

# UNDERGRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS OF HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

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Sexual harassment is common in high schools and research has provided in-depth information about the frequency and types of sexually harassing behaviors. Female students experience more sexual harassment and are more negatively affected than their male counterparts. Although sexual harassment is frequently occurring in schools, very few students report these behaviors to anyone, in particular to school staff. This study sought to identify reasons why students chose not to report sexually harassing behaviors to school staff. Participants were 197 first-year undergraduate females in introductory psychology courses. Participants completed a modified version of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) survey which collected information on demographics, if they experienced sexually harassing behaviors during high school, if they reported these behaviors, the reasons why they chose not to report, if they had knowledge of their school's sexual harassment policy, and if they perceived they had been sexually harassed. Overall, there was variability between the different behaviors and why students chose not to report. The most common reasons were related to not finding the behaviors offensive enough or it not occurring to them to tell anyone about the behaviors. In addition, of statistical significance is that reporters of sexually harassing behaviors more often indicated they had been sexually harassed and non-reporters more often indicated they had not been sexually harassed. These findings suggest that there may be a need for further

education about sexual harassment in high schools as a means to enhance school culture, raise student awareness about behaviors that constitute sexual harassment, and to make school staff more appealing confidants for students.

UNDERGRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS OF HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 1972, Title IX of the Education Amendments Act was enacted to reduce the occurrence of sexual harassment by forbidding harassment in academic settings that receive federal funding and by requiring schools to have disciplinary guidelines against sexual harassment (Fineran & Bennett, 1998). Despite this effort, sexual harassment continues to be a problem in America's schools, particularly in high schools; studies have shown that more than 80% of high school students have been sexually harassed (Fineran & Bennett, 1998; Ormerod, Collinsworth, & Perry, 2008; Walsh, Duffy, & Gallagher-Duffy, 2007). These figures are alarming, especially given that sexual harassment in school is prohibited and many schools are supposed to have a zero-tolerance policy for harassment.

The U.S. Department of Education's definition of school sexual harassment includes any verbal, nonverbal, or physical behavior that is sexual in nature, unwelcome, and that "denies or limits a student's ability to participate in or benefit from a school's education program" (2008, p. 3). Sexual harassment in school can be perpetrated by school staff, students, or "non-employee third parties" and can take place during a school program or activity, on school grounds, school bus, or at other off-facility locations (U.S. Department of Education, p.3). According to the U.S. Department of Education, examples of sexual harassment at school include:

sexual propositions or pressuring students for sexual favors; touching of a sexual nature; writing graffiti of a sexual nature; displaying or distributing sexually explicit drawings, pictures, or written materials; performing sexual gestures or touching oneself sexually in front of others; telling sexual or dirty jokes; spreading sexual rumors or rating other students as to sexual activity or performance; or circulating or showing e-mails or Web sites of a sexual nature. (2008, pp. 3-4).

Researchers that have studied school sexual harassment follow the general guideline that sexual harassment is behavior that is sexual in nature, unwelcome, and unwanted by the victim (e.g., Wishnietsky, 1991).

Early research focused on sexual harassment in university or workplace settings, rather than in high schools. Several studies have been concerned with the demographic characteristics of sexual harassment perpetrators or victims, such as age, race, or sex. These studies have shown overwhelmingly that perpetrators are usually male and victims are usually female (AAUW, 1993; Fineran & Bennett, 1998; Hill & Kearn, 2011; Roscoe, Strouse, & Goodwin, 1994; Slotten, 2002). Females receive more sexual harassment than males (Hill & Kearn, 2011; Ormerod et al., 2008). In addition to gender characteristics, most research on schools has focused on the frequency of sexual harassment (AAUW, 1993) or types of harassment experienced by students (AAUW, 1993; Roscoe et al., 1994; Timmerman, 2003; Walsh, et al., 2007).

Although studies have shown that sexual harassment is a common occurrence in schools, few students actually report their personal experiences of sexual harassment to others (Hill & Kearn, 2011; Slotten, 2002; Walsh et al., 2007; Wishnietsky, 1991). For example, Walsh and colleagues found that less than 0.5% of high school students who had experienced sexually harassing behaviors reported the incident(s) to a teacher or school staff. Only 7% of these students told a friend and 1% told a family member. Timmerman's (2003) study conducted in the Netherlands found slightly higher reporting rates, however, these were still surprisingly low (e.g., 8% told a teacher, 3% told a school counselor, and 1% told a school doctor/nurse).

Reporting sexual harassment to school officials would seem to be an important step in reducing the experience of sexual harassment in schools. A more recent study done by Hill and Kearn

(2011) found higher reporting rates among middle and high school students, with 12% reporting to a school employee, 32% told a parent or family member, and 29% told a friend.

Sexual harassment can lead to negative outcomes for victims, including academic, health, and psychological problems. Negative academic outcomes resulting from sexual harassment include school absenteeism (AAUW, 1993; Fineran & Bennett, 1998; Hill & Kearl, 2011), as well as concentration problems and decreased class participation (AAUW, 1993; Hill & Kearl, 2011). Other studies have found that victims' overall school performance was negatively affected (Duffy, Wareham, & Walsh, 2004; Fineran & Bennett, 1998) and victims reported feeling unsafe at school (Chiodo, Wolfe, Crooks, Hughes, & Jaffe, 2009). Victims may take measures to avoid perpetrators, including skipping or withdrawing from classes which would in turn affect academic outcomes (Fineran & Bennett, 1998; Hill & Kearl, 2011).

Victims may also experience physical problems and psychosomatic symptoms as a result of sexual harassment. These include sleep problems (AAUW, 1993; Hill & Kearl, 2011), appetite problems (AAUW, 1993; Chiodo et al., 2009), and substance use (Chiodo et al., 2009). Hill and Kearl also found that many students who experienced sexual harassment reported having an upset stomach (2011). Psychological problems that may stem from being a victim of school sexual harassment include decreased self-esteem (AAUW, 1993; as cited in Fineran & Bennett, 1998; Ormerod et al., 2008; Timmerman, 2003) and self-confidence (AAUW, 1993; Duffy et al., 2004; as cited in Fineran & Bennett, 1998; Strauss & Espeland, 1992;), negative body image (Lindberg, Grabe, & Hyde, 2007; Ormerod et al., 2008), suicidal thoughts (Chiodo et al., 2009) and overall psychological distress (Ormerod et al., 2008). Duffy and colleagues found that student victims of sexual harassment reported being self-conscious, embarrassed,

afraid, confused, and were unsure if they would have a positive romantic relationship in the future (2004).

Sexual harassment does not just affect the victim during its occurrence, but its effects may continue into the future. For instance, Chiodo and colleagues (2009) found that ninth grade girls who were sexually harassed in school later experienced emotional and delinquency problems in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. These girls were also more likely to be victims of dating violence and physical violence from other peers later in life. Students in Hill and Kears's study reported experiencing sleeping problems after the time that the sexual harassment occurred (2011).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Research has shown that sexual harassment occurs frequently in schools, particularly toward female students. Sexual harassment in schools may lead to academic, health, and psychological issues for victims, and these effects can be long-lasting. Studies have shown that few students report school sexual harassment, especially to school employees. The few studies done in this area have investigated the rates at which and to whom students report personal sexual harassment experiences. However, one question remains: Why are high school students not reporting sexual harassment?

It is important to understand the reasons and factors that influence why students are not reporting sexual harassment in schools. If students who have been victims of sexual harassment do not report school sexual harassment to an adult, then it is likely that no action will be taken to stop the harassment. Reporting harassment to an adult also increases the likelihood that the victim will receive the appropriate help to alleviate any academic, health, and psychological problems. Reporting may also help ensure that the perpetrator receives the appropriate discipline and, where necessary, psychological intervention that may further reduce harassment. In

addition, if school staff and administrators are not made aware of sexual harassment, they may not know how common it is and might not undertake system-wide preventative actions. If it is known why sexual harassment victims in high school underreport its occurrence to school staff, steps can be taken to increase the probability that it will get reported and potentially be resolved in schools.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to examine the reasons why students do not report sexually harassing behaviors to school staff. There are various reasons why students might choose not to report, and these are listed as research questions below.

When students chose not to report sexually harassing behaviors, did they do so because:

1. They did not think the behavior was offensive enough to report?
2. There was no one in the school to whom they felt comfortable reporting?
3. They believed there would be negative outcomes for reporting?
4. It did not occur to them to tell anyone about it?
5. They did not know that their high school had a sexual harassment policy or how to obtain it?
6. There was a discrepancy between their subjective labeling of sexual harassment and their objective experiences of such?
7. Or, there were other reasons?

