out about their relationship, it would ruin both of their reputations. Looking back on their relationship, she says, "I don't think it could be called consensual with that kind of power imbalance."

The investigation, which interviewed 13 witnesses, found that "although the relationship may have begun as consensual, the evidence supports a finding that the Complainant, at some point, felt coerced to continue the relationship and reasonably believed that she had no choice but to continue the

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relationship lest it damage her career".

Schneider did not reply to multiple requests for comment. But in the investigation report from UCSF, Schneider "maintains that their relationship was welcome and consensual from beginning to end".

The report concludes that Schneider's "actions and behavior are in violation of the UC Policy on Sexual Harassment". Two years later, in February 2015, UCSF chancellor Sam Hawgood informed Schneider through a letter that he would be disciplined with a demotion from professor to associate professor.

The next year, Schneider won a 'Mentor of the Year' award from UCSF. (The university says he was selected for the prize by students.) He continues to supervise researchers in his UCSF lab. Meanwhile, the student left academia after earning her PhD. "I went into a deep depression," she says to *Nature*. "I had panic attacks and crippling nightmares for years."

Intense environment

Schneider's career continued to advance. In December 2016, the MBL announced that he would co-direct its embryology summer course. During these programmes, around 20 trainees, mainly in their early twenties, live alongside the course directors for six weeks in Woods Hole. Patel says that Schneider's violation wasn't known when he was appointed.

But several people affiliated with the course said they discovered the violation soon afterwards. That's because in early 2017, in response to public-records requests, the University of California gave media outlets more than 100 redacted records on harassment cases across its campuses from 2013 to 2016. *The Mercury News*, a paper based in the San Francisco Bay

area, reported on Schneider's case. In March, two databases on sexual harassment in academia posted his violation online.

By 2019, many graduate students and post-doctoral researchers in the course were aware of Schneider's past because their colleagues had sent them links to the databases and media articles. "I was frankly very frustrated because the embryology course is known to be amazing, so I went but was on guard," says a graduate student who took the course last year, and who asked to remain anonymous to avoid retribution. The student adds, "Sometimes I would imagine the person who almost left grad school because of [Schneider's] actions, and wonder what that person would think."

At least one trainee wasn't bothered. "Rich [Schneider] paid his debt to society, and there are a lot of male scientists who have never been caught," the researcher says on condition of anonymity.

On 14 July 2019, the last day of that year's course, Schneider brought up his violation during an ethics lesson, and apologized if it had made the students uncomfortable, according to a few students present. "I don't think anyone commented," one of them recalls.

But the situation changed quickly after Dundes's tweet on 14 January. Within 42 hours, more than 14,000 people had seen the tweet, and 824 had clicked on a link that Dundes had posted to an account of Schneider's violation in UCSF's student newspaper, *Synapse*. Mark Peifer, a cell biologist at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, replied with a link to an entry on Schneider in one of the databases of sexual misconduct. "This is really disturbing -- @MBLScience -- what do you say about this," he wrote.

Patel says the MBL has been developing a plan for how to vet investigators who violated codes of misconduct elsewhere. "Frankly, most institutions are not going to tell us this information," Patel says, "so that is our challenge."

But it's not all that hard, counters Julie Libarkin, a geologist at Michigan State University in East Lansing, who created one of the online databases of substantiated sexual-harassment claims in 2016. Schneider's case and more than 1,000 others are in it. Libarkin acknowledges that her database is incomplete because it includes only records that have been made public – not those that were handled confidentially by institutions.

"A good step would be to require all job candidates to affirm that there has never been a formal or informal finding of misconduct against them," she says. "In order to have a sustainable academic system, we need to put people before everything else," she adds. "These are deep and troubling conversations to have, but they are so important."

Amy Maxmen, a senior reporter at *Nature*, attended the MBL course in 2003.