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Get Help, Use 'Calm,' Strategic Responses When Research Is Attacked, Group Says

Challenges to investigators' work are increasing in frequency, scope and method, and coming from a widening group of not just bloggers and conservative groups but state officials and members of Congress.

The Union of Concerned Scientists has stepped in to offer some help to beleaguered researchers with *Science in an Age of Scrutiny: How Scientists Can Respond to Criticism and Personal Attacks*, which UCS terms a "guide that helps scientists deal with harassment and other unwarranted attacks on their integrity and their work." Universities and other higher education institutions may also find useful advice in UCS's guide.

The guide has sections that address responses to "demands for private information," as well as strategies for dealing with "harassing" correspondence and bloggers, and "attacks through a mainstream source."

"Certainly, institutions need to be better prepared to respond to requests for private information," Michael Halpern, UCS's program manager for scientific integrity, wrote on the UCS blog in announcing the guide. "States and the federal government need to explore ways to protect researchers while still allowing adequate access to information about how the government functions and makes decisions."

But the attacks on Penn State's Michael Mann, who told *RRC* he reviewed the new guide in draft form and found it helpful, actually came from a state. Virginia's attorney general sued the University of Virginia for the release of documents and emails related to Mann's tenure there from 1999 to 2005 *(RRC 7/10, p. 1).* That case was dismissed by that state's supreme court *(RRC 3/15/12).* The emails spurred several misconduct investigations, but the allegations were found to be baseless *(RRC 8/25/11).* Other groups filed similar suits but also have not been successful.

Mann and other climatologists began being targeted following the 2009 release of their hacked emails with demands for more emails pressed in court. Such a tactic is what Halpern terms a "powerful new tool: going after scientists' email correspondence in hopes they will find a sentence or a phrase to take out of context."

For many years, researchers who work with animals have been subject to attacks, including death threats, fire bombings of vehicles and destruction of labs and personal property. Corporations with vested interests have also sought to silence researchers whose work on subjects such as asbestos, tobacco and chemicals "is threatening to their bottom line," UCS puts it.

"Scientists need to understand that they are under assault from special interests looking to poison the public discourse in areas of science that have policy implications, such as climate change. The report provides helpful information for scientists who may find themselves under attack because of the policy implications of their work," Mann told *RRC.* "Part of the reason I wrote my book *The Hockey Stick and the Climate Wars* about my own experiences in the fray is to help my fellow scientists who too might find themselves targeted by vested interests running smear campaigns aimed at discrediting them and their work."

Halpern told *RRC* the guide was not developed in response to a single incident, but was a "long time in coming." Much of the content is based on the "personal experiences" of researchers who "study a diversity of topics," Halpern said.

Resources for these researchers have been developed by various groups, and some investigators have called on their colleagues to support them and offer assistance *(RRC 1/11, p. 1).* The Society for Neuroscience also released a publication, "Best Practices for Protecting Researchers and Research: Recommendations for Universities and Institutions." But few may offer the sort of immediate advice and specific steps in the new guide.

UCS itself has "helped many scientists over the years, many of whom are thrust into the spotlight suddenly and don't know how best to react," Halpern said. "But often, by the time they turn to us for help, damage has been done. If they are unprepared, many scientists make mistakes in the crucial hours and days after an attack on their research or scientific integrity."

'Damage' Can Occur Quickly

He adds that it is also "resource intensive to respond to each case, and it doesn't make sense to play defense all the time."

"Scientists need to be able to distinguish between legitimate criticism and personal attacks. We thought it would be best for scientists to consider in advance how they would respond to feedback, so that they might react appropriately," Halpern said.

The most useful information in the guide, Mann said, is "the immediate steps a scientist should take, and the resources that are available to them, in the immediate aftermath of an attack against them by outside groups using FOIA, subpoenas, etc.," he said, referring to the federal Freedom of Information Act and similar state laws. "It is those first few hours where scientists are most likely to make a mistake in how they deal with this sort

Attacks by Public Officials May Require Collective Responses

The Union of Concerned Scientists recently issued *Science in an Age of Scrutiny: How Scientists Can Respond to Criticism and Personal Attacks*, which stresses that when researchers are being unfairly attacked, they must be careful to respond appropriately.

The guide poses a number of scenarios and offers strategies for responses that vary depending on the type of attack or scrutiny and the source.

Under the section "harassing correspondence," the situations described are receipt of an email "from an unknown individual alleging that your research or field of research is fraudulent," an "endless string of follow-up questions" after "you answer questions from someone via email," and "you receive a letter that threatens physical harm to you or your family."

What to do? According to the guide:

◆ "Respond to valid inquiries.

◆ "Assume that any response you write can be forwarded or published online.

◆ "Look for signs that an e-mailer is wasting your time with endless questions, or attempting to play 'gotcha' by asking badly framed questions.

◆ "Refrain from responding to harassing correspondence.

◆ "Compile all threatening e-mail or paper mail into archives (such as into one folder that is safe and protected on your computer, on external hard drives, or in your office).

◆ "Report the threats to your work supervisor so he or she is aware of the situation.

