
Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

Student Knowledge
and Experiences



Vocational Equity Research, Training and
Evaluation Center

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Background

A literature search performed by VERTEC staff during the last program year (2011-2012) indicated that little is known about the incidence and effects of sexual harassment of youth placed in workplaces as interns and through cooperative work agreements. The research that exists relative to sexual harassment in school indicates that these behaviors can profoundly affect students' (particularly girls') school commitment and achievement; the few studies that do exist examining the experience of students in jobs and internships suggest that the same is true of the workplace.

Last year, VERTEC staff administered a one-time, anonymous survey electronically (using Survey Monkey) to students via their Cooperative Work Experience instructors. The survey was designed to ask about student knowledge of what constitutes sexual harassment, student experiences of being harassed, any reporting of the harassment, comfort level with discussion of sexual harassment, and training/materials related to sexual harassment. The convenience sample was small (N=41), yet students, by their report, were experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace. While rates are lower for most types of harassing behaviors in school sponsored workplaces than in non-school sponsored workplaces, all students are experiencing these behaviors with some frequency.

During this year, VERTEC staff conducted a similar survey with a slightly larger group of students. Efforts were made by staff to recruit students from all districts across the state who participated in school-sponsored work experiences, but the response rate from teachers and counselors was low. Therefore, staff decided to also survey students from around the state who were participants in a statewide Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) conference.

Methodology

Students were recruited from among participants in a conference for Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) held in Cromwell, Connecticut on April 22, 2013 and through a Career and Technical Education teacher from a high school in New Haven County.

Study participation was voluntary and non-discriminatory. Students were advised not to include their names on the survey, and that all data would be aggregated. Additionally, they were informed that their participation or non-participation would not negatively affect their participation in any educational program in which they were involved (FBLA; their CTE classes); that they were free to respond or not to any questions included in the survey; and, that they were free to terminate their participation at any time. For FBLA students, a small incentive was offered for the return of a survey (a chance to win a raffle for an iPod).

Students were asked to provide non-identifying demographic information and asked a series of questions about their experiences in the workplace specifically related to behaviors identified as sexually harassing.

The survey was designed to measure knowledge, experiences and attitudes related to sexual harassment of students in the workplace. The survey was substantively similar to the survey administered last year to a group of 41 students via Survey Monkey, but included the following additions or revisions:

- **Question 6** was revised to assess the use of technology by harassers. *Which of these actions do you consider sexual harassment?* was revised to include two additional sub-questions (j and k) which both required a yes/no response: *A coworker posts unwanted Facebook messages of a sexual nature;* and *A coworker emails you with sexual jokes that make you uncomfortable.*
- **Question 9** was added to assess students’ attitudes about victim blaming. It required a yes/no response and read: *Sexual harassment in the workplace can be brought on by how a person is dressing or acting.*
- **Question 11** was added to collect information about who was doing the harassing in the workplace. The question read: *If you experienced any of the behavior identified at your last workplace, who committed the behavior?* It required students to respond yes/no to a number of options, including another *Peer; Co-worker; Supervisor; Client; Customer;* and, *Other.*
- **Question 14** was added to collect information about students’ attitudes regarding reasons for not reporting sexual harassment. It read: *If you did not report, why not?* Possible responses included: *Fear of losing my job; Fear of my grade being negatively impacted; Afraid that people wouldn’t believe me; I felt that I brought it on myself; I didn’t think anything would be done about it; I didn’t think it was a big deal;* and, *Other.*
- **Question 21** was added to collect information about the best way to reach students with information and resources related to sexual harassment. It read: *What would be the best way to get materials and information about sexual harassment to you?* Response options included: *Flyers/Posters; Book Cover; Pens/Pencils; Phone App; Website; Facebook Page;* and, *Other.*

Results

138 students responded to the survey – 99 FBLA students and 39 students from a high school in New Haven County. A student sample description follows in Table 1.

