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An open letter to the students, staff, and faculty of our department

Dear Colleagues,

Prof. Steve Holbrook, Head of the Department of Geosciences composed an open letter to his department about sexual harassment. With his permission, I am plagiarizing Steve's letter because these concerns are just as important to us as well.

As you no doubt know, we are experiencing a cultural reckoning about the problem of sexual harassment. The #MeToo movement is at once inspiring, for the hope it gives us of a future where harassment is unambiguously viewed as unacceptable, and heartbreaking, as it shines a light on traumatizing behavior that too many of us did not know was as deeply rooted and widespread as it now appears to be. This "spotlight of shame" has fallen on all fields of endeavor, including chemistry.

While #MeToo raises our awareness, an ongoing project vividly captures the effects of sexual harassment in higher education. A crowdsourced google doc hosted by blogger, columnist and Ph.D. scientist Dr. Karen Kelsky contains the stories of nearly 2,000 people who have been victimized by sexual harassment (perpetrators remain anonymous). Reading through these accounts is a harrowing but eye-opening experience. If any of you doubt the ruinous consequences of harassment, take an hour or two to read through this document (<http://bit.ly/2BJUfkX>), and your outlook will be forever changed. A striking theme in the stories is the importance of swift, supportive reactions from friends, peers, and mentors. Indeed, when trusted colleagues react with indifference, disbelief, or derision, this is often as traumatic, or even more traumatic, than the original transgression.

Sexual harassment causes lasting harm, both to individuals and to our profession. Victims, largely women, are traumatized, and often scarred for life. They are left fearful of their safety in their labs, offices or field sites. They question their talent. They adopt protective behaviors that they know may harm their prospects for career advancement. They suffer in silence for fear of retribution or ridicule. Many switch universities, change fields, or leave higher education altogether. These are, first and foremost, personal tragedies — but in aggregate they also devastate our profession and deprive our discipline of talented scientists and educators. And too often the perpetrators carry on, unpunished.

I am writing this as an “open” letter, because I think it is vital for all of us — especially those of us in positions of responsibility — to speak more openly about this behavior, to call it out for what it is, and to add our voices to the many speaking out in support of victims everywhere.

To all of you in our department — students, faculty, staff, and visitors: know that any reports of sexual misconduct will be taken seriously, treated respectfully, and reported immediately to the appropriate university authorities. The university has thorough policies in place to protect against sexual harassment and misconduct. We will support and strictly follow those policies.

We all have a part to play in ending sexual harassment. We owe it to each other, to ourselves, to our society, and to our profession. Most of all, we owe it to our students to ensure that labs, offices, classrooms, and field sites are safe places where the only object is science.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. M. Tanko". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

J. M. Tanko
Professor & Chair