

IT'S **EASY** TO
KEEP READING!

GET YOUR FIRST MONTH OF ALL DIGITAL ACCESS
FOR 99¢. ACCESS INCLUDES EARLY, ENHANCED
AND EXCLUSIVE CONTENT.

TRY IT NOW!



UC Berkeley's sexist response to sexual harassment

By Jo-Ellen Pozner and Kellie McElhaney | April 5, 2016 | Updated: April 5, 2016 4:47pm

0

UC Berkeley's response to repeated allegations of sexual harassment is not only inadequate, it might make the problem worse.

By appointing women to head up the change leadership efforts, the administration has suggested that intimidation via the sexual channel (to borrow UC Berkeley linguistics Professor **Robin Lakoff's phrase**) is more than a problem for women; it is a problem to be solved by women. We believe a more thoughtful approach would yield better results.

The recent spate of sexual harassment allegations at UC Berkeley, and more broadly through the world of elite academic institutions, clearly necessitates immediate action, not simply reaction. We must address the leadership and culture of our institution, which allows — if not encourages — the behaviors that lead to allegations of sexual intimidation and harassment.

The university's administration has responded in what could be deemed a symbolically appropriate way: by naming women to take charge of the solution. A female professor who

studies issues related to gender and marriage has been named interim dean of the UC Berkeley School of Law. A female historian who studies women's issues in the context of the French Enlightenment has been appointed to coordinate a university strategy to address sexual harassment and assault claims.

These appointments — putting women in control, particularly women with bona fides in gender-focused research — makes for very good optics. Those harassed might feel more comfortable making themselves vulnerable to other women, leading to more frank conversations. Policies and procedures considered by women might be more sensitive or even appropriate to those proposed by people who have never been on the receiving end of sexual intimidation.

Research, however, suggests that putting women in control in a purely symbolic way is unlikely to effect real change.

For example, when companies are flailing, **boards are more likely to replace** white male leaders with females or minorities, perhaps indicating that women are better equipped to deal with crises. But these female leaders' terms at the helm are shorter, and they typically are then replaced with white males. If the firm's financial performance does not improve, who is likely to be blamed?

We also know that firms with women in positions of leadership and decision-making rate more highly on issues of environmental, social and corporate governance (scandals, fraud and corruption) concern, though these effects are significant only when women occupy a quarter of leadership roles.

Consequently, we are troubled by UC Berkeley's appointment decisions.

By putting women in control of processes aimed at curbing and responding to sexual

harassment of women, the administration has feminized the problem. Women are the objects of this intimidation, certainly, but by placing women in charge of solving the problem, the UC Berkeley administration marginalizes the very problem itself. Labeling intimidation via the sexual channel a woman's problem is a very small step from blaming the victim.

Moreover, **research shows** that women and minorities who are involved in conversations about diversity are seen as less competent and less effective than men involved in the same conversations. Given those findings, how likely is it that the men who are at risk of — or already engaged in — intimidation via the sexual channel will take seriously the recommendations of women asking them to fire their male colleagues?

UC Berkeley ought to name prominent men to co-lead the efforts to reform campus policies and procedures, including punishments.

Lasting change is only effective when those in positions of power, who have long benefited from that privilege, are part of the solution. Emphasizing the role of women in providing perspective is important to the legitimacy of the process of change, but highlighting the role of men in understanding the issue — its importance, and the need for change — is critical to the outcome. Communications coming from women might be seen as harping; instructions coming from men and women might be seen as more legitimate.

Remember that women generally are not the instigators of intimidation in the workplace; they are the targets. Labeling harassment a woman's issue turns the tables in the most perverse of ways.

Jo-Ellen Pozner is an assistant professor of management and organizations at the UC Berkeley Haas School of Business. Kellie McElhaney is adjunct professor in the Institute of Business and Social Impact at UC Berkeley Haas School of Business.

Sexual harassment at UC Berkeley

These men have been the focus of harassment cases:

Graham Fleming, vice chancellor for research, resigned his post but retains his job as a

tenured professor.

Geoffrey Marcy, astronomy professor, resigned.

Sujit Choudhry, dean of UC Berkeley School of Law, resigned.

Yann Hufnagel, assistant basketball coach, is on paid leave after being told the university intends to fire him for allegedly harassing a reporter.