August 15, 2019

The Honorable Eddie Bernice Johnson  The Honorable Frank Lucas
Chairwoman  Ranking Member
Committee on Science, Space, and Committee on Science, Space, and
Technology  Technology
United States House of Representatives United States House of Representatives
2306 Rayburn House Office Building  2405 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515  Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairwoman Johnson and Ranking Member Lucas,

We are writing to thank you for your leadership in combating sexual harassment in STEM fields in the United States Congress, particularly for your leadership in the passage of the Combating Sexual Harassment in Science Act (H.R. 36) in the 116th Congress. On behalf of over 14,500 graduate students represented by the Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) of Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) and the Graduate Student Council (GSC) of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), we thank you for your efforts and hope for your continued support for reforming policies to create a safe working environment for STEM researchers — one that is free of any and all forms of sexual harassment and misconduct.

A safe and harassment-free work environment for all students, and researchers at our universities is essential to achieve diversity, equity, and inclusion required for the United States to continue its global leadership in science and innovation. As the National Academies noted in their report on sexual harassment in STEM last year, “…gender discrimination itself harms women and the broader meritocracy of science.” The acts of sexual harassment and misconduct, as well as the procedures around how sexual misconduct is handled, consequently, have a direct impact on our constituents. This impacts the overall campus climate which can influence students’ ability to pursue equal education opportunities. Hence, efforts to provide safe working space to students and researchers without having to worry about a potential act of sexual harassment or misconduct are important policy issues from our perspective.

In 2016, CMU conducted a survey on Discriminatory and Sexual Harassment. The survey found that at CMU, one-third of graduate students have experienced harassment at least once in an academic context, with the most common type of harassment as being subjected to an assumption based upon a stereotype. With discrimination and harassment rates for women being at least triple the rates for men, nearly one-quarter of graduate women were found to have been the subject of a stereotypical assumption in an academic setting, along with three percent of graduate men. The survey also revealed that more than forty percent of graduate students who identify as gay or lesbian have experienced at least one harassment experience based on their sexual orientation with another fifteen
percent of students who reported their gender identity was different from their birth sex indicating having experienced at least one act of harassment based on their gender identity. Likewise, MIT conducted a survey on Community Attitudes on Sexual Assault in 2014. The survey found that at MIT, at least 7% of female graduate students had been victims of sexual harassment along with 2% of men. Of the respondents who indicated an unwanted sexual experience at MIT, the most common impacts included being unable to work or complete assignments (35%), being unable to eat (30%), loss of interest in intimacy or sex (36%), and grades dropping (29%). Sexual harassment is a serious problem in higher education and impacts students’ well-being, not just at CMU or MIT but across the country, and addressing such a systemic issue requires a systemic reform.

Unfortunately, few incoming graduate students are aware of the climate of graduate school or what universities are doing to combat it. Reflected by the stories we have heard time after time, graduate students are often in vulnerable positions, as their entire professional careers hinge upon their advisors. Their career progress hinges on invitations to work on professors’ grants or—if students have their own projects—access to big data sets or expensive lab equipment controlled by overwhelmingly male senior faculty. The quality of the advisor-advisee relationship is the number one predictor of success in graduate school and after, and there is currently little to guarantee that students are protected from unhealthy, abusive and/or toxic environments. A survey conducted by CMU GSA in 2018 of advisor/advisee relations at CMU found that women were consistently less satisfied with their advisors than men. We hope that the research and data collection efforts presented as part of this bill will help address many of these issues. The Committee’s hearings on “Combating Sexual Harassment in Science,” underscored the need for the government, academia, and the broader science community to work together to combat the serious problem of sexual harassment in the scientific workplace.

However, we are concerned that the ongoing efforts by the Department of Education to revisit Title IX regulations could undermine any progress we make, if and once this bill becomes law. The definition of Sexual Harassment proposed by the Department of Education may limit the scope of what the National Science Foundation, National Science and Technology Council, and the Office of Science and Technology Policy study as part of the funding, once appropriated. Sexual harassment happens along a continuum. The Department’s efforts to limit the definition to the most severe sexual misconduct leaves students open to a hostile environment that can interfere with their ability to succeed in school and conduct research, resulting in severe underreporting of incidents, further impacting these studies and leading to results that could undermine the scope of this issue across our colleges and universities. We urge you to work with your colleagues and the agencies involved to ensure this does not happen.

We are once again very grateful for the efforts that your office has undertaken to improve higher education and support graduate students and we urge you to work with your colleagues to address issues faced by graduate students in the country. We believe that by doing so, we will be able to improve advancing policies that ensure a healthy graduate student experience not just at CMU or MIT, but throughout the nation. As always, if there is any way we can work
with your office to address these needs, or any other initiatives, please do not hesitate to reach out to us.

Sincerely,

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