◆ "In the case of a clear and explicit threat to someone's life, health, or safety, notify law enforcement."

So what should the response be when a "public official or politician publicly attacks you or your research"? Or if a newspaper does so?

Here's what UCS said to "try to avoid":

◆ Saying "no comment" in response to a reporter's questions. The reporter may assume you have something to hide. Also, a news story is much more likely to be inaccurate if you refuse to engage.

◆ Getting defensive. Calmly and clearly explain the facts. Acting defensively makes it look as though you did something wrong.

◆ Answering illegitimate criticisms. Instead, put them in an appropriate context.

◆ Assuming that you can speak "off the record." Anything you say to a reporter can be quoted or used in a story.

◆ Overemphasizing the debunking of misinformation (often related to details) at the expense of sharing top-level information that scientists in your field know to be accurate.

◆ Responding to attacks from public officials or politicians without seeking assistance. The legislative and public policy environments are much different from the scientific environment.

But what could be done:

◆ Respond to reporters' questions promptly. This enables you to explain inaccuracies in the charges against you. You can also help shape a story by explaining how the peer-review process works.

◆ Ask newspapers if you can respond to an editorial or op-ed with your own op-ed or letter. Many newspapers will grant this request, especially if you are named in the original piece.

◆ Ask colleagues who understand your work to help you set the record straight by validating your response.

◆ Seek assistance from your public relations office, your scientific society, or other resources in responding publicly to attacks from politicians or public officials. These sources can help you understand how to communicate your research most effectively.

◆ Consult *A Scientist's Guide to Talking with the Media*, available at www.ucsusa.org/deskreference.

Link: http://blog.ucsusa.org/new-guide-for-scientists-responding-to-criticism-and-personal-attacks

of attack. That's why it's crucial that they have professional advice like this."

Among the "recurring pieces of advice" in the guide are to:

◆ "Respond calmly and constructively to valid criticism and inquiries about your work and field of research — but avoid getting pulled into debates with people who only seek to waste your time.

◆ "When you do respond, do so through mainstream sources or on more neutral territory, such as your own blog.

◆ "Use the resources available to you, such as nonprofit legal counsel or your organization's public relations office, to help you determine the best strategy for responding.

◆ "Remember that your work emails may become public in certain situations, and keep them accordingly professional.

◆ "Keep records of harassing messages, and contact authorities if they become threatening."

Each section gives three examples of a situation, a list of actions that "should" be done in response, and a list of those one should to "try to avoid" (see box, p. 3).

But criticisms are levied not just by private individuals or groups. Personal challenges can also come from a member of Congress who is directing his or her fire at recipients of federal funding and their home institutions. The late Sen. William Proxmire (D-Wis.) used to give out "Golden Fleece" "awards" for projects he termed a waste of U.S. research dollars. Those ended with his retirement in 1988.

Last spring some scientists found their work publicly ridiculed in a contentious report issued in May by Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.), *Under the Microscope*, which he claimed "identifies more than $1.2 billion the National Science Foundation has lost due to waste, fraud, duplication and mismanagement and an additional $1.7 billion in unspent funds" *(RRC 7/11, p. 3)*.

Groups such as the Association of American Universities rallied to the defense of the researchers and NSF at the time. To overcome the impact of these kinds of efforts, the groups this year launched their own "Golden Goose" awards "to demonstrate the human and economic benefits of federally funded research by highlighting examples of seemingly obscure studies that have led to major breakthroughs and resulted in significant societal impact."

As the guide shows, responses often necessitate the involvement of others at the institution, but it seems to suggest that the scientist or investigator will be the one directing, and making, comments regarding the scrutiny. Mann said that he has "never had a university public relations person tell me what I can or cannot say. I would hope that the same is true for my colleagues at other institutions. Academic freedom means that academics are free to speak their minds," as long as they do not commit libel or otherwise "infringe on the rights of others," he said.

Mann called the support of his colleagues and Penn State officials "crucial."

"They did not cave into the pressure tactics used by some right-wing politicians who wanted them to take punitive actions against me in response to the trumped-up, bogus 'Climategate' allegations. They made sure that the investigation of the allegations was done rigorously and objectively," he said. "And their finding, absolving me of any and all charges of wrongdoing by my detractors, was independently confirmed by the National Science Foundation Office of the Inspector General."

When asked what else institutions could do to support their researchers who find themselves under siege, Mann noted the need for legal assistance. "Universities don't always provide the legal support that they might when academics and scientists at their institutions are targeted by outside groups. They could do a better job in providing the resources necessary for those individuals to defend themselves," he said.

Mann's advice and the guide's may become more worthy of attention as time goes on, as UCS "expects attacks on scientists to continue...given the ideological divides on many science-based policy challenges, as well as the integral role of science in the policy-making process."

UCS is "sharing [the guide] at scientific meetings and through online channels and word of mouth. If other lines of attack manifest themselves, we will update the guide," Halpern told *RRC.*

Link: http://blog.ucsusa.org/new-guide-for-scientists-responding-to-criticism-and-personal-attacks ✧