

Demystifying Caltech's Equity and Title IX Office

A Graduate Student's Perspective

In 2022 I met with the Caltech Equity and Title IX Office about harassment I experienced from another graduate student. I'd like to share some of the things I learned along the way as a resource for others. I also want to acknowledge that while I had an extremely positive experience working with the Equity and Title IX Office, I am aware of complainants who had a different experience. Without knowing details on these other cases, I still strongly support a student to contact the Office to be aware of resources, supportive measures, and options available.

Note: Here, the procedural term "respondent" refers to the person whose behavior you are considering to report. You are the complainant.

1. The Office will be able to provide guidance and support, no matter the situation.

The Equity and Title IX Office at Caltech is a campus resource to be used in situations where you might want advice, support, or action taken based on uncomfortable or unwanted interactions with another individual. This individual can be a Caltech community member or someone outside Caltech. The Office, located in the Center for Student Services, has the knowledge and experience to help you through any harassment or misconduct no matter how casual or severe. Harassment can be sexual or based on factors like race, gender, sexual orientation, or disabilities, or it could fall into none of these listed categories. *Even if you are unsure or think your situation doesn't fall into any of the listed categories, I encourage you to go talk to the Office.* They also have a detailed website with more information: <https://equity.caltech.edu/what-we-do> It doesn't hurt to get information on how they can help in your situation.

2. You are in control of the process

You have the power to choose how much to share and when to share it with the Office. You can choose which available options you would like to take to address the respondent's behavior. The Office will keep things as confidential as possible. If situations require it, they will share the minimum information necessary to effectively assist you. In most situations* no action is taken and no one else is contacted, including the respondent, until you give your permission. You can also pose hypotheticals to learn how the office would respond before you share actual information. I was surprised at how much flexibility and control I had throughout, including the ability to change my mind about proceedings part way through after I learned more about my options from the Office.

**There are occasions when the Office and Caltech must take responsive action to protect the vulnerable, for example, if a minor is alleged to have been harmed or there is an immediate threat to the physical safety of an individual or campus. But they make the scope of their confidentiality and your control very clear before you tell them your situation. And even when Caltech takes action, you have the freedom to decide the scope of your participation.*

3. The Office is extremely friendly, inviting, and knowledgeable

Even though initially I was intimidated to reach out, I quickly discovered the staff is very accommodating and no one pressured me to share anything before I was ready. The Office was great at providing all options available to me, setting up appointments that worked for my schedule, and answering my questions throughout our several meetings. I was able to take this information and as much time as I needed to decide how I wanted to proceed.

4. There is a wide range of options available to you to address your situation, many of which you might not realize are available

The Office will work with you to figure out ways to improve your situation and quality of life at Caltech, and will respond to offending behavior based on what you are comfortable with. The Office has the resources to help with all types of misconduct and inappropriate behavior, including addressing uncomfortable conversations or comments, unwanted physical touching, stalking, and more. The options available will depend in part on your situation.

Supportive measures that do not directly involve the respondent

- a. Rearrangement of your class, office, or work schedules to avoid interaction with the respondent
- b. Extensions of time for classwork, candidacy exams, and other academic accommodations
- c. Counseling, including with the confidential campus advocate, Pilar Montenegro
- d. Conversations with the Office to prepare you to handle the situation yourself
- e. Have the Office talk with your PI/supervisor to facilitate support or assistance
- f. And more - you can brainstorm other ideas based on what you want done

Supportive measures that involve the respondent more directly:

Note: With any of these options, you do not ever have to see or interact with the respondent.

- a. Conversations between just the Office and respondent addressing their behavior
- b. Training/workshops for groups/labs that the respondent might be a part of
- c. Mutual no contact orders, prohibiting the respondent to communicate with you in any way
- d. Mediated conversations between you, the respondent, and the Office (and other parties such as faculty and heads of departments)
- e. Formal Complaint: Depending on your situation, you may have the option to file a formal complaint under Title IX and Caltech's sex- and gender-based misconduct policy which lets you choose between non-disciplinary and disciplinary options (this was one of the actions I took)

5. You can keep the other person anonymous

I started my conversations with the Office in this manner, without naming the respondent, and there were still several resources available to support me. Eventually, I determined I wanted to name the respondent, but this decision was made on my own after conversations with the Office.

6. You can keep yourself anonymous

If you want to keep yourself anonymous with the Office, you can use their "Reporting a Concern" form: <https://equity.caltech.edu/reporting/reporting-options>. Just leave your name blank and use an alternative email address for them to contact you or use a trusted friend's or support person's email. It's a good way to get more information and start a conversation. You can also have a friend meet up with the Office and ask questions on your behalf. If you are ok with the Office knowing your name but not anyone else, the Office can coordinate with others outside of the Office to enact change without using your name or specifics about your situation.

7. You will never be in the same room as the respondent and will never need to speak to them at any point during the process

From the beginning I knew that I did not want to interact directly with the respondent, and the Office assured me immediately I would never need to engage with them in any way. I never saw or heard from the respondent during this process, and the Office kept me informed on when they needed to reach out to

the respondent (with my permission) and when the respondent completed the requirements of the formal complaint process that I chose. However, if you do want to talk with the respondent and address things yourself, the Office will prepare you to have the conversation, or, if you prefer, they will bring everyone involved together and facilitate a conversation in a controlled space. They have done this latter option for students and PIs, for example.

8. The Equity and Title IX Office staff will do the work needed to address the situation

The Office took care of contacting and gathering info from those involved (with my permission and knowledge), educated staff involved to help prevent my situation from happening again, provided email drafts and communication tips, and completed all the organization needed. It was a huge relief to not have to do any of the work during this process.

9. I wish I had gone to see them sooner

No one deserves or has done anything to warrant harassment or misconduct of any kind. Even if you believe that your behavior contributed to a bad situation, I strongly encourage you to talk it through with the Equity and Title IX Office. If you're not ready to talk about it with the Office, see if you can reach out to a friend or support person. This was helpful for me to gain confidence.

Whether your situation is ongoing or an incident that happened in the past, even years ago (and after you graduate), you can go to the Equity and Title IX Office. There are resources available to you, including filing formal complaints after you graduate. Meetings are available in person and online. Please see <https://equity.caltech.edu/reporting/deciding-to-report> for more info.