### **Definitions of Variables**

The variables used in this study are defined as follows:

Sexually harassing behavior: A verbal, nonverbal, or physical behavior that is sexual in nature, and unwanted by the person experiencing the behavior; could be any of the 14 behaviors

from the American Association of University Women (AAUW) survey, including someone who: 1) made sexual comments, jokes, gestures, or looks, 2) showed, gave, or left sexual pictures, photographs, illustrations, messages, or notes, 3) wrote sexual messages/graffiti on bathroom walls, in locker rooms, etc., 4) spread sexual rumors, 5) said the victim was gay or lesbian, 6) spied on the victim as she dressed or showered at school, 7) touched, grabbed, or pinched the victim in a sexual way, 8) pulled at the victim's clothing in a sexual way, 9) flashed or mooned the victim, 10) intentionally brushed against the victim in a sexual way, 11) pulled the victim's clothing off or down, 12) blocked the victim's way or cornered the victim in a sexual way, 13) forced the victim to kiss the perpetrator, or 14) forced the victim to do something sexual other than kissing. This may also be referred to as potential sexual harassment, since the questionnaire does not assess whether there were consequences suffered from experiencing the behaviors, thus not warranting the use of the term sexual harassment.

Negative outcome for reporting: One or more of the following reasons selected from the AAUW survey: 1) "I would not be taken seriously," 2) "The behavior would continue or increase if I reported," 3) "I would be blamed for the incident," or 4) "I would experience retaliation from the person if I reported."

Objective experience of sexually harassing behavior: Experience of at least one of the 14 AAUW behaviors as indicated by response on the questionnaire.

Subjective sexual harassment: The perception that one had been sexually harassed, by selecting "Yes" to the following question: "Thinking back to your entire high school career, do you think you were ever subjected to sexual harassment?"

Discrepancy between subjective sexual harassment and objective experience:

Experiencing objective harassment but selecting “No” to the following question: “Thinking back to your entire high school career, do you think you were ever subjected to sexual harassment?”

Reporter: A participant who indicated that she had experienced at least one of the 14 sexually harassing behaviors by selecting “Yes” on the AAUW survey and also indicated that she reported at least one behavior that she experienced by selecting “Yes” when asked if a behavior was reported to someone who worked at her high school.

Non-reporter: A participant who indicated that she had experienced at least one of the 14 sexually harassing behaviors by selecting “Yes” on the AAUW survey and also indicated that she never reported any of the behaviors by selecting “No” when asked if a behavior was reported to someone who worked at her high school.

The following hypotheses were studied:

1. *Knowledge of school policy.* Participants indicating that their high school had a sexual harassment policy or they knew how to obtain it would be related to reporting sexually harassing behaviors, where participants who reported would be more likely to answer “Yes” and those who did not report would be more likely to answer “No” or “My high school didn’t have a sexual harassment policy” to this item.
2. *Subjective labeling of sexual harassment.* Accurately subjectively labeling sexual harassment and experiencing objective sexually harassing behaviors will be related to reporting, where participants who reported would be more likely to answer “Yes” and those who did not report would be more likely to answer “No” to this item.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Sexual Harassment in High School**

To date, numerous studies have been conducted on the frequency and types of sexual harassment that occur during high school, including information about the demographics of its victims and perpetrators. Researchers have found that girls experience more sexually harassing behaviors than boys (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Ormerod et al., 2008; Timmerman, 2003; Walsh et al., 2007), with 80% or more girls reporting the experience of at least one sexually harassing behavior (Ormerod et al., 2008; Walsh, 2007). Researchers have also reported that males are typically those who perpetrate sexual harassment towards females (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Roscoe, 1994; Timmerman, 2003). To collect this information, researchers have asked high school students to share their experiences of sexual harassment (Ormerod et al., 2008; Timmerman, 2003; Walsh et al., 2007), collected undergraduates' retrospective accounts of high school sexual harassment (Corbett, Gentry, & Pearson, 1993; Houston & Hwang, 1996; Slotten, 2002), and asked adults to share their high school experiences through interview (Slotten, 2002).

Timmerman's 2003 study was conducted in secondary schools in a rural area of the Netherlands with 14- and 15-year old male and female students. Participants completed a questionnaire that collected information about the frequency of unwanted sexual behaviors that occurred during school activities. Other information they collected included if the behaviors were perpetrated by teachers or peers, the location of these behaviors, how severe the behaviors were perceived, and if participants talked to another person about the behaviors. Results from this study indicated that female students reported being the target of unwanted sexual behaviors more frequently than males and that males, both peers and teachers, were more often perpetrators of those behaviors.



Ormerod and colleagues (2008) also studied male and female high school students. These researchers looked at the frequency of sexual harassment perpetrated by both peers and school-staff, along with the level of distress the victim experienced. Factors that were hypothesized to contribute to peer harassment were the participant's perception of school tolerance of sexual harassment, self-esteem, perceived health, concern with body image, school safety, and avoidance of school. The researchers found that over 95% of girls reported at least one experience of sexual harassment, and these experiences were more frequent and upsetting for girls than boys. They also found that girls who indicated their schools were tolerant of sexual harassment reported feeling unsafe at school, avoided school, and had decreased self-esteem.

A Canadian study by Chiodo and colleagues (2009) examined sexual harassment in high school with ninth grade male and female students, and then followed up with these students during their 11<sup>th</sup> grade year. Other variables that these researchers studied were dating and peer violence, emotional distress, suicidal thought, self-harm, maladaptive dieting behaviors, substance use, feeling unsafe at school, and information regarding sexual activity and dating. Boys and girls reported experiencing similar rates of sexual harassment, however, girls reported experiencing more unwanted sexual jokes and comments, and unwanted touch than boys. In contrast to boys, girls exhibited all of the examined risk factors associated with sexual harassment, including suicidal thoughts, self-harm, maladaptive dieting, early dating, substance use, and feeling unsafe at school. This pattern was seen later in 11<sup>th</sup> grade as well, where the male students had fewer risk factors and to a lesser magnitude when compared to female students, suggesting the pervasiveness of sexual harassment's effects.

Roscoe and colleagues (1994) studied early adolescents' experiences and acceptance of sexual harassment. Participants were male and female students in one intermediate school who

were aged 11- to 16- years old. Participants completed a questionnaire created by the researchers about different sexually harassing behaviors perpetrated by peers only, and to what degree they found those behaviors acceptable. Female students experienced more sexually harassing behaviors than male students and were generally unaccepting of those behaviors. The researchers also found that male students were generally the perpetrators of sexual harassment toward female students.

Two studies conducted in Newfoundland by Duffy and colleagues (2004) examined the sexual harassment experiences of male and female high school and college students aged 16 years and older. High school students were asked about their sexual harassment experiences in the preceding two weeks, and first-year psychology college students who had been sexually harassed in high school were asked to recount their accounts of sexual harassment experiences during their last year in high school. Both studies collected the frequency of sexually harassing behaviors and how upsetting the participants found these behaviors. Participants in both studies also indicated if they had experienced various psychological or educational problems and if they had sexually harassed anyone. Among high school students, females had significantly more psychological consequences resulting from being sexually harassed than males. Females also had slightly more negative educational consequences and also doubted if they would have a happy romantic relationship. The first-year college students reported doubting if would have a happy romantic relationship. Overall, both studies indicated that the types of consequences experienced differed according to the behavior.

### **Assessment of Sexual Harassment**

When determining whether students have been sexually harassed, researchers typically use the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ) or a version of the AAUW survey. The SEQ

was developed for use with adults, including adults in the workplace and university settings, and there are no standardized versions of it that exist (Gutek, Murphy, & Douma, 2004). The AAUW survey was designed to be used with students and it examines 14 behaviors that could be classified as sexual harassment in a school setting (AAUW, 1993).

Various studies have used the SEQ in different settings and with different populations to assess school sexual harassment, and thus various versions have been used due to the unstandardized nature of this instrument. For instance, Houston and Hwang (1996) used the SEQ to gather the frequency of sexually harassing behaviors perpetrated by high school teachers, while Barak, Fisher, and Houston (1992) used it to gather frequency of behaviors perpetrated by professors toward college students. Reber (2000) used a modified version of the SEQ with undergraduate women in introductory psychology classes to determine if various sexually harassing behaviors occurred or not. Ormerod and colleagues (2008) used two different versions of the SEQ to collect data on the frequency of sexual harassment for male and female high school seniors, with one version worded for peer perpetrated harassment and one for school-adult perpetrated harassment.

In contrast to the variability of the SEQ, researchers are able to use the original version of the AAUW survey or can make slight modifications to the wording. By using the AAUW survey, researchers can look at the same behaviors across studies and samples. Walsh and colleagues (2007) used a modified version of the AAUW survey to examine high school students' experiences of sexually harassing behaviors that occurred in the previous two weeks. They also modified it by removing the collection of frequency of behaviors and added a nonsense item for response bias. Chiodo and colleagues (2009) used a modified version of the AAUW survey; the version their participants completed included behaviors that occurred in the

past three months and the removal of collecting frequency data of behaviors by having participants only indicate whether or not the behavior occurred. Duffy and colleagues (2004) modified the AAUW survey by having participants indicate the frequency of behaviors within the past two weeks and also included a lie scale question. Lindberg and colleagues (2007) used the AAUW survey with a sample of rising sixth grade students. They examined the frequency of sexually harassing behaviors within the past year to determine if students had been sexually harassed by peers, and they found that being sexually harassed mediated the relationship between self-surveillance and objectified body consciousness. Hill and Kearn (2011) used a version of the AAUW survey to examine the frequency of sexually harassing experiences among middle and high school students during one school year.

