Call for structural changes to mitigate the potential for abuse and harm in Oceanography

We, the combined Graduate student and Postdoc communities, are writing to call on the School of Oceanography community, Director and Faculty Council to evaluate current policies and procedures that perpetuate systemic abuse and harm. In the last few months this community, and the academy more broadly, has grappled with how to ensure a safe and inclusive environment. The current culture and power dynamics of academia does harm and enables abuse of trainees, here defined as undergraduate and graduate students and postdoctoral researchers. This abuse disproportionately impacts Black trainees, trainees of color, LGBTQ+ trainees, trainees with disabilities, and other underrepresented groups. Furthermore, trainees are constrained by power dynamics, which prevent victims of abuse from asking for help or coming forward with issues. Abuses of power are not an abstract problem nor are they unique to a few individual bad actors. Abuse stems from systemic issues that manifest both as singular incidents and as long-term patterns of behavior.

The graduate students have already identified many of these systemic issues and presented ideas for solutions. Here, we present further guidance that builds on that foundation and expands the proposed solutions. We recognize that there may be many possible solutions to the issues presented, and we welcome a discussion about how best to improve our community. In brief, the proposals outlined below can be summarized as follows:

**Issue 1:** Need for Oceanography leadership to have a more thorough understanding of how abuse and power dynamics play out and persist in the School of Oceanography.

**Issue 2:** Lack of orientation and onboarding information for postdocs, including information for PIs about IDPs and annual reviews.

**Issue 3:** Need for transparency about disciplinary processes and consequences for faculty, adjunct faculty, affiliate faculty and anyone else in Oceanography who serves as a primary mentor for trainees.

**Issue 4:** Inconsistencies among current curricular groups’ semi-annual review of graduate student progress.

**Issue 5:** Lack of a standardized and transparent semi-annual feedback system for trainees, especially postdocs.

**Issue 6:** Lack of understanding and data about the current climate and established metrics for improvement within the School of Oceanography.
Issue 1

The Director and DEI committee chairs have indicated that they need a more thorough understanding of how abuse and power dynamics play out and persist in the School of Oceanography.

Proposed solution: A meeting with the Director and DEI committee chairs about how the power dynamics of the academy impact trainees and prevent them from being successful in the Oceanography department.

Timeline: This meeting should occur before the start of the 2020 Fall Quarter.

Issue 2

There is no department-wide documentation about expectations for PIs or postdocs to ensure a successful postdoctoral experience. As a result, all orientation, onboarding, evaluation, and access to university- or departmental- resources is currently handled ad hoc by current PIs, with various levels of success and care. The current ad hoc system is not inclusive, defaults to ignorance and neglect, and thus is unnecessarily harmful to trainees.

Proposed solutions:
1. Provide materials that include (at the least) the following: onboarding information, explanation of benefits, HR resources, professional development resources, expectations for PIs and postdocs regarding individual development plans and reviews (annual or semi-annual). This could take the form of a handbook similar to the Graduate Student Guide. Note that there is an existing University-wide PostDoc handbook (from 2014) with some important resources, though it does not reflect the recent unionization of postdocs. The College of the Environment website does not link to this handbook despite several requests for this correction. These Oceanography and College of the Environment specific resources could be compiled by the College, but such an effort would require significant leverage from the Oceanography department to gain momentum.

2. This information should be distributed to current postdocs, potential postdocs, and PIs hosting or recruiting postdocs.

Timeline: Materials should be accessible by the end of 2020 and updated yearly to incorporate improvements requested through the annual climate survey (see Issue 6).
Issue 3

Currently students and postdocs do not know how faculty (including adjuncts and affiliates) are evaluated on their advising or what consequences are imposed on faculty who behave badly or are poor mentors. Transparency about what consequences can be and are imposed on faculty is critical as these decisions have a massive impact on individuals within our department who lack the power to influence them, contributing to power imbalances and hostile work environments.

Proposed solutions: Transparency about disciplinary processes and consequences for faculty, adjunct faculty, affiliate faculty and anyone else in Oceanography who serves as a primary mentor for trainees.

1. Echoing the graduate student call to action, we request the public disclosure of faculty mentorship records to provide transparency within our department and to help inform prospective students and postdocs. New hires should be explicitly informed in their contract letters that the department takes faculty evaluations seriously, and the evaluations can be made available for them to review.

2. These records should include quantitative metrics of attrition, students graduated, student time to graduation, undergraduate students mentored, and postdocs mentored, as well as information gathered via anonymized surveys (see Issue 6).

3. The department should distribute information about the evaluation timelines, mechanisms of evaluation, and corresponding disciplinary consequences for all types of faculty, including adjunct faculty and affiliate faculty. This could be distributed via the Oceanography website or MyOcean intranet. Along with this information, there should be clear instructions about how trainees can give feedback that will inform these evaluations. If there are currently no evaluation mechanisms for non-voting faculty or affiliate faculty, the department should come up with such mechanisms.

4. In the event that a situation requires serious disciplinary action to be taken, the Director should write to the School of Oceanography membership to acknowledge the situation and describe the consequences imposed.

5. It has come to our attention that one response to abuse and inappropriate behavior from faculty is to bar faculty from working with or advising a particular group of trainees (e.g. graduate students). If faculty are barred from advising one group that information should either be made public, or the faculty should be barred from advising all trainees (e.g. postdocs and undergraduates).

