

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

2321 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6301

(202) 225-6371
www.science.house.gov

October 26, 2017

The Honorable Robert M. Lightfoot, Jr.
Acting Administrator
National Aeronautics and Space Administration
300 E Street SW
Washington, DC 20546

Dear Acting Administrator Lightfoot,

The Committee on Science, Space, and Technology is investigating reports that a National Science Foundation (NSF), National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) grant recipient employed by Boston University (“the University”) has been accused of sexually harassing and assaulting female researchers. According to *Science* and the *Washington Post*, two former graduate students at the University allege Professor David Marchant repeatedly assaulted and sexually harassed them while on isolated research trips in Antarctica, as part of his NSF and NASA funded research.¹ The Committee is sending similar letters to the University and other grant-making agencies involved. The Committee is interested in understanding all the facts surrounding this case, what steps NASA has undertaken to uncover the extent of the allegations and investigate their validity, any repercussions related to the allegations, and what safeguards NASA has in place to address sexual assault and harassment cases.

In October 2016 and May 2017, two separate Title IX complaints were filed with the University by former graduate students who had participated in Antarctica research trips with Professor Marchant.² These allegations involved direct physical and verbal attacks on the female students, including threats from Professor Marchant to utilize his prominent standing and sizeable funding to prevent their advancement in the field of Antarctic research and block their access to future NSF research funding.³

¹ Meredith Wadman, *Disturbing allegations of sexual harassment in Antarctica leveled at noted scientist*, SCIENCE (Oct. 6, 2017), <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/10/disturbing-allegations-sexual-harassment-antarctica-leveled-noted-scientist>; Ben Guarino, *Antarctic geologist accused of sexually harassing, assaulting female researchers*, WASH. POST (Oct. 10, 2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2017/10/10/antarctic-geologist-accused-of-sexually-harassing-assaulting-female-researchers/?utm_term=.378cee341442&wpisrc=nl_science&wpmm=1.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

Since the late 1990s, Professor Marchant has been the recipient of over \$5.4 million in awards from NSF and NASA, ranging from projects including Antarctic and Mars research, to K-12 STEM Education.⁴ Professor Marchant allegedly used derogatory terms to describe his female graduate students—terms too crude to be written in this letter.⁵ In addition, there is at least one claim of physical battery. A current professor at Scripps told *Science* that Professor Marchant “repeatedly shoved her down a steep slope, pelted her with rocks[, and] . . . blew [volcanic] ash [containing tiny shards of glass] into her eyes.”⁶ The abuse appears to have been psychological as well. One former researcher who traveled with Professor Marchant to Antarctica alleges that not only did he call her vulgar terms, “he promised to block her access to [NSF] research funding should she earn a Ph.D.”⁷ One complainant, a female high school teacher, who encountered Professor Marchant through his work in K-12 STEM education wrote: “[Professor Marchant’s] taunts, degrading comments about my body, brain, and general inadequacies never ended.”⁸ She says this treatment was a daily occurrence.⁹

Professor Marchant’s alleged actions, if true, are an example of behavior that is not acceptable in the academic scientific community or in any professional environment. The Committee has a responsibility to ensure that recipients of federal dollars are worthy of the taxpayer’s trust. Any behavior that stymies the advancement and support of women in science should not be tolerated and this Committee will seek all surrounding facts. The Committee’s investigation is consistent with its broader goal of ensuring the effective management and stewardship of taxpayer dollars allocated through NSF, NASA, and NOAA grants and funding.

To appropriately inform the Committee on the circumstances of these allegations, we request that NASA provide the Committee with documents and information. Please produce the following documents and information, in electronic format, for the time period January 1, 1997, to the present:

1. All documents and communications referring or relating to federal grants or monetary awards to Professor Marchant.
2. All documents and communications referring or relating to any complaint(s) or investigation(s) of alleged sexual or physical harassment, assault, or battery by Professor Marchant.
3. All documents and communications referring or relating to actions NASA has taken in response to the alleged activity by Professor Marchant.

The Committee on Science, Space, and Technology has sole legislative jurisdiction over NASA and “shall review and study on a continuing basis laws, programs, and Governmental

⁴ *Id.*; Boston University, *Professor Profile: David R. Marchant* (last visited Nov. 16, 2017), <http://www.bu.edu/earth/people/faculty/david-r-marchant/>.

⁵ Wadman, *supra* note 1.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

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activities” as set forth in House Rule X. This request and any documents created as a result of this request will be deemed congressional documents and property of the House Science Committee. An attachment to this letter provides additional information about responding to the Committee’s request.

We request that you provide the requested documents and information as soon as possible, but no later than 5:00 p.m. on November 9, 2017. When producing documents to the Committee, please deliver production sets to the Majority Staff in Room 2321 of the Rayburn House Office Building and the Minority Staff in Room 394 of the Ford House Office Building. The Committee prefers, if possible, to receive all documents in electronic format.

If you have any questions about this request, please contact Travis Voyles of the Committee’s Majority staff at 202-225-6371 or Douglas Pasternak of the Committee’s Minority staff at 202-225-6375. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Lamar Smith
Chairman



Eddie Bernice Johnson
Ranking Member

Encl.