

Hold NYU Accountable: Terminate Avital Ronell's Employment and Implement Institutional Reform #NYUtoo

To sign the petition, go to <https://tinyurl.com/NYUtooPetition>.

NYUtoo and The Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC-UAW Local 2110), the union for graduate workers at NYU, strongly opposes the [return](#) of Avital Ronell, professor of Comparative Literature and German, who was found guilty in a Title IX investigation of verbal and physical sexual harassment of a graduate student. She is currently undergoing a one-year suspension and will return to her teaching and research duties in fall 2019. Ronell's well-documented emotionally manipulative and sexually harassing behavior threatens the physical and mental safety of NYU's undergraduates, graduate students and workers, faculty, and staff. At every step, Ronell's case demonstrates systemic abuses of power and NYU's failure to ensure a safe working and learning environment.

As the union for graduate employees, we maintain that every student and employee of NYU has the right to work and learn free from the fear of harassment, discrimination, and abuse. NYU's decision to continue Ronell's employment constitutes an attack on survivors of sexual abuse and contributes to a hostile learning and working environment. The university already tacitly acknowledges this in making it a condition of Ronell's return that her future meetings with students be supervised. Moreover, Ronell's behavior is not isolated to this particular instance, but is part of a long-standing pattern of intimidation and misconduct, as testified by other students and faculty (that prompted at least one additional Title IX case against Ronell). We therefore call on NYU to enforce its [policy](#) "to maintain a safe learning, living, and working environment" and immediately terminate Avital Ronell's employment.

NYU's handling of the case suggests that its stated commitment to diversity and inclusion is nothing more than tokenism in place of actual institutional reform. Furthermore, NYU's continued silence around this case and its failure to warn Ronell's future students of her past actions makes clear the university's interest in protecting its tenured professors and the institution at the physical, emotional, and financial expense of its students and staff. Allowing Ronell to return to NYU demonstrates the university's complicity in reproducing the structures that produce harassment and exclusion.

Also troubling was NYU's silence regarding a disinformation campaign against Ronell's accuser in which many prominent scholars, including NYU professors, signed a letter urging NYU President Hamilton and Provost Fleming not to fire Ronell. This letter defended Ronell solely based on her scholarly reputation while slandering her accuser's personal character and baselessly attributing his claims to malicious intent. This letter and NYU's failure to respond to it further highlight the power imbalance between advisors and graduate students, and the barriers

that prevent students and workers from reporting instances of misconduct and being taken seriously.

As graduate workers who navigate these power imbalances on a daily basis, we fight to hold NYU accountable to enforce its policies, prevent abuse and inequality of all kinds, and consistently hold perpetrators accountable. The conditions that enabled Ronell's misconduct are the very same institutional conditions that enable all injustice and hostility based on ability, race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, or nationality. We stand in solidarity with other ongoing struggles within NYU, such as the recent mobilizations against [institutional racism at Silver](#), that seek to transform the university into a more equitable and just place for all of its students and employees.

We recognize that sexual harassment is a problem across academia, as evidenced by recent cases at [Johns Hopkins](#), [Dartmouth](#), [Harvard](#), and [John Jay](#) (CUNY). We call on NYU to step forward as a leader among its peer institutions by appropriately responding to findings of misconduct and building an academic environment free from harassment and discrimination.

We the [undersigned](#) demand that NYU:

TITLE IX ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

1) Cancel Professor Ronell's Fall 2019 course and terminate her employment at the university. After being found guilty of sexual harassment, Ronell's continued employment precludes the possibility of a safe workplace. Further, we demand that:

- A. NYU release a public statement that denounces Ronell's actions, addresses the handling of her case, and outlines steps for responding to the demands in this petition.**
- B. Faculty who signed the support letter for Ronell issue a formal apology.** This should state their commitment to their students' and colleagues' safety and reaffirm their support for survivors of sexual harassment, discrimination, and abuse.