### **Reporting Rates**

Few studies have examined if students report sexually harassing behaviors to others. For instance, Timmerman (2003) asked students to indicate to whom, if anyone, they talked to about their experiences. In that study, most students told a friend (88%), while fewer reported the behaviors to their parents (33%), teachers (8%), school counselor (3%), or school doctor/nurse (1%).

In a study done by Walsh and colleagues (2007), very few students told anyone about experiencing sexually harassing behaviors. Seven percent of their participants told a friend, 2% told no one, and 1% told a parent or family member. In addition, only 0.5% told a teacher or school employee and 2% told someone who was not a friend, parent, family member, teacher or school employee.

In a 2011 study by Hill and Kearn, middle and high school students who experienced sexually harassing behaviors indicated to whom they told about these incidents. In their overall

sample, 12% of students told a school employee, 32% told a parent or family member, 29% told a friend, and 2% reported to police. Forty-four percent of these students did not do anything in response to experiencing sexually harassing behaviors.

### **Reasons for Not Reporting**

There are various reasons why a student might choose not to report sexually harassing behaviors to school staff, these are related to: perceived offensiveness of behavior(s), comfort with reporting to school staff, perceived outcomes for reporting, knowledge of school's sexual harassment policy, subjective labeling of sexual harassment, and other reasons.

#### **Perceived Offensiveness**

Only one study has examined victims' perceived offensiveness of sexually harassing behaviors and how this might relate to reporting. Welsh (1999) studied the sexual harassment experiences of undergraduate junior and senior women during college, and examined the various variables that influenced whether the students reported the behaviors. The researcher found that women who perceived a sexually harassing behavior to be more offensive were more likely to report and vice versa.

Other studies have investigated similar variables, such as acceptability and severity of behaviors, however, did not discuss the relation of this to the reporting of behaviors. Roscoe and colleagues (1994) examined adolescents' acceptability of sexually harassing behaviors. Although students in their study found sexually harassing behaviors to be unacceptable, they indicated that students did nothing about the behaviors. Open-ended responses provided by some students about why they did nothing included not considering the behaviors to be unwelcome or illegal, or that the behavior is common or just a way to show interest in the opposite sex. With regard to severity, studies have found that females who perceived their sexual harassment

incidents as less severe were less likely to define those experiences as sexual harassment (Barak et al., 1992; Houston et al., 1996; Reber, 2000).

### **Comfort Reporting to School Staff**

No known studies have investigated whether not feeling comfortable reporting to a school employee is a reason for not reporting sexually harassing behaviors.

### **Perceived Outcomes**

Another variable that Welsh (1999) investigated with regard to why women did not report sexually harassing behaviors was related to perceived outcomes for reporting. He included various positive, negative, and neutral outcomes that could have happened if students had reported. He found that women who perceived negative outcomes for reporting sexual harassment were less likely to report the behavior to anyone, and that the neutral response was also a common reason for not reporting. The negative outcomes used in his study were the victim being labeled a troublemaker, not being taken seriously, being blamed for the incident, experiencing retaliation from the person, and experiencing demotion, pay cut, or possible firing, in addition to the behavior increasing or continuing. One neutral response to why the participant did not report was included as an option, and this had to do with it not occurring to tell anyone.

### **Knowledge of School's Sexual Harassment Policy**

No known studies have investigated whether there is a relationship between reporting sexual harassment in school and having knowledge of one's school sexual harassment policy.

### **Subjective Labeling**

Research has indicated that women often experience objective sexual harassment, in other words sexual harassment that is consistent with the legal definition, however, they do not always subjectively label it as such. Both Houston and Hwang (1996) and Barak et al. (1992)

found that perceiving and subjectively labeling objectively defined sexual harassment were rare among women. Both of these studies labeled this finding as a “discrepancy” between subjective and objective sexual harassment. Houston and Hwang (1996) found that almost 25% of their participants had experienced at least one incident of objective sexual harassment and indicated that they had been subjectively sexually harassed. Barak and colleagues reported that nearly 58% of the women in their study described experiencing objectively defined sexual harassment, but only about 4% subjectively perceived that they had been sexually harassed (1992). Both of these studies tapped into subjective sexual harassment by asking students if they thought they had been sexually harassed.

Another study found that women whose subjective definition of sexual harassment differed from the legal definition were less likely to consider their experiences as being sexual harassment (Reber, 2000). This researcher looked at individual, societal, and organizational variables that could influence whether women perceived sexual harassment as such. Women who were better educated about what sexual harassment was and was not perceived that they had been sexually harassed and vice versa.

### **Other Reasons**

This researcher has yet to find another study that allowed participants to respond in an open-ended format about why they did not report sexually harassing behaviors. Timmerman (2003) gathered information about sexual harassment experiences from students by having them select from various behaviors, but also allowing them to qualitatively describe their experiences. However, students were not asked why they did not report sexually harassing behaviors.

## CHAPTER 3: METHOD

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were 197 female students in their first undergraduate year in college who were taking introductory psychology courses at East Carolina University during the spring, summer and fall semesters in 2012. Participants all attended a public or private high school which housed grades nine through 12, and all graduated high school the year prior to starting their first undergraduate year. Participants were excluded if they did not graduate high school the school year prior to beginning college or did not attend a four-year public or private high school, even if they met all other criteria. Ninety-one percent of the sample attended a public high school, 8% attended a private high school, and 1% attended school for two consecutive years in a public and private school. Seventy-five percent of the sample identified as White, 14% as Black/African American, 6% selected multiple races, 4% were Hispanic or Latino, and less than 1% were Asian. Approval for this study was obtained by the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A).

### **Instrumentation**

Participants completed a paper-and-pencil questionnaire packet designed by the investigator (see Appendix B). The questionnaire gathered demographic information on sex, year in college, year graduated high school, type of high school attended, and race. All demographic information, with the exception of race, was collected in order to confirm that participants met the inclusion criteria (i.e., first year undergraduate female who graduated from a four-year public or private high school the year prior to beginning college).

The questionnaire also included questions adapted from the AAUW sexual harassment survey (1993). The AAUW survey has been widely used in other studies to assess if students



have been exposed to unwanted verbal and physical forms of sexually harassing behaviors, including a number of recent studies using both the original version and a modified version (Chiodo, et al., 2009; Timmerman, 2003; Walsh et al., 2007). The original version of the AAUW survey asked participants to indicate the frequency at which sexual harassment experiences had occurred. The modified version asked participants to select “Yes,” “No,” or “Don’t Remember/Unsure” if they had been the target of 14 sexually harassing behaviors, including forms of verbal, nonverbal, or physical behaviors while engaged in a school program or activity that they did not want within their entire high school career. The questionnaire’s instructions indicated to participants that the perpetrator of these behaviors could have been another student, a teacher or school employee, or a non-employee third party of their school. Answering “Yes” to one or more of the questions represented that a participant had experienced a sexually harassing behavior. Answering “No” signified that a participant had not experienced a sexually harassing behavior.

### **Procedure**

The majority of participants were recruited in 2012 during the spring and fall semesters using the Experimentrak system and were offered partial course credit for their participation in departmental research. Additional participants were recruited during the 2012 summer semesters by the experimenter entering introductory psychology classrooms and inviting students to take part in the study; these participants were not offered an incentive for their participation. All participants were provided with a consent letter (see Appendix C) and paper versions of the questionnaire. The participants completed the questionnaire in classrooms in a small-group setting. To eliminate overcrowding, participants signed up for timeslots before participating in the study. The experimenter verbally reviewed the consent letter to all participants, encouraged

participants to answer all questions, and informed participants that they could omit any questions they did not feel comfortable answering. Each participant was assigned a unique identification number and no personally identifying information was collected. Data were entered into Excel and double-checked to ensure accuracy, and descriptive statistics were obtained. Data for the questions on knowledge of high school's sexual harassment policy and subjective labeling of sexual harassment were entered into SPSS, and Chi-square analyses were performed.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Eighty-nine percent of the participants had experienced one or more of the 14 AAUW sexually harassing behaviors described in the questionnaire ( $n = 176$ ) and 11% reported experiencing none of the behaviors ( $n = 21$ ). Of those who had experienced at least one behavior listed on the questionnaire, 16% indicated that they reported at least one incident to someone who worked at their high school ( $n = 29$ ); this is the reporters group. Eighty-four percent of participants who had experienced at least one sexually harassing behavior never reported an incident to someone who worked at their high school ( $n = 147$ ); this is the non-reporters group.