Table 1. Student sample description

	GENDER	
	Number	%
Female	81	58.7%
Male	52	37.7%
Trans/gender non-conforming	3	2.2%
Missing	2	1.4%

GRADE LEVEL

	Number	%
9 th	20	14.5%
10 th	28	20.3%
11 th	35	25.4%
12 th	53	38.4%
Missing	2	1.4%

RACE

	Number	%
African American/Black	12	8.7%
American Indian or Eskimo	2	1.4%
Asian or Pacific Islander	11	8%
Caucasian	89	64.5%
Multi-racial	6	4.3%
Other	16	11.6%
Missing	2	1.4%

ETHNICITY

	Number	%
Latino/Hispanic	24	17.4%
Not Latino/Hispanic	110	79.7%
Missing	4	2.9%

SCHOOL-SPONSORED WORKPLACE

	Number	%
Agriculture	9	6.5%
Business	59	42.8%
Childcare	6	4.3%
Construction	1	.7%
Food Service	3	2.2%
Healthcare	3	2.2%
Information Technology	6	4.3%
Manufacturing	1	.7%
Retail	6	4.3%
Other	14	10.2%
Multiple	11	8%
Missing	19	13.7%

Sexual Harassment: Knowledge

Responses to this year's surveys appear to confirm last year's findings as there was only incremental variation in frequencies of responses reported last and this year.

When asked “Which of these actions do you consider sexual harassment?” students’ responses included the following (Table 2). For comparison, this year’s responses appear in column 2; column 3 contains 2012-2012 survey response frequencies.

Table 2. Sexual harassment knowledge

	YES 2012-13	YES 2011-2012
A coworker asks about your sex life and constantly makes jokes about what you did on the weekends.	69.6%	56.4%
A coworker continuously addresses you as “baby.”	58.7%	56.4%
A coworker tells a joke and another coworker remarks, “That’s what she said.”	25.4%	33.3%
A customer compliments your hair.	6.5%	7.7%
Your supervisor promises you a raise if you give her/him a massage.	77.5%	76.9%
Your coworker asks you out every time you work together.	53.6%	46.2%
A supervisor consistently offers to drive you home. When you accept and you’re in the car, she/he puts a hand on your leg.	89.1%	87.2%
Coworkers are watching an inappropriate video at work in plain sight.	55.8%	51.3%
Coworkers consistently make comments about someone’s gender identity and/or sexual orientation.	65.2%	61.5%

When asked if sexual harassment can only occur between two people of opposite genders, 89.1% correctly indicated that the answer was false (similar to 2011-2012 results, 87.5%). Additionally this year, more students indicated that harassment in the workplace could occur in relationships that did not involve unequal authority or position; 91.3% answered false compared to 75% of students last year. The last question posed in the knowledge section indicated that approximately 72% of students thought that sexually harassing behavior could be brought on by dress or actions of the target.

Sexual Harassment: Behavior

When asked if they had experienced any of the following actions in a **SCHOOL SPONSORED WORKPLACE**, students’ responses included the following (Table 3).

Table 3. Sexual harassment behavior: school sponsored workplace

	YES 2012-2013	YES 2011-2012
Has someone made sexual or sex-based jokes that made you uncomfortable?	26.8%	24.4%
Has someone told rumors or spread information about your sex life?	26.8%	24.4%

Has someone threatened you if you do not comply with a sexual request?	6.5%	9.8%
Has someone made derogatory gestures or facial expressions of a sexual nature?	31.9%	19.5%
Has someone stared or made comments about your clothing, body, or appearance?	42%	36.6%
Has someone requested sexual favors in which you did not want to engage?	10.9%	12.2%
Have you been touched, hugged, kissed, stroked, and patted in a sexual way when you did not want to be?	22.5%	19.5%
Have you been promised an employment incentive (salary raise, promotion, new office, etc.) in exchange for engaging in sexual behavior?	5.1%	7.3%
Have you received unwanted texts, emails, phone calls, IMs, Face book messages, or Tweets of a sexual nature (ex. sexing, etc.)?	16.7%	22%
Has someone called you gay or lesbian in a negative way?	21%	9.8%
Have you received or been exposed to unwanted posters, drawings, pictures, or screensavers of a sexual nature?	18.8%	9.8%

When asked if they had experienced any of the following actions in a **NON-SCHOOL SPONSORED WORKPLACE**, students responses included the following (Table 4).