2) Ensure transparency and consistency regarding Title IX proceedings, and that those found guilty of misconduct face consequences commensurate with the offense. In less severe cases, offenders should be required to complete regular training as a condition of continued employment; in cases where employees would continue to pose significant safety threats to students and workers, they should be terminated. Further, we demand that NYU:

- A. Ensure that disciplinary measures are meted consistently in comparable cases.** NYU must disclose the specific evidentiary standards and criteria by which a Title IX adjudicator determines verdicts for various offenses, as well as disclose the standards used for determining disciplinary measures in findings of misconduct.
- B. Process all complaints with timeliness and sensitivity to victims, thereby minimizing retraumatization and opportunities for retaliation.**

3) Publish an annual report providing information and statistics on all Title IX complaints for the academic year, including NYU's responses to those complaints. This information should be categorized by incident type, the procedures and resolutions for each incident, the complainant's and respondent's role in the university (student, staff, or faculty) and school/college/institute/campus affiliation, investigation length, and whether any respondents were the subject of multiple complaints.¹ *Such annual reports are common practice at many universities, including [Harvard](#), [Stanford](#), and [Brown](#).*

RESOURCES AND REPORTING

4) Establish a restorative justice option for addressing sexual misconduct, requiring the hiring of at least two highly trained facilitators. Restorative justice is a survivor- and victim-centered alternative to the Title IX process that prioritizes a survivor's/victim's needs throughout the entire resolution and adjudication process. A restorative justice approach, in which the survivor gives active consent to engage in dialogue with their perpetrator, grants the survivor agency and can reduce the possibility of re-traumatization compared to the Title IX process. This approach has been shown to lessen the likelihood of repeat offense by the perpetrator and often provides a more satisfactory sense of justice for the survivor. Facilitators must have specialization in racial and sexual discrimination, and must be hired in consultation with NYU's [Center for Strategic Solutions](#) (CSS). *The University of Michigan's restorative justice practice provides a good model for implementing this approach. Restorative justice options also exist at [Stanford](#), [Brown](#), the [University of Kentucky](#), and others.*

5) Establish an anonymous reporting option for all forms of misconduct, including racial discrimination, gender discrimination, sexual misconduct, and threat of retaliation. NYU must offer an anonymous online reporting option, as well as a 24-hour anonymous telephone reporting hotline. These resources would supplement NYU's Bias Response Line, which does not currently allow anonymous reporting. This would help alleviate the fear of retaliation, which is one of the largest impediments to reporting misconduct. When a student, staff member, or faculty member makes an anonymous report, they would be provided with resources appropriate to their situation, as well with a report key and password with which they can follow up on their report and see what actions are being taken. *Harvard's reporting system offers a good model. [Marquette](#), [SUNY Buffalo](#), and the [University of Oregon](#) also offer this option.*

¹ This data would be presented without specific identifying information and thus would not be in violation of FERPA. Moreover, this information would be different than that contained in NYU's annual Clery Act report ("Security and Fire Safety Reports"). The Clery Act report includes statistics on solely criminal conduct, whereas this proposed report would reflect statistics on the more broad range of prohibited behaviors outlined in NYU's sexual misconduct policy. Moreover, this new report would include cases pertaining to a wider geographical jurisdiction than those covered under the Clery Act's more narrow geographical specifications.

6) Significantly increase funding to NYU's [S.P.A.C.E.](#) (Sexual Misconduct Prevention, Assistance, Counseling, and Education) to streamline and expand the resources available to the NYU community. This funding would allow S.P.A.C.E. to become NYU's dedicated survivor-centered and trauma-informed resource, both as a physical office and website, offering comprehensive services to address each student's individualized needs. This transformation of S.P.A.C.E. must be implemented in consultation with [Students for Sexual Respect](#). Further, we demand that NYU:

- A. Devote substantial funding to S.P.A.C.E., allowing for the hiring of *at least four additional mental health professionals to support the following programs:*** Short- and long-term counseling; crisis response; survivor advocacy; interpersonal violence prevention, intervention, and counseling; Title IX case support; referral services; and general guidance for students facing any form of sexual mistreatment, violence, or harassment. S.P.A.C.E. should also host workshops, trainings, campaigns, and events for NYU student, staff, and faculty. Each new hire must have expertise in working with students of color as well as trans and gender non-conforming students.
- B. Establish a peer-education training program to be housed in and facilitated by S.P.A.C.E., including the hiring of a full-time director and coordinator.** This program would train interested students to be peer educators who work to create a culture of radical consent by changing harmful norms. Peer educators would plan and implement awareness-raising campaigns, co-facilitate workshops, and act as liaisons between the NYU student body and S.P.A.C.E. resources. *Such peer-education programs currently exist at [Brown](#), [Towson](#), [Princeton](#), and other universities.*
- C. Redesign the S.P.A.C.E. website with more comprehensive and easy-to-navigate resources for the prevention of and response to sexual assault and harassment, including an online reporting option.** NYU's current online resources are disorganized, difficult to navigate, and [contain](#) (at the time of writing) broken links to potentially life-saving resources;
- D. Create and widely distribute a one-to-two page fact sheet and flowchart that clearly outlines the various resources and modes of recourse available to students for a wide variety of scenarios.** [Princeton](#) and [Arizona State](#) offer good examples of this type of resource.