The 14 sexually harassing behaviors from the modified AAUW survey were both experienced by and reported to school staff at different frequencies among the sample (see Table 1). Overall, 45% of the total reasons why participants did not report was not thinking a behavior was offensive enough to report; this was the most common reason selected. The second most common reason (18%) for not reporting was that it did not occur to the participant to tell anyone about the incident. The percentage of total responses for the other reasons are as follows: The participant had no one in the school to whom she was comfortable reporting (7%), would not be taken seriously (7%), would experience retaliation from the person if she reported (7%), the behavior would continue or increase if she reported (6%), and the participant would be blamed for the incident (3%). Table 2 presents the percentage that each reason was selected for each individual behavior from the AAUW questionnaire.

TABLE 1

Percentage of behaviors experienced and reported to staff

SH Behavior	Experienced behavior			Reported to school staff		
	Yes	No	Don't Remember/Unsure	Yes	No	Don't Remember/Unsure
Made sexual comments, jokes, or looks	67%	29%	4%	5%	95%	1%
Showed, gave, or left you sexual pictures, photographs, illustrations, messages, or notes	25%	74%	1%	4%	96%	0%
Wrote sexual messages/graffiti about you on bathroom walls, in locker rooms, etc.	10%	90%	0%	11%	89%	0%
Spread sexual rumors about you	43%	56%	1%	11%	89%	0%
Said you were gay or lesbian	8%	91%	1%	0%	100%	0%
Spied on you as you dressed or showered at school	2%	97%	1%	50%	50%	0%
Touched, grabbed, or pinched you in a sexual way	48%	52%	0%	16%	84%	0%
Pulled at your clothing in a sexual way	13%	86%	1%	7%	93%	0%
Flashed or "moonied" you	35%	64%	1%	4%	96%	0%
Intentionally brushed against you in a sexual way	29%	67%	4%	0%	98%	2%
Pulled your clothing off or down	10%	89%	1%	10%	90%	0%
Blocked your way or cornered you in a sexual way	12%	86%	2%	8%	92%	0%
Forced you to kiss him/her	6%	93%	1%	8%	92%	0%
Forced you to do something sexual other than kissing	6%	94%	0%	0%	100%	0%

TABLE 2

Percentage of reasons why not reported

	Not offensive enough	No one in school	Not taken seriously	Continue or increase	Be blamed	Experience retaliation	Never occurred	Other
Made sexual comments, jokes, gestures, or looks	58%	3%	4%	3%	1%	6%	22%	3%
Showed, gave, or left you sexual pictures, photographs, illustrations, messages, or notes	39%	9%	2%	0%	6%	9%	33%	2%
Wrote sexual messages/graffiti about you on bathroom walls, in locker rooms, etc.	37%	4%	18%	15%	0%	4%	22%	0%
Spread sexual rumors about you	18%	16%	10%	12%	8%	11%	13%	12%
Said you were gay or lesbian	50%	4.5%	4.5%	4.5%	4.5%	0%	14%	18%
Spied on you as you dressed or showered at school	0%	0%	25%	25%	0%	0%	25%	25%
Touched, grabbed, or pinched you in a sexual way	52%	6%	7%	6%	4%	5%	14%	5%
Pulled at your clothing in a sexual way	57%	0%	8%	6%	6%	0%	20%	3%
Flashed or “mooned” you	60%	1%	8%	1%	1%	0%	17%	12%
Intentionally brushed against you in a sexual way	56%	2.5%	8%	4%	2.5%	5%	18%	4%
Pulled your clothing off or down	46%	19%	4%	4%	0%	8%	11%	8%
Blocked your way or cornered you in a sexual way	38%	12%	6%	6%	0%	15%	20%	3%
Forced you to kiss him/her	16%	21%	10.5%	10.5%	5%	16%	10.5%	10.5%
Forced you to do something sexual other than kissing	10.5%	16%	5%	5%	5%	32%	16%	10.5%

Selecting “other” accounted for 6% of the overall reasons for not reporting. Most participants indicated that they did not report the behavior because it was a joke, which was often reported for the behavior of flashing or mooning. Additional commonly described “other” reasons for not reporting behaviors included that the behavior was done by a friend or boyfriend, the participant “took care of it” herself, or she felt embarrassment about the situation. There were

differences between the reasons why participants did not report dependent upon the type of sexually harassing behavior to school staff (see Table 3).

TABLE 3

“Other” Responses	
SH Behavior	“Other” responses
Made sexual comments, jokes, gestures, or looks	(1) Scared; (2) Didn’t care enough; (3) Didn’t bother me, It was amongst friends in a light-hearted manner
Showed, gave, or left sexual pictures, photographs, illustrations, messages, or notes	(1) Did not take the pictures as offensive. Did not give them randomly, he was a boyfriend
Spread sexual rumors	(1) Embarrassed; (2) Embarrassing; (3) I didn’t want them to get in trouble. I took matters in my own hands. (4) I didn’t want it to be blown up even more; (5) There would be nothing they could do, it would only make it more embarrassing; (6) It would have made it a bigger deal then [ <i>sic</i> ] it already was; (7) Didn’t know who started it nor did I want teachers to think that way of me
Said you were gay or lesbian	(1) Was dating a girl at the time; (2) Wasn’t and most of school knew it; (3) I took it as a joke; (4) I play softball, it’s not unusual
Spied on as dressed or showered at school	(1) Girl in locker room, confronted her and it stopped
Touched, grabbed, or pinched in a sexual way	(1) They were usually friends just kidding around but in a sexual way to be funny; (2) My boyfriend; (3) Flirting; (4) I took care of the situation myself
Flashed or “mooned”	(1) The teacher saw it too so no reason for me to report it; (2) Done by fellow student as a joke; (3) Marching band kid behavior; (4) It was funny; (5) He was my best friend; (6) It was a joke; (7) Thought it was a joke or being silly; (8) Joking; (9) It was kind of funny; (10) Just kids trying to be funny it wasn’t to be offensive; (11) It was a joke
Pulled clothing off or down	(1) Unintentional; (2) My friends tried to when I wore sweats, but I always had shorts on too anyways [ <i>sic</i> ]
Forced to kiss him/her	(1) He was my boyfriend; (2) I took care of it
Forced to do something sexual other than kissing	(1) Embarrassed; (2) Close to me, in my small friend group didn’t want to mess it up

Data from the question about whether participants were provided with a copy of their high school’s sexual harassment policy or if they knew how to obtain it are presented in Table 4. When asked if participants were provided with their high school’s sexual harassment policy or knew how to obtain it, 55% of reporters and 46% of non-reporters answered “Yes.” Of participants who said they were not provided with a copy of their school’s sexual harassment policy or did not know how to obtain it, 17% were reporters and 23% were non-reporters. Six percent of the non-reporters indicated that their high school did not have a sexual harassment policy, while 10% of reporters selected this response when asked about their school’s high

school sexual harassment policy. A Chi-square test was performed and responses (“Yes,” “No,” or “My high school didn’t have a sexual harassment policy”) about whether a participant was provided with a copy of her high school’s sexual harassment policy or if she knew how to obtain it did not significantly differ between reporters and non-reporters,  $\chi^2(2, n = 134) = 1.20$ ,  $p = .548$ .

TABLE 4

	Provided with school’s policy or knew how to obtain it			
	Yes	No	Don’t Remember/Unsure	No policy
Reported	55%	17%	17%	10%
Did not report	46%	23%	25%	6%
Total (reporters + non-reporters)	49%	22%	23%	6%

Participant responses were varied when asked if they were ever subjected to sexual harassment in high school, a question intended to determine if participants subjectively labeled sexually harassing behaviors as such (see Table 5). Of those who reported, 48% indicated they had been sexually harassed, 38% said they had not been sexually harassed, and 14% were “unsure.” Of non-reporters, 24% thought they had been sexually harassed, 58% believed they had not been sexually harassed, 18% were “unsure,” and less than 1% did not remember. There were 21 participants who indicated that they had never experienced any of the 14 sexually harassing behaviors, and of these 91% said they had not been sexually harassed ( $n = 19$ ), one participant said she had been sexually harassed, and one participant was “unsure.” A Chi-square goodness-of-fit test was conducted and reporters’ responses to whether they believed they were sexually harassed were statistically significantly different than non-reporters’ responses,  $\chi^2(1, n = 145) = 6.66$ ,  $p = .010$ .

TABLE 5

	Subjectively reported experiencing SH			
	Yes	No	Don’t Remember	Unsure
Reported	48%*	38%*	0%	14%
Did not report	24%*	58%*	1%	18%
Total (reporters + non-reporters)	25%	58%	1%	16%

\*  $p \leq .01$

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study was intended to provide further insight into the reasons why high school students chose not to report sexually harassing behaviors to school staff. The potential reasons why students chose not to report sexually harassing behaviors, included: they did not think the behavior was offensive enough to report, there was no one in the school to whom they felt comfortable reporting, they believed there would be negative outcomes for reporting, it did not occur to them to tell anyone about it, there were other reasons, they did not know that their high school had a sexual harassment policy or how to obtain it, and there was a discrepancy between their subjective labeling of sexual harassment and their objective experiences of such. Findings from each of these research questions are summarized below.