Timeline: These materials should be made available by February 2021 (prior to graduate student recruitment) and should be updated annually.
Issue 4

The Graduate Student Guide notes that "it is the responsibility of the adviser to provide a summary of the [semi-annual] curricular group's advice and guidance, obtain curricular group approval of that summary, and place it in the student’s file after discussion of its content with the student." There is currently a lack of data on how the review process is instituted, whether it is effective, and whether it perpetuates bias or does harm. For the few students who do receive feedback from these semi-annual curricular group evaluations, it is inconsistent in form and substance, sometimes directly contradicting previous feedback from one’s committee. Additionally, the current review process is extremely inconsistent across options. As it stands, the process does not result in meaningful interventions for students who are not meeting expectations, and BIPOC students have expressed concern about opportunities for bias and inappropriate discussions (e.g. violations of privacy or confidentiality) within the current format.

Proposed solutions:

1. Collect at least the last five years of reviews from all four options in order to evaluate the feedback conveyed following the semi-annual reviews. With a specific focus on if this feedback results in successful outcomes and/or perpetuates harm. This evaluation needs to be thorough and qualitative, and must address:
   a. How often and the manner (e.g. email, in-person meeting) in which feedback is conveyed to students.
   b. The consequences of that feedback and whether the feedback is consistent with the eventual success of students or the timing of benchmarks achieved by students (e.g. did feedback adequately convey the need for improvement to students who failed their general exam?).
   c. How often feedback is positive vs. negative as well as constructive vs. unhelpful, and whether those distributions vary across student demographics (gender, race, etc.).

2. Anonymized quantitative data should be shared with the Oceanography community via MyOcean. The results of this evaluation should also be discussed at a meeting with students, the Director, the Faculty Council, and the DEI committee.

Timeline: This evaluation should be completed by January 2021 in order to inform the development of a new standardized semi-annual feedback system.


**Issue 5**

As detailed above, the current review system is inconsistent and does not provide trainees adequate feedback. Additionally, there is currently no feedback system in place for postdocs even though Article 11, Section 3 of the UAW Postdoctoral Scholars contract entitles them to “at least one written review per twelve (12)-month period.” While the contract does not require individual units to establish assessment and IDP procedures, this language is in the contract because these procedures help facilitate the intentional mentoring of postdocs and protect them from abuse. These procedures represent best practices and therefore should be put in place.

**Proposed solutions:**

1. Standardize the format of the curricular groups’ semi-annual review of graduate student progress and broaden the scope of these semi-annual reviews to include postdocs.
   a. These evaluations should use a rubric that is completed for each student and postdoc. The rubrics do not need to be the same for graduate students and postdocs, but they should be made available in the Graduate Student Guide and Postdoc Handbook (see Issue 2), respectively.
   b. The rubrics should evaluate trainees using specific categories, such as academic performance, outreach and service, and research progress.
   c. The rubrics should ask specific questions, e.g. “Is this student on track to meet their next benchmark (i.e. Master’s Degree, General Exam, PhD defense)?” or "Is this postdoc on track to have an application package ready for their next job, as highlighted on their IDP?”, and should include constructive feedback that is specific to the trainee.

2. In the event a graduate student is not on track, the semi-annual review for students should offer clear steps that the student should take to get on track, as well as identify the ways in which their advisor and/or committee plan to support the student in getting back on track.

3. The semi-annual review for postdocs should result in a discussion between the advisor and the postdoc regarding their IDP, and should include constructive feedback that is specific to the trainee about what they need to do in order to meet the goals established in their IDP.

**Timeline:** This new system should be established and implemented in time for the Spring 2021 semi-annual reviews.
Issue 6

We are currently lacking the data to accurately identify problems within the School of Oceanography. Furthermore, as we implement changes, we will need metrics to evaluate progress and establish new goals. This data will help identify problematic faculty and staff, identify systemic issues with the curriculum and graduate program, and build a strong alumni network that could further limit harm to trainees by providing new avenues for mentorship.

Proposed solutions:
1. We support the implementation of the Exit Survey that is currently being developed.
   a. Anonymized quantitative data should be shared with the Oceanography community via MyOcean. Written responses should be summarized and anonymized by the Graduate Program Coordinator or someone like Tansy or Mikelle before being shared with the community via MyOcean.
   b. Faculty reviews should include these anonymized survey responses, as well as relevant information about abuse and biases raised in course evaluations.
   c. The results should be presented and discussed annually at a faculty meeting.
2. In addition to exit surveys, we should be routinely collecting data on the climate of the School. Conducting annual surveys will create a large enough sample size to truly anonymize results.
   a. Anonymized quantitative data should be shared with the Oceanography community via MyOcean. Written responses should be summarized and anonymized by Tansy or Mikelle before being shared with the community via MyOcean.
   b. The questions asked should overlap with those asked during the exit interview, but this annual survey does not need to be identical to the exit survey.
   c. The results should be presented and discussed annually at a faculty meeting.

Timeline: The Exit Survey should be implemented by the end of the 2020 summer and sent to students who have graduated or finished a MS within the 2019-2020 academic year. The first annual climate survey should be implemented by the end of the 2020-2021 academic year.

Signed,

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