Table 4. Sexual harassment behavior: non-school sponsored workplace

	YES 2012-2013	YES 2011-2012
Has someone made sexual or sex-based jokes that made you uncomfortable?	31.9%	31.7%
Has someone told rumors or spread information about your sex life?	23.9%	21.9%
Has someone threatened you if you do not comply with a sexual request?	11.6%	24.4%
Has someone made derogatory gestures or facial expressions of a sexual nature?	34.8%	36.6%
Has someone stared or made comments about your clothing, body, or appearance?	37.7%	31.7%
Has someone requested sexual favors in which you did not want to engage?	24.6%	29.3%
Have you been touched, hugged, kissed, stroked, and patted in a sexual way when you did not want to be?	21%	29.3%
Have you been promised an employment incentive (salary raise, promotion, new office, etc.) in exchange for engaging in sexual behavior?	9.4%	26.8%
Have you received unwanted texts, emails, phone calls, IMs, Face book messages, or Tweets of a sexual nature (ex. sexing, etc.)?	30.4%	36.6%
Has someone called you gay or lesbian in a negative way?	29.3%	24.6%
Have you received or been exposed to unwanted posters, drawings, pictures, or screensavers of a sexual nature?	29.3%	23.9%

When asked who had committed the sexually harassing behavior at their workplace, student responses included the following (Table 5).

Table 5: Executor of harassing behavior

	Number	%
Another peer	74	53.6%
Co-worker	15	10.9%
Supervisor	11	8%
Client	2	1.4%
Customer	9	6.5%
Other	8	5.8%

Sexual Harassment: Reporting

When asked, “If you have experienced any of the behaviors in question 10 in your workplace, did you report it/tell someone?” 28 out of 76 respondents (36.8%) who answered the question (excluding those who answered *not applicable*) reported the incident(s). This compares to 13.5% of respondents in last years’ sample.

Of those who reported the harassment (N=51);

- 78.4% told a friend
- 33.3% told a parent
- 27.4% told a sibling
- 13.7% told a teacher
- 11.7% told a principal
- 9.8% told a guidance counselor
- 9.8% told another family member
- 7.8% told a coworker
- 3.9% told an employment supervisor
- 1.9% told other

When asked “If you did not report, why not?” responses included (N=85):

- Fear of losing my job: 4.7%
- Fear of my grade being negatively impacted: 5.9%
- Afraid that people wouldn’t believe me: 11.8%
- I felt that I brought it on myself: 7.0%
- I didn’t think anything would be done about it: 34.1%
- I didn’t think it was a big deal: 75.2%
- Other: 5.9%

Asked if they felt comfortable discussing the following topics with PEERS and ADULTS, students responded as illustrated in Table 6 (which follows).

Table 6: Comfort level of sexual harassment discussion

	PEERS		ADULTS	
	Not at all/ not very comfortable	Somewhat/ very comfortable	Not at all/ not very comfortable	Somewhat/ very comfortable
What sexual harassment is?	9.4%	85.5%	27.7%	69.3%
How to prevent sexual harassment?	10.8%	84.8%	27.5%	68.5%
What to do to prevent sexual harassment?	16.7%	79%	31.2%	65.3%

When asked, “Have you discussed in school how you report workplace sexual harassment?” 48.6% of students responded yes, while 44.9% answered no.

Students were also asked to indicate ALL of the vehicles that would be the BEST way to get information about sexual harassment; they responded:

- Website: 59.4%
- Flyers/posters: 55.5%
- Phone App: 29.7%
- Facebook page: 29.7%
- Pens/Pencils: 27%
- Book cover: 15.3%
- Other: 5.8%

Discussion

As in last year’s results, most students who responded to the survey questions related to sexual harassment knowledge could identify the most egregious forms of sexual harassment, especially those associated with physical touch. However, it is concerning that at least 30% of students did not regard a coworkers’ unwelcome comments about a student’s sex life, coworkers watching inappropriate videos and coworkers consistently making comments related to sexual identity and/or sexual orientation as sexual harassment. And it is even more concerning that more than 20% did not identify a supervisor promising a worker a raise in exchange for a massage as sexual harassment.