### **Offensiveness of Behavior**

One reason that students chose not to report a sexually harassing behavior was because they did not consider the behavior offensive enough to report. This was the most common reason why students did not report sexually harassing behavior (45% of the total reasons for not reporting). This was the most commonly indicated reason for not reporting the following specific behaviors: made sexual jokes, gestures, or looks (58%); showed, gave, or left sexual pictures, photographs, illustrations, messages or notes (39%); wrote sexual messages/graffiti on bathroom walls, in locker rooms, etc. (37%); spread sexual rumors (18%); said participant was gay or lesbian (50%); touched, grabbed, or pinched in a sexual way (52%); pulled at clothing in a sexual way (57%); flashed or mooned the participant (60%); intentionally brushed against participant in a sexual way (56%); pulled participant's clothing off or down (46%); and blocked or cornered in a sexual way (38%). This suggests that students likely did not consider these behaviors to be harsh enough to report or they did not consider them to be a form of harassment.



These behaviors may also be seen by students as normal, perhaps because of the prevalence with which they occur, or non-threatening, and thus they were not offensive enough to report.

Other researchers have sought to explain why students do not find certain sexually harassing behaviors to be offensive. Brooks and Perot (1991) found that the women in their study perceived certain behaviors as not offensive. These behaviors often fell under the categories of gender harassment (e.g., sexual looks, jokes, gestures, and sexist remarks, etc.) and seduction (e.g., sexual attention, remarks, and rumors, etc.), and these behaviors were those that were experienced most frequently. Brooks and Perot proffered that because these behaviors were experienced often and they were not particularly severe compared to other forms of sexual harassment, then women do not consider these offensive (1991). In addition, women may be accustomed to and therefore tolerant of forms of sexism and sexual advances that are often experienced in society (as cited in Brooks & Perot, 1991). Thus the participants in the current study may have frequently experienced some of the less severe forms of sexually harassing behaviors and did not consider them offensive enough to report if they were oft exposed to them.

### **No One in School to Whom Student Felt Comfortable Reporting Harassment**

Students may feel that there is no adult in their high school to whom they feel comfortable reporting sexually harassing behaviors. No other research has examined this as a reason that deters students from reporting. This reason accounted for 7% overall for not reporting all 14 behaviors, and was more frequently chosen when behaviors were more serious in nature, such as pulling clothing off or down (19%), blocking or cornering in a sexual way (12%), forcing to kiss (21%), and forcing to do something sexual other than kissing (16%). Not having someone the participant felt comfortable reporting to in a school was also selected for the behavior of spreading sexual rumors (accounting for 16% of the reasons for this behavior). These behaviors

are those that could potentially embarrass or expose aspects about a student's personal life, and it could be that students did not feel comfortable reporting these behaviors to school employees because they feared they might be judged.

No previous research on why students do not report sexual harassment addressed students' comfort level in reporting these behaviors to someone who worked at their school. However, several researchers have investigated adolescents' concerns related to discussing personal information to healthcare professionals and school staff. One of these concerns has to do with confidentiality (Clarke, Coombs, & Walton, 2003; O'Sullivan, 2001) and privacy (Shakeshaft, Mandel, Johnson, & Sawyer, 1997). Confidentiality is important to students because adolescents are developing emotional autonomy and worry that certain information, particularly sexual information, will be revealed to their parents (Carlisle, Shickle, Cork, & McDonagh, 2006).

In addition to confidentiality, students may hold other perceptions about how school staff will react if they report sexually harassing behaviors to them and this may cause students to feel uncomfortable. For instance, a student may think that if she reports a behavior that school staff will treat her as if she did something wrong (Slotten, 2002). Students may also hold the belief that school staff do not care about students' problems, such as harassment (Shakeshaft et al., 1997), or will blame the student for being "sexually precocious" (as cited in Shute, Owens, & Slee, 2008, p. 479). Students may also perceive that school staff are too busy with their jobs to help students and that helping students with reports of harassment were not part of their jobs (Shakeshaft et al., 1997).

Furthermore, students who experience sexually harassing behaviors do not want to talk about their experiences because of their feelings surrounding about the situations, particularly

with school staff and other adults. Students may feel shame (Timmerman, 2003) or guilt (Slotten, 2002) over experiencing sexual harassment. Students may also feel embarrassment over the situation (as cited in Slotten, 2002) and feel embarrassed to discuss personal issues with school staff (Clarke et al., 2003).

The overall sexual harassment climate of a particular school may also contribute to how comfortable a student feels reporting sexually harassing behaviors to school staff. This may particularly be true if school employees are perpetrating sexually harassing behaviors towards students (Ormerod et al., 2008; Slotten, 2002). Timmerman (2003) explained that teachers model behaviors for students and this influences school culture. Students may be less likely to report certain behaviors if their school culture appears accepting of teachers making advancements toward students or when they do not intervene when witnessing sexually harassing behaviors (Timmerman, 2003). Due to this, students may not feel comfortable reporting certain behaviors if they perceive that their school climate tolerates this behavior and that nothing will be done (Ormerod et al., 2008; Slotten, 2002).

### **Perceived Negative Outcomes for Reporting**

Students may not report certain behaviors to school staff because they perceive that there would be a negative outcome for reporting (e.g., the student would not be taken seriously, the behavior would continue or increase, the student would be blamed, or the student would experience retaliation). Overall, few participants indicated the concern that there would be a negative outcome for reporting sexually harassing behaviors as a reason that prevented them from reporting (23% overall across the four outcomes). Concern about experiencing retaliation was selected as a common reason for not reporting more serious behaviors, including being forced to do something sexual other than kissing (32%), forced to kiss (16%), and being blocked

or cornered in a sexual way (15%). Experiencing retaliation from one of these physical behaviors would likely evoke more anxiety or fear than retaliation from a verbal or less severe behavior. Participants' choice not to report sexual harassment overall was not often due to a concern with negative consequences that might arise from doing so, although this factor was more strongly associated with not reporting more serious harassing behaviors. Welsh (1999) found similar results in his study whereby few students indicated that they perceived there would be a negative outcome for reporting sexually harassing behaviors.

### **Did Not Occur to Participant to Report the Behavior**

A more neutral reason for why a student does not report sexual harassment is that it did not occur to her to report a particular behavior. This was the second most frequent reason overall for not reporting a sexually harassing behavior (18%). This reason was never selected as the most common reason for any one specific behavior. In a similar study, Welsh (1999) found that over half of his sample indicated that it never occurred to them to tell anyone about experiencing sexually harassing behaviors.

Although not directly related to reporting, other researchers have examined the normalcy and acceptability of sexually harassing behaviors among adolescents. Several researchers have discussed that sexually harassing behaviors occur frequently, often daily and publicly (Timmerman, 2003), and because of this frequency these behaviors are considered acceptable (O'Sullivan, 2001) and normal by students (Berman, McKenna, Traher Arnold, Taylor, & MacQuarrie, 2000; Chiodo et al., 2009; Roscoe, 1994; Slotten, 2002). This idea extends beyond the realm of school into society as well. Shute and colleagues (2008) indicate that adolescents perceive certain sexually harassing behaviors as normal because of society's overall acceptance of these behaviors. Furthermore, media and society's exploitation of girls reinforce an attitude

that “boys will be boys” and that these behaviors are normal and expected (Berman et al., 2000, p. 42).

Similar to the normalcy with which adolescents view sexually harassing behaviors, researchers have discussed other explanations that may be related to reasons why some behaviors are not considered offensive. For instance, sexually harassing behaviors are perceived as accepted (Ormerod et al., 2008), and although adolescents consider them inappropriate they also consider many behaviors to not be serious (Corbett et al., 1993). From a developmental standpoint, adolescents often have difficulty understanding others’ intentions and may be unsure whether a behavior is flirting or harassment (as cited in Ortega, Sánchez, Ortega-Rivera, Nocentini, & Menesini, 2010).

### **Other Reasons for Not Reporting**

There may be other reasons that participants chose not to report sexually harassing aside from the aforementioned reasons. The other option allowed participants to write in reasons that they did not report. Few participants indicated that there were other reasons for not reporting sexually harassing behaviors to school staff ( 6% of the overall reasons). “Other” was commonly selected for the behavior of being flashed or mooned, and most participants indicated that the reason they did not report was because it was funny or a joke. Participants also often indicated that a friend or boyfriend perpetrated the following behaviors and that is why they did not report: made sexual comments, jokes, gestures, or looks; showed, gave, or left sexual pictures, photographs, illustrations, messages, or notes; touched, grabbed, or pinched in a sexual way; intentionally brushed against in a sexual way; pulled clothing off or down; and forced to kiss. The instructions of the questionnaire explicitly read that the participant should indicate if the behaviors happened when she did not want them to, thus it is difficult to decipher from some

responses whether the participants understood this since they indicated the behaviors were jokes or done by friends. It is possible that a boyfriend or friend could perpetrate an unwanted behavior. For some less severe behaviors, it cannot be determined from the data whether the participant understood the question, however. In some instances where “other” was chosen, the participant provided enough detail to infer that she did not want the behavior to happen. For instance, for the behavior of being forced to do something sexual other than kissing, a participant wrote that the perpetrator was, “close to me, in my small friend group didn’t want to mess it up [*sic*].” This is a more severe behavior and the participant expressed concern that reporting could potentially disturb the dynamics of her friendship group.

