

# #WeToo: Taking on Harassment Through Collective Action

Emily Myers,\* Paige Sechrest,\* Sam Sumpter\*

University of Washington & UAW Local 4121



**Unionization is a uniquely powerful tool for breaking down structural power imbalances that undergird sexual harassment in academia.**

As the 2018 NASEM report elaborates, sexual harassment in academia is endemic, affecting 58% of female university employees. In our own surveys of Academic Student Employees (ASEs -- graduate & undergraduate TAs, RAs, tutors, & graders) and Postdocs at the University of Washington, we have found similarly high rates:

**58%**

of women in academic positions nationally have experienced sexual harassment (Ilies et al 2003; NASEM 2018)

**63%**

of women and non-binary Postdocs at UW have experienced discrimination and/or harassment in their time at UW (UAW 4121 survey 2018)

**60%**

of women & 80% of non-binary ASEs at UW have experienced discrimination and/or harassment in the past year at UW (UW-UAW 4121 joint survey 2018)

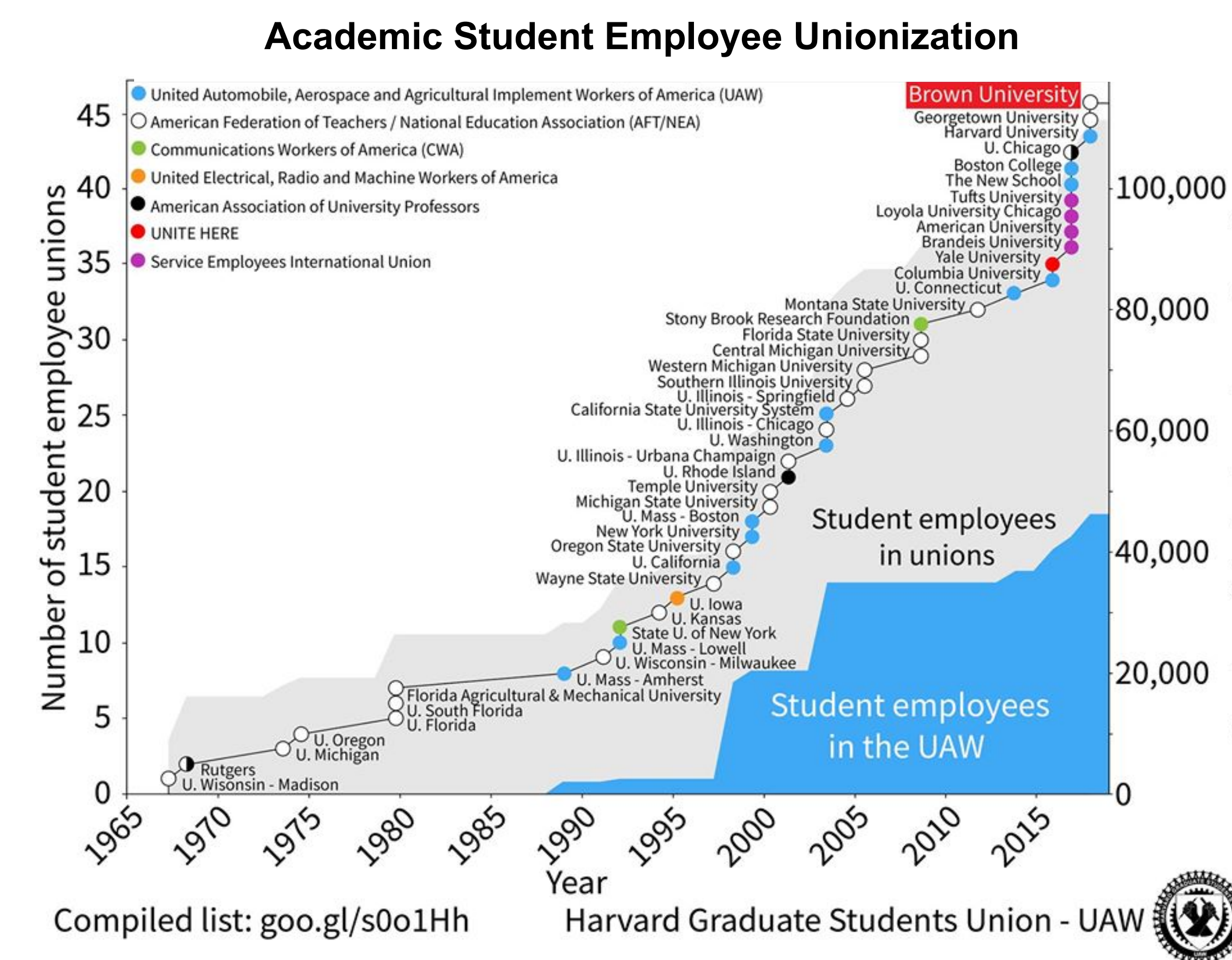
## KEY PROBLEMS FOR PREVENTION & RESPONSE EFFORTS