Importantly, many students expressed a victim-blaming attitude when asked if dress or actions could lead to sexual harassment. Approximately 72% of students responded that how a person is dressing or acting can precipitate sexual harassment in the workplace. This belief can affect whether a student perceives the perpetrator’s actions as sexual harassment, whether a student reports, and how a peer might support a friend who is targeted. The attitude expressed must be addressed in trainings provided to students, teachers and employers.

As for their own experiences with sexually harassing behavior, this year’s respondents appeared to confirm last year’s findings – they were more likely to be sexually harassed at a non-school sponsored workplace than at a school-sponsored workplace.

In school-sponsored workplaces, **four in ten students** reported someone making comments about their clothing, body or appearance (42%) and more than **three in ten students** reported someone making sexual gestures or facial expressions. Further, more than **one in four students** responded that someone made sexual jokes that made them uncomfortable or spread rumors about their sex life. And while sexual touch was experienced by a minority of respondents, almost **one in four students** had been touched, hugged, kissed, stroked or patted in a sexual way when they did not want to be.

In non-school sponsored workplaces, greater percentages of students reported sexually harassing behaviors in many categories. Twice as many students had been promised an employment incentive in exchange for sexual favors (9.4% in non-school sponsored workplaces v. 5.1% in school sponsored workplaces) and more respondents reported being threatened if they did not comply with a sexual request (11.6% v. 6.5%).

The data indicate that most of the harassing is being perpetrated by peers, although 8% reported being harassed by a supervisor.

Thirty-seven percent (37%) of students reported the harassment, most often to a friend or family member. For students who did not report, most did not report because they thought the behavior wasn't a big deal (75.2%) or they didn't think anything would come out of it (34.1%).

The additional data collected has allowed us to revise our training outlines (for students and teachers) to address the problematic attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, we will explicitly discuss the less egregious but more common forms of harassment, deconstruct the victim-blaming which prevents students from reporting harassment, and highlight how friends and siblings can help support a harassment target. Teachers need more targeted information about how pervasive sexual harassment is for their students who are also workers and strategies for facilitating discussions with students before they enter the workplace.

Recommendations

- Engage students in developing outreach messages.
- Engage school systems in promoting awareness of workplace sexual harassment.
- Use social media (web, facebook, tumblr) to inform students about sexual harassment and to facilitate reporting and assistance.
- Require workplace sexual harassment training for all students entering any school-sponsored workplace and for all teachers supervising their work experiences.

Appendices

- Parent Letter
- Teacher Letter
- Survey

PARENT LETTER

FROM: Lucy Brakoniecki, Research and Evaluation Director, 860.247.6090 x102, lbrakoniecki@cwealf.org
RE: Sexual Harassment Study – High School Students in the Workplace

Dear Parent,

CWEALF has been engaged in research, education and training related to the issues of sexual harassment in school and in the workplace since our founding in the early 1970's. CWEALF staff, through our Legal Information and Referral Program, informs and advocates for individual callers and provides training and technical assistance to middle school, high school and college audiences on Title VII and IX, assisting them to address individual needs, to understand the law, and to be able to identify, prevent and address sexually harassing behavior.

There is a great deal of research related to the incidence of sexual harassment in schools, and to the incidence for adults in the workplace, but little is known about the incidence and effects of sexual harassment of youth placed in workplaces as interns and through cooperative work agreements.

CWEALF staff is therefore proposing a study with high school students who are engaged in any school-sponsored or school-sanctioned work experience. Students will be recruited for a one-time, anonymous survey that will be conducted electronically (via Survey Monkey) or via paper instrument. Study participation will be completely voluntary, confidential, and non-discriminatory. Participants will be reminded that their participation or non-participation will not negatively affect their participation in their classes. In the unlikely event that participants find the survey distressing, they will be reminded that they are free to not respond to any question(s) they choose and they are free to terminate their participation at any time.

Students will be asked to provide some non-identifying demographic information and then asked a series of questions about their experiences in the workplace specifically related to behaviors identified as sexually harassing.

The information we receive will be used to inform materials and training for students who participate in the workforce in a number of ways. We really appreciate your son/daughter's participation.