However, that the “other” category was rarely selected indicates that the major reasons that students do not report sexually harassing behaviors were already listed as options on the questionnaire. The open-endedness of this option allowed for greater variability to be known about reasons students do not report sexually harassing behaviors, however, did cause some confusion when little detail was shared.

### **Knowledge of High School’s Policy or How to Obtain the Policy**

It was hypothesized that non-reporters would more frequently respond to the question if they were provided with their school’s sexual harassment policy or if they knew how to obtain a copy of it with “No” or “My high school didn’t have a sexual harassment policy” compared to reporters. There was no statistically significant difference between those who reported and those who did not on this item. No previous research has examined this as a factor related to reporting of sexually harassing behaviors. This finding could suggest that knowing that one’s school has a school sexual harassment policy or knowing how to obtain it do not necessarily affect reporting.

Rather than having the knowledge about the existence of a policy, it could be that being educated about what sexual harassment is and is not is a factor that relates more to reporting.

Almost half of all participants who experienced at least one sexually harassing behavior regardless of whether they reported it or not had knowledge of their high school's sexual harassment policy. These students all attended four-year public or private high schools, schools which likely received Title IX federal funding, meaning that these schools must have sexual harassment policies in place (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). If only half of students were provided with or knew how to obtain this policy, this might indicate a need for schools to make students more aware of sexual harassment and similar policies, including how to handle related grievances.

### **Subjective Labeling of Sexual Harassment**

It was hypothesized that reporters would be more likely to subjectively label sexually harassing behaviors as such than non-reporters. Reporters more frequently indicated that they thought they had been sexually harassed (48%) than non-reporters (27%), whereas non-reporters were more likely to indicate they had not been sexually harassed (58%) compared to reporters (38%), and both differences were statistically significant. Both reporters and non-reporters had similar percentages of participants who said they were unsure of whether they had ever been sexually harassed. In addition, only one of the participants who had never experienced a sexually harassing behavior at school indicated that she thought she had been sexually harassed, and 90% of these said they thought they had not been.

Reporters showed a smaller discrepancy between subjective labeling and objective experiencing than non-reporters. Also, there was virtually no discrepancy between subjective labeling and objective experiencing for those who never experienced a sexually harassing

behavior in high school. Overall, these findings indicate that those who thought they were sexually harassed were more likely to report than those who did not.

### **General Findings**

Consistent with previous research, a high percentage of the participants in the study had experienced at least one sexually harassing behavior while in high school (Fineran et al., 1998; Ormerod et al., 2008; Walsh, 2007). In the current study more participants, compared to previous research, reported sexually harassing behaviors to school staff. Sixteen percent of the participants had reported at least one sexually harassing behavior to an employee at their high school. Previous research found a typical reporting rate ranging from 0.5% (Walsh et al., 2007) to 12% (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Timmerman, 2003).

One explanation for the increased percentage of participants who reported to school staff in the current study could be due to the samples used in previous research. The discrepancy in reporting could be related to cultural differences, as well as the age range of the participants, the inclusion of males, and the low percentage of those who experienced sexually harassing behaviors in previous studies. For example, Timmerman's study (2003) was conducted in the Netherlands with 14- and 15-year old secondary school male and female students, and fewer participants indicated that they had experienced a sexually harassing behavior at school (18%) than what has been shown by other studies. Walsh et. al (2007) conducted their study in rural Canadian schools with male and female students that were 16 years and older, and they also found low rates of experiencing sexually harassing behaviors (e.g., the most frequently experienced harassing behavior, exposure to sexual comments or jokes, was experienced by only 6.5% of the sample). Hill and Kearl's sample consisted of male and female students in middle



and high school who reported only on their experiences from one school year, rather than for an extended amount of time (2011).

Another interesting finding was related to the main reasons that students chose not to report. There are three notable patterns that were found in both Welsh's study (1999) and the current one: 1) perceiving sexually harassing behaviors as not offensive enough to report was the most commonly selected reason for not reporting; 2) not thinking to tell anyone about the harassing behaviors was also related to not reporting, and 3) perceiving negative outcomes for reporting was rarely selected as a reason for not reporting. Welsh suggested that if students did not think certain behaviors were offensive paired with having a neutral attitude towards sexually harassing behaviors, then they might have not even considered the negative outcomes for reporting. This also suggests that students may have thought the behaviors were normal, acceptable, or seemingly unimportant enough to report if they were not considered offensive and it did not occur to them to tell anybody.

### **Limitations**

There are a few limitations for this study. It is unclear if the sample used for this study is representative of any larger population, due to its small size and the fact that the sample was drawn from one university in the Southeastern United States. Thus, the findings may not be generalizable. Also, there may be concerns with participants recalling their high school experiences while in college. First year students were chosen as participants in an attempt to reduce this limitation. Lastly, the responses from students who indicated that there were other reasons for why they did not report behaviors were at times unclear. Completion of the questionnaire in an interview format may be necessary to prevent this confusion.

## **Implications for Practice**

Although it is important to keep in mind that there is not a single reason for any given behavior about why students do not report sexual harassment, the most common reasons for not reporting include not thinking behaviors are offensive enough to report or it not occurring to the participants to report the behavior. Education describing sexual harassment and its frequency of occurrence in schools, including the associated negative outcomes, could be provided to students to increase the likelihood that they will report.

Participants who could not identify a school employee to whom they felt comfortable reporting sexual harassment also affects the likelihood of reporting sexually harassing behaviors. To address this, school staff could be educated on how to create a climate that encourages students to talk about their school sexual harassment experiences. Some suggestions have included encouraging school staff to make themselves more accessible, understanding, knowledgeable about sexual harassment issues, and non-discriminatory (Slotten, 2002). Students have indicated that they are more likely to talk to school staff and other professionals if they appear to be attentive listeners (Goodman, Hoagland, Pierre-Toussaint, Rodriguez, & Sanabria, 2011) and trustworthy (Clarke et al., 2003; as cited in Music, McCammon, & Walcott, 2008). Of particular importance is that school staff ensures and maintains confidentiality with regards to students' disclosure of personal information, such as reports of sexual harassment (Carlisle et al., 2006). School staff can partake in trainings designed to increase trust and respectful partnerships, and that inform staff of the boundaries for confidentiality (Clarke et al., 2003). School staff could also be encouraged to approach students who they suspect have experienced sexual harassment if they know that students rarely seek them out to report it.

Only about half of all participants knew that their high school had a sexual harassment policy or knew how to obtain it. Schools that receive federal funding through Title IX are required to have a school sexual harassment policy. To increase students' knowledge of their school's policy, schools should ensure that the student handbook on rights and policies is made available to all students or find other ways of ensuring that how to obtain it is made clear to students. In addition, schools could spend some time briefly describing to students what information is contained within the handbook. Procedures for reporting grievances, including sexual harassment, should also be described to students including to whom in the school they can report and how to go about reporting.

There was some discrepancy between experiencing behaviors defined by the sexual harassment policies as sexual harassment and participants subjectively labeling those experiences as such. Twenty-eight percent of all participants who had experienced at least one sexually harassing behavior subjectively thought that they had been subjected to sexual harassment, and over half of them thought that they had not been. As might be expected, reporters more frequently indicated that they thought they had been sexually harassed (48%) than non-reporters (24%). This could indicate the need for student awareness about what sexual harassment is and what it entails, or this could be related to the participants' perceptions about sexual behaviors not being offensive enough to report.

There are sexual harassment prevention curricula available for use in schools that could be implemented and these also provide educational opportunities for students about what sexual harassment is. These include, but are not limited to, Sexual Harassment Prevention in the Schools (Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape, 2009), Expect Respect (Sanchez et al., 2001; Meraviglia, Becker, Rosenbluth, Sanchez, & Robertson, 2003), Sexual Harassment for Teens: A

Program for Positive Change (Strauss & Espeland, 1992), and Steps to Respect and Bullyproof (Espelage & Swearer, 2010). Few of these curricula have published research about their efficacy or effectiveness. The Expect Respect program has been shown to improve knowledge of sexual harassment and its effects, however, this research was done with elementary school students (Meraviglia et al., 2003; Sanchez et al., 2001). Other programs that package information on general bullying and sexual harassment (e.g., Steps to Respect and Bullyproof) have research that show improvement in student knowledge and behavior in schools. However, these studies either have no specific mention of sexual harassment measures (Hirschstein, Van Schoiak Edstrom, Frey, Snell, & MacKenzie, 2007) or removed the sexual harassment component of the program for use in elementary schools (Hallford, Borntrager, & Davis, 2006).