- **ENTRENCHMENT OF POWER HIERARCHIES:** There are significant power imbalances between academic workers and our supervisor/institutions. These are a key factor in the likelihood that sexual harassment will occur and a significant deterrent to reporting (NASEM 2018, Chp 2). These power dynamics are especially likely to be abused by for academic workers who are on visas, even more when their country of origin is also under attack by the federal government. **To be effective, prevention efforts must empower the most vulnerable with meaningful protections and real recourse.**
- **FAILURE TO TREAT SH AS A STRUCTURAL ISSUE:** Relatedly, sexual harassment is a fundamentally structural issue rather than something merely perpetrated by individual bad actors. This approach often only addresses individual symptoms rather than root causes (NASEM 2018, Chp 6). **To be effective, prevention efforts must drive culture change, increase institutional accountability, and address structural inequities.**
- **INSUFFICIENCY OF TOP-DOWN COMPLIANCE-BASED APPROACHES:** Solely legalistic top-down approaches have been shown to be insufficient for preventing sexual harassment or generating community buy-in (NASEM 2018, Chp 5). **To be effective, prevention efforts must be led by the voices of the most vulnerable & must focus on structural change rather than mere compliance.**

## UNIONIZING TO ADDRESS HARASSMENT

Starting in the mid-90s through today, there has been a surge of unionization among graduate workers, postdocs, and other academic workers. These unionization efforts all share a focus on addressing systemic harassment and workplace inequity by restructuring the balance of power in our workplaces.

- **BARGAINING AS EQUALS:** Unionizing fundamentally balances power between academic workers and our supervisors & institutions -- through collective bargaining we structurally have the right to negotiate the terms of our work as equals with the institution.
- **REAL RECOURSE:** Our contractual grievance procedure ensures that we are able to take complaints to a neutral third-party if we cannot resolve them with the university, and ensures that we are entitled to representation so we don't have to navigate complex institutional processes on our own. Because we have real ownership over this process and it is backstopped by a neutral party, it is far more timely, transparent, and accountable than internal university processes on their own. Further, just cause protections ensure that we can't be fired for discriminatory reasons like pregnancy or visa complications.
- **ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES:** Through collective bargaining and collective action, we are able to address structural inequities in higher ed that undergird sexual harassment and make it more likely to happen, including by fighting for: pay equity and transparency, family leave, health insurance, childcare subsidies, fee waivers, and more. We are also able to protect members who face increased vulnerability from federal policies like travel bans and other threats to international scholars.
- **PEER SUPPORT:** As member-driven, democratic organizations, our unions are fundamentally built on the maxim that an injury to one is an injury to all. Unionizing is a key tool for developing the kind of peer support and solidarity necessary for addressing sexual harassment at a grassroots level.



### Postdoc & Junior Scientist Unionization

- **2004:** Postdocs at University of Connecticut Health - AFT 3837
- **2008:** Postdocs at University of California - UAW 5810
- **2010:** Postdocs at University of Alaska - AFT/AAUP
- **2012:** Postdocs at University of Massachusetts-Amherst - UAW 2322
- **2012:** Postdocs at Rutgers University - AFT/AAUP
- **2013:** Postdocs at University of Oregon - AFT 3209
- **2016:** Postdocs at Lawrence Berkeley National Labs - UAW 5810
- **2019:** Postdocs at University of Washington - UAW 4121
- **2019:** Academic Researchers at University of California - UAW 5810
- **In progress:** Postdocs & Associate Research Scientists at Columbia University - UAW
- **In progress:** Postdocs at University of Connecticut - UAW

## CASE STUDIES AT UW



UW ASE Paige Sechrest speaks to other ASEs during 2018 contract negotiations about the importance of addressing sexual harassment through bargaining.

### ASE Contract Campaign (2017-18)

#### Collective Actions:

- 2300+ ASEs signed on to bargaining demands & equity petition
- 2600+ ASEs vote at 96% rate to authorize a strike
- 2000+ person 1-day strike

#### Key Wins:

- Paid positions for 2 members to develop & implement joint peer-to-peer sexual harassment prevention training for ASEs
- Interim measures & improved timeline for harassment grievances
- Joint equity survey
- Trans-inclusive healthcare
- Increased childcare subsidies & family leave
- 2% wage increase, decreased student fees
- Hourly pay transparency
- Improved access to mental healthcare
- Family Leave bargaining

### Postdoc Unionization & 1st Contract (2018-19)

#### Collective Actions:

- 100s of PDs join "let us vote!" sit-in to demand union election vote
- Majority of PDs and 89% of unchallenged voters vote to join union
- 100s of PDs rally at president's office to demand no more delays in starting bargaining
- 100s of PDs at City Council Work Session

#### Key Wins:

- Paid position for 1 member to develop & implement joint peer-to-peer sexual harassment prevention training for PDs
- Individual development plan with right to secondary mentor
- Grievance procedure, including interim measures & protection from retaliation
- Family leave & childcare subsidy program
- Compensation tied to NIH minimum
- Appointment security & just cause discipline standard



Hundreds of UW Postdocs gathering in 2019 for a work session held by Seattle City Councilmember Teresa Mosqueda on the urgent need to address sexual harassment prevention & response through the Postdoc contract.