Thank you!

Sexual harassment research

Last spring, CWEALF administered a one-time, anonymous survey electronically (using Survey Monkey) to students via their Cooperative Work Experience instructors. The survey was designed to ask about student knowledge of what constitutes sexual harassment, student experiences of being harassed, any reporting of the harassment, comfort level with discussion of sexual harassment, and training/materials related to sexual harassment.

Students in the sample could identify the behaviors that constitute sexual harassment, especially the most egregious acts related to physical touch and quid pro quo type behaviors. Yet, knowledge of the kinds of behaviors that constitute a hostile environment is not as evident. **And more importantly, students are experiencing sexual harassment in their workplaces, both school and non-school sponsored.** While rates are lower for most types of harassing behaviors in school sponsored workplaces than in non-school sponsored workplaces, all students are experiencing these behaviors with some frequency.

We will be gathering more data about the incidence of sexual harassment in school and non-school sponsored work placements in Connecticut, and we need your help.

The survey will be administered either via a paper instrument or online. Student participation is voluntary and anonymous.

The information we gather will help us and our partners to develop trainings and informational materials that will be used to inform students, educators and employers.

To have your students participate, please contact:

Lucy Brakoniecki, Research and Evaluation Director

lbrakoniecki@cwealf.org or 860.247.6090 x102

Thank you!

SURVEY

ID#_____

The CT Women's Education and Legal Fund would like you to complete the following survey to help us gather information about student experiences in both school sponsored and non-school sponsored workplaces regarding sexual harassment.

Your participation or non-participation is completely anonymous and confidential and will not negatively affect your participation in your CWE or internship program or any educational program in any way.

You are free to not respond to any question(s) you choose and free to stop participating at any time.

If you consent to taking this survey, please circle YES below; if not, circle NO.

Thank you for your participation.

Yes, I do want to participate or No, I do not want to participate

For the questions below, please circle the letter before the response that BEST describes you.

1. Gender:

- A. Male
- B. Female
- C. Transgender/Gender non-conforming

2. What is your current grade level in school?

- A. 9
- B. 10
- C. 11
- D. 12

3. What is your race? (Please circle ALL that apply)

- A. Black/African American
- B. White/Caucasian
- C. American Indian or Eskimo
- D. Asian or Pacific Islander
- E. Other (please specify) _____

4. What is your ethnicity?

- A. Latino/Hispanic
- B. Non-Latino/ Non-Hispanic

5. Which of these most accurately describes your school-sponsored workplace?

- A. Agriculture
- B. Business
- C. Childcare
- D. Construction
- E. Food Service
- F. Healthcare
- G. Information Technology
- H. Manufacturing
- I. Retail
- J. Other (please specify) _____

**6. Which of these actions do you consider sexual harassment?
(Please circle ALL that apply)**

- A. A coworker asks about your sex life and constantly makes jokes about what you did on the weekends.
- B. A coworker continuously addresses you as "baby."
- C. A coworker tells a joke and another coworker remarks, "That's what she said."
- D. A customer compliments your hair.
- E. Your supervisor promises you a raise if you give her/him a massage.
- F. Your coworker asks you out every time you work together.
- G. A supervisor consistently offers to drive you home. When you accept and you're in the car, he/she puts a hand on your leg.
- H. Coworkers are watching an inappropriate video at work in plain sight.
- I. Coworkers consistently make comments about someone's gender identity and/or sexual orientation.
- J. A coworker continuously posts unwanted facebook messages of a sexual nature.
- K. A coworker emails you sexual jokes that make you feel uncomfortable.

7. Sexual harassment in the workplace can only occur between two people of opposite genders.

- A. True
- B. False

8. Sexual harassment in the workplace can only occur between two people of unequal authority or position. (For example, between a supervisor or manager and someone they are supervising.)

- A. True
- B. False

9. Sexual harassment in the workplace can be brought on by how a person is dressing or acting.

- A. True
- B. False

22. What do you feel are the three best ways to prevent sexual harassment?

A.

B.

C.

23. Do you have any suggestions and/or comments regarding sexual harassment for your school or work place? Please put as much detail as you would like.



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