In addition, to increase rates of reporting sexually harassing behaviors in a school it may be beneficial to educate students about what behaviors constitute sexual harassment. Similar studies have stressed a need for sexual harassment education for adolescents, including the societal politics (e.g., sexism) that underlie several types of sexually harassing behaviors (Berman et al., 2000; Shakeshaft et al., 1997; Shute et al., 2008). Educational practices should be targeted as an attempt to change the overall school culture of sexual harassment (Shakeshaft et al., 1997). Shakeshaft and colleagues (1997) suggest that schools use activities designed for students to reflect on their experiences and as a means to raise consciousness of sexual harassment. These activities should be included in the general education curriculum and should define appropriate replacement behaviors for sexual harassment. These efforts should be reflected throughout the entire school community. This type of education and defining of behaviors creates a culture of discussion about sexual harassment so that it is not perceived as normal or accepted (Berman et al., 2000; Shakeshaft et al., 1997).

Efforts could be combined with the recent wave of anti-bullying campaigns, which could potentially encompass attempts towards minimizing sexual harassment. School staff that are responsible for district-wide programs could pioneer screening efforts, using a similar approach or methodology as this study, to determine the sexual harassment climate at their schools, and react accordingly. Of interest would be a gauge of school staff's attitudes toward school sexual harassment, and potential training opportunities if staff members appear to need education or awareness. It is likely that school employees are unaware of the frequency of or extent to which sexual harassment is occurring in schools, given that few students actually report sexually harassing behaviors, and thus school employees may not know how to respond to a student who reports sexual harassment.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of available sexual harassment curricula. Additional research could examine what school professionals, such as administrators, counselors, school psychologists, and other staff, can do to educate students about school sexual harassment besides what little information is currently available.

It would be useful to determine if students consider sexually harassing behaviors normal or if they simply have a laissez-faire attitude surrounding behaviors that are sexual in nature. Related to this, it could be important to further examine high schools' education of sexual harassment to their students and staff, including schools' sexual harassment climate and attitudes. With regard to policy, research could be carried out to determine if students and staff are aware of policies, and, if not, efforts could be made to ensure all members of a school community are made available with current up-to-date policies, procedures, and handbooks.

This was the only study identified to examine students' feeling uncomfortable reporting sexual harassment to school staff. Therefore, more research is needed in this area. Other research is needed to examine if other students indicate this is a reason for not reporting. To determine how to make school staff more appealing for students to talk about personal matters, research could be done to investigate various factors and characteristics of school staff to increase the likelihood of reporting. In addition, understanding why students are embarrassed to report sexually harassing behaviors to school staff is of importance.

### **Summary**

Sexual harassment is still a common occurrence in high school. Generally speaking, data from this study suggest some sexually harassing behaviors are considered to not be offensive enough to report to school staff, amongst not feeling comfortable reporting to school staff or having perceived negative outcomes for reporting. Results from this study show that most students who have experienced potential sexual harassment either do not think or are unsure if they had been sexually harassed.

It is imperative that students know how, to whom, and when to report suspected sexual harassment. If the proper channels that deal with sexual harassment in schools are unaware that it is occurring, then nothing will likely be done to stop it from happening, discipline those who are perpetrating it, and work to alleviate any negative outcomes that may arise for the victims. All students deserve a safe and non-threatening environment in which they can learn and grow.

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APPENDIX A



**EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY**  
**University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board Office**  
4N-70 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682  
600 Moyer Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834  
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** · [www.ecu.edu/irb](http://www.ecu.edu/irb)

Notification of Amendment Approval

From: Social/Behavioral IRB  
To: Miranda Phillips  
CC: Michael Brown  
Date: 11/20/2012  
Re: Ame2\_UMCIRB 12-000199  
UMCIRB 12-000199  
Undergraduates' Perceptions of High School Experiences

Your Amendment has been reviewed and approved using expedited review for the period of 11/19/2012 to no expiration exempt #2. It was the determination of the UMCIRB Chairperson (or designee) that this revision does not impact the overall risk/benefit ratio of the study and is appropriate for the population and procedures proposed.

Please note that any further changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. A continuing or final review must be submitted to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description	Modified	Version
	Request submitted and approved to extend study timeline to May, 2013		

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

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IRB00000705 East Carolina U IRB #1 (Biomedical) IORG0000418  
IRB00003781 East Carolina U IRB #2 (Behavioral/SS) IORG0000418 IRB00004973

## APPENDIX B

Dear Participant,

I am a student at East Carolina University in the Psychology department. I am asking you to take part in my research study entitled, "Undergraduates' Perceptions of High School Experiences."

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into different experiences that some people face during high school. By doing this research, I hope to learn about how some students respond to certain high school experiences. Your participation is voluntary.

You are being invited to take part in this research because you are a first year female undergraduate student who is taking an introductory psychology course. The amount of time it will take you to complete this study is approximately 30 minutes.

You are being asked to complete a paper questionnaire and indicate whether or not you experienced a number of situations, and to indicate what you did in response to these situations.

Because this research is overseen by the ECU Institutional Review Board, some of its members or staff may need to review my research data. However, the information you provide will not be linked to you in any way. Therefore, your responses cannot be traced back to you by anyone, including me

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the UMCIRB Office at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director of UMCIRB Office, at 252-744-1971.

You do not have to take part in this research, and you can stop at any time. If you decide you are willing to take part in this study, continue on with the attached questionnaire.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my research.

Sincerely,

Miranda Phillips, Principal Investigator

**APPENDIX C**

Sex: Female Male Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Year in college: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Year graduated high school: \_\_\_\_\_

Type of high school you attended: Public (grades 9-12) Private (grades 9-12) Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_

Race (circle all that apply): American Indian/Alaska Native      Asian      Black/African American      Hispanic or Latino      Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander  
 White  
 Some other race: \_\_\_\_\_

**Thinking back to your *entire high school career*, did anyone (this only includes students, teachers, other school employees, or anyone related to your high school) do any of the following things to you *when you did not want them to*? (School-related instances only, such as: on the way to and from school, in classrooms and hallways, on school grounds during the day and after school, and on school trips.) Please circle the appropriate answer for Questions 1-14, and follow the sub-directions where noted.**

Question 1

1) Made sexual comments, jokes, gestures, or looks?	Yes Please answer 1a	No Please skip to 2	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 2
1a) Did you report an incident of this nature to someone who worked at your high school?	Yes Please skip to 2	No Please answer 1b	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 2
1b) Why did you not report an incident of this nature? (Please check all that apply.)	<input type="checkbox"/> I didn't think the behavior was offensive enough to report <input type="checkbox"/> I had no one in the school to whom I was comfortable reporting <input type="checkbox"/> I would not be taken seriously <input type="checkbox"/> The behavior would continue or increase if I reported <input type="checkbox"/> I would be blamed for the incident <input type="checkbox"/> I would experience retaliation from the person reported <input type="checkbox"/> It never occurred to me to tell anyone about the incident <input type="checkbox"/> Other:		

Question 2

2) Showed, gave, or left you sexual pictures, photographs, illustrations, messages, or notes?	Yes Please answer 2a	No Please skip to 3	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 3
2a) Did you report an incident of this nature to someone who worked at your high school?	Yes Please skip to 3	No Please answer 2b	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 3
2b) Why did you not report an incident of this nature? (Please check all that apply.)	<input type="checkbox"/> I didn't think the behavior was offensive enough to report <input type="checkbox"/> I had no one in the school to whom I was comfortable reporting <input type="checkbox"/> I would not be taken seriously <input type="checkbox"/> The behavior would continue or increase if I reported <input type="checkbox"/> I would be blamed for the incident <input type="checkbox"/> I would experience retaliation from the person reported <input type="checkbox"/> It never occurred to me to tell anyone about the incident <input type="checkbox"/> Other:		

Question 3

3) Wrote sexual messages/graffiti about you on bathroom walls, in locker rooms, etc.?	Yes Please answer 3a	No Please skip to 4	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 4
3a) Did you report an incident of this nature to someone who worked at your high school?	Yes Please skip to 4	No Please answer 3b	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 4
3b) Why did you not report an incident of this nature? (Please check all that apply.)	<input type="checkbox"/> I didn't think the behavior was offensive enough to report <input type="checkbox"/> I had no one in the school to whom I was comfortable reporting <input type="checkbox"/> I would not be taken seriously <input type="checkbox"/> The behavior would continue or increase if I reported <input type="checkbox"/> I would be blamed for the incident <input type="checkbox"/> I would experience retaliation from the person reported <input type="checkbox"/> It never occurred to me to tell anyone about the incident <input type="checkbox"/> Other:		