CULTURAL CHANGE

7) Implement regular, in-person, rigorous trainings for faculty, staff, and students across the university focusing on anti-harassment, sexual respect, racial sensitivity, and bystander intervention. Regular trainings would normalize discussions around a safe and healthy working and learning environment and contribute to broader cultural change. Given that many of the most transformative trainers in the U.S. work at NYU, we demand that NYU ensure

these trainings are based on current best practices and implemented in an intersectional framework. In particular, we demand:

- A. Mandatory, *in-person* sexual respect trainings for all students, requiring the hiring of at least three full-time trainers.** These trainings would supplement NYU's "Think About It" online sexual misconduct training, which does not provide sufficiently impactful sexual harassment and assault education for students. These in-person trainings must, at minimum, include: consent and sexual respect information; interactive workshops on interpersonal violence, structural power inequality, and healthy vs. unhealthy relationships; interactive bystander intervention training; information on resources available for reporting and combating sexual assault, harassment, and relationship violence; and information on available health and counseling services. These hires would be housed in the S.P.A.C.E. and must be made in coordination with NYU's [Center for Strategic Solutions](#) (CSS) and NYU'S [Center for Multicultural Education and Programs](#). (CMEP). *Similar mandatory in-person trainings for students exist at [George Washington University](#), [UC Santa Cruz](#), and [Northwestern](#), as well as other universities.*
- B. Mandatory, *in-person* anti-harassment and sensitivity trainings for all faculty.** These trainings must include discussions on best practices for mentors, appropriate faculty-graduate student interactions, bystander intervention training, definitions of roles and responsibilities, and information on resources for reporting and combating sexual misconduct and abuses of power. The trainings should be regular (ex. biannual) and work with each department to design a training that addresses its specific needs and culture.

8) Prioritize the hiring and retention of faculty from underrepresented groups, ensure holistic race-conscious admissions processes, and increase need-based financial aid opportunities. NYU must make concrete and proactive steps to interrupt and transform the way whiteness and economic privilege has historically structured the university and thus excluded economically disadvantaged and historically minoritized groups. Further, we demand that NYU:

- A. Proactively eliminate implicit and explicit bias in admissions practices, and significantly increase funding for *need-based* scholarships, tuition waivers, and support programs for lower-income and first-generation students.** As lower-income students statistically bear the brunt of increasing tuition costs, NYU must take concrete steps to eradicate the financial barriers that continue to make education inaccessible for historically disadvantaged groups.
- B. Proactively eliminate bias in its hiring and promotional practices,** as well as prioritize the hiring and retention of faculty of color and marginalized identities.
- C. Promote and foster a culture of collegiality, respect, and cooperation** by including those as criteria in hiring and promotion considerations.

9) Take steps to diffuse and reinvent the power structures within academia that currently give tenured faculty and administrators undue power over graduate students. NYU must begin to address the significant power imbalances that can isolate students from seeking help for fear of retaliation, thereby leaving them vulnerable to coercion, by taking the following steps:

- A. Designate an ombudsperson in each department who can support students and others when issues arise.** This ombudsperson should receive training in the available resources and be able to relay the options for taking action after an incident. They should also act as a resource to informally report negative interactions within the department, and should use this collected information to work with individuals conducting training programs to tailor them to the specific needs of the department. The ombudsperson's role should be made clear to all graduate students in the department on a regular basis.
- B. Add support to the traditional dyadic advising model by increasing the role of the thesis committee.** In addition to their role as intellectual advisors for graduate students, the thesis or dissertation committee should act as a resource with a diversity of potential pathways for advice, funding, support, and informal reporting of any issues including harassment or abuse. Graduate students should meet with their committee members without their primary advisor at least once per year; this would help diffuse the power of a single advisor over the trainee.
- C. Create a plan for support of graduate students who are unable to work with their original advisor.** There are many reasons a graduate student may no longer be able to be advised by their original advisor, from problems of abuse to logistical issues, such as an advisor leaving the institution. Departments must make plans for the continuous funding and intellectual support of students for at least the average duration of graduate study.

In Solidarity,
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