Question 4

4) Spread sexual rumors about you?	Yes Please answer 4a	No Please skip to 5	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 5
4a) Did you report an incident of this nature to someone who worked at your high school?	Yes Please skip to 5	No Please answer 4b	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 5
4b) Why did you not report an incident of this nature? (Please check all that apply.)	<input type="checkbox"/> I didn't think the behavior was offensive enough to report <input type="checkbox"/> I had no one in the school to whom I was comfortable reporting <input type="checkbox"/> I would not be taken seriously <input type="checkbox"/> The behavior would continue or increase if I reported <input type="checkbox"/> I would be blamed for the incident <input type="checkbox"/> I would experience retaliation from the person reported <input type="checkbox"/> It never occurred to me to tell anyone about the incident <input type="checkbox"/> Other:		

Question 5

5) Said you were gay or lesbian?	Yes Please answer 5a	No Please skip to 6	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 6
5a) Did you report an incident of this nature to someone who worked at your high school?	Yes Please skip to 6	No Please answer 5b	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 6
5b) Why did you not report an incident of this nature? (Please check all that apply.)	<input type="checkbox"/> I didn't think the behavior was offensive enough to report <input type="checkbox"/> I had no one in the school to whom I was comfortable reporting <input type="checkbox"/> I would not be taken seriously <input type="checkbox"/> The behavior would continue or increase if I reported <input type="checkbox"/> I would be blamed for the incident <input type="checkbox"/> I would experience retaliation from the person reported <input type="checkbox"/> It never occurred to me to tell anyone about the incident <input type="checkbox"/> Other:		



Question 6

6) Spied on you as you dressed or showered at school?	Yes Please answer 6a	No Please skip to 7	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 7
6a) Did you report an incident of this nature to someone who worked at your high school?	Yes Please skip to 7	No Please answer 6b	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 7
6b) Why did you not report an incident of this nature? (Please check all that apply.)	<input type="checkbox"/> I didn't think the behavior was offensive enough to report <input type="checkbox"/> I had no one in the school to whom I was comfortable reporting <input type="checkbox"/> I would not be taken seriously <input type="checkbox"/> The behavior would continue or increase if I reported <input type="checkbox"/> I would be blamed for the incident <input type="checkbox"/> I would experience retaliation from the person reported <input type="checkbox"/> It never occurred to me to tell anyone about the incident <input type="checkbox"/> Other:		

Question 7

7) Touched, grabbed, or pinched you in a sexual way?	Yes Please answer 7a	No Please skip to 8	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 8
7a) Did you report an incident of this nature to someone who worked at your high school?	Yes Please skip to 8	No Please answer 7b	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 8
7b) Why did you not report an incident of this nature? (Please check all that apply.)	<input type="checkbox"/> I didn't think the behavior was offensive enough to report <input type="checkbox"/> I had no one in the school to whom I was comfortable reporting <input type="checkbox"/> I would not be taken seriously <input type="checkbox"/> The behavior would continue or increase if I reported <input type="checkbox"/> I would be blamed for the incident <input type="checkbox"/> I would experience retaliation from the person reported <input type="checkbox"/> It never occurred to me to tell anyone about the incident <input type="checkbox"/> Other:		

Question 8

8) Pulled at your clothing in a sexual way?	Yes Please answer 8a	No Please skip to 9	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 9
8a) Did you report an incident of this nature to someone who worked at your high school?	Yes Please skip to 9	No Please answer 8b	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 9
8b) Why did you not report an incident of this nature? (Please check all that apply.)	<input type="checkbox"/> I didn't think the behavior was offensive enough to report <input type="checkbox"/> I had no one in the school to whom I was comfortable reporting <input type="checkbox"/> I would not be taken seriously <input type="checkbox"/> The behavior would continue or increase if I reported <input type="checkbox"/> I would be blamed for the incident <input type="checkbox"/> I would experience retaliation from the person reported <input type="checkbox"/> It never occurred to me to tell anyone about the incident <input type="checkbox"/> Other:		

Question 9

9) Flashed or "mooned" you?	Yes Please answer 9a	No Please skip to 10	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 10
9a) Did you report an incident of this nature to someone who worked at your high school?	Yes Please skip to 10	No Please answer 9b	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 10
9b) Why did you not report an incident of this nature? (Please check all that apply.)	<input type="checkbox"/> I didn't think the behavior was offensive enough to report <input type="checkbox"/> I had no one in the school to whom I was comfortable reporting <input type="checkbox"/> I would not be taken seriously <input type="checkbox"/> The behavior would continue or increase if I reported <input type="checkbox"/> I would be blamed for the incident <input type="checkbox"/> I would experience retaliation from the person reported <input type="checkbox"/> It never occurred to me to tell anyone about the incident <input type="checkbox"/> Other:		

Question 10

10) Intentionally brushed against you in a sexual way?	Yes Please answer 10a	No Please skip to 11	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 11
10a) Did you report an incident of this nature to someone who worked at your high school?	Yes Please skip to 11	No Please answer 10b	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 11
10b) Why did you not report an incident of this nature? (Please check all that apply.)	<input type="checkbox"/> I didn't think the behavior was offensive enough to report <input type="checkbox"/> I had no one in the school to whom I was comfortable reporting <input type="checkbox"/> I would not be taken seriously <input type="checkbox"/> The behavior would continue or increase if I reported <input type="checkbox"/> I would be blamed for the incident <input type="checkbox"/> I would experience retaliation from the person reported <input type="checkbox"/> It never occurred to me to tell anyone about the incident <input type="checkbox"/> Other:		

Question 11

11) Pulled your clothing off or down?	Yes Please answer 11a	No Please skip to 12	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 12
11a) Did you report an incident of this nature to someone who worked at your high school?	Yes Please skip to 12	No Please answer 11b	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 12
11b) Why did you not report an incident of this nature? (Please check all that apply.)	<input type="checkbox"/> I didn't think the behavior was offensive enough to report <input type="checkbox"/> I had no one in the school to whom I was comfortable reporting <input type="checkbox"/> I would not be taken seriously <input type="checkbox"/> The behavior would continue or increase if I reported <input type="checkbox"/> I would be blamed for the incident <input type="checkbox"/> I would experience retaliation from the person reported <input type="checkbox"/> It never occurred to me to tell anyone about the incident <input type="checkbox"/> Other:		

Question 12

12) Blocked your way or cornered you in a sexual way?	Yes Please answer 12a	No Please skip to 13	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 13
12a) Did you report an incident of this nature to someone who worked at your high school?	Yes Please skip to 13	No Please answer 12b	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 13
12b) Why did you not report an incident of this nature? (Please check all that apply.)	<input type="checkbox"/> I didn't think the behavior was offensive enough to report <input type="checkbox"/> I had no one in the school to whom I was comfortable reporting <input type="checkbox"/> I would not be taken seriously <input type="checkbox"/> The behavior would continue or increase if I reported <input type="checkbox"/> I would be blamed for the incident <input type="checkbox"/> I would experience retaliation from the person reported <input type="checkbox"/> It never occurred to me to tell anyone about the incident <input type="checkbox"/> Other:		

Question 13

13) Forced you to kiss him/her?	Yes Please answer 13a	No Please skip to 14	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 14
13a) Did you report an incident of this nature to someone who worked at your high school?	Yes Please skip to 14	No Please answer 13b	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 14
13b) Why did you not report an incident of this nature? (Please check all that apply.)	<input type="checkbox"/> I didn't think the behavior was offensive enough to report <input type="checkbox"/> I had no one in the school to whom I was comfortable reporting <input type="checkbox"/> I would not be taken seriously <input type="checkbox"/> The behavior would continue or increase if I reported <input type="checkbox"/> I would be blamed for the incident <input type="checkbox"/> I would experience retaliation from the person reported <input type="checkbox"/> It never occurred to me to tell anyone about the incident <input type="checkbox"/> Other:		

Question 14

14) Forced you to do something sexual other than kissing?	Yes Please answer 14a	No Please skip to 15	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 15
14a) Did you report an incident of this nature to someone who worked at your high school?	Yes Please skip to 15	No Please answer 14b	Don't Remember/Unsure Please skip to 15
14b) Why did you not report an incident of this nature? (Please check all that apply.)	<input type="checkbox"/> I didn't think the behavior was offensive enough to report <input type="checkbox"/> I had no one in the school to whom I was comfortable reporting <input type="checkbox"/> I would not be taken seriously <input type="checkbox"/> The behavior would continue or increase if I reported <input type="checkbox"/> I would be blamed for the incident <input type="checkbox"/> I would experience retaliation from the person reported <input type="checkbox"/> It never occurred to me to tell anyone about the incident <input type="checkbox"/> Other:		

**If you have completed Questions 1-14, please answer the following:**

Question 15

Were you provided with a copy of your school's sexual harassment policy or did you know how to obtain it?

Yes       No       Don't Remember/Unsure

My high school didn't have a sexual harassment policy

Question 16

Thinking back on your entire high school career, do you think you were ever subjected to sexual harassment?

Yes       No       Don't Remember       Unsure