

Chapter 13

Professor and Victim: Cyberbullying Targeting Professors in the Higher Education Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Colleges and universities increasingly depend on technology to facilitate communication and course delivery. As a consequence of this heightened technology usage, cyberbullying now occurs frequently on college and university campuses. College faculty often become victims of cyberbullying due to their visible and active roles as educators and academics. Traumatic cyberbullying incidents cause significant emotional and physical distress for faculty victims. As such, cyberbullying can drastically interfere with faculty's work. The chapter discusses the various forms in which faculty experience cyberbullying in the higher education workplace. The chapter then identifies the perpetrators of this form of cyberbullying—specifically, students, fellow faculty members, administrators, and members of the general public. Next, the chapter sheds light on the negative psychological, professional, and physical consequences resulting from cyberbullying incidents. Finally, the chapter offers several policy suggestions to curtail cyberbullying on higher education campuses.

INTRODUCTION

In the higher education workplace, bullying can be omnipresent. In one comprehensive study that surveyed over 400 college administrators at 175 colleges in the United States, 62% of administrators that were surveyed confirmed that they had either personally been bullied or witnessed bullying (Hollis, 2015). Apart from universities, community college faculty can likewise experience cyberbullying. In a study of community college professors at a community college in the Southern region of the United States, Tran (2019) found that 35% of faculty members expressed they had been targets of bullying (Tran, 2019).

With the advent of online technologies which have facilitated rapid communication via email, social media, and chat platforms, bullying now often presents itself in the form of cyberbullying (Cassidy et al.,

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2014; Molluzo & Lawler, 2014). As more college classes are conducted online or have significant online instructional components, the number of incidents of discourteous online behavior targeting faculty has burgeoned (Wildemuth & Davis, 2012). Many of these discourteous behaviors are aggressive actions (Wildemuth & Davis, 2012), which fall into the realm of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is defined by the U.S. government as “bullying that takes place over digital devices like cell phones, computers, and tablets....Cyberbullying includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else” (United States Government, 2019). Similar to other forms of bullying, cyberbullying involves an imbalance of power and involves repeated malicious behavior with the intention of harming the victim (Molluzo & Lawler, 2014).

Cyberbullying has become a pressing concern at colleges and universities across the world. On a survey distributed to faculty at an urban university in the Northeastern United States, 10% of respondents stated that they had been victims of cyberbullying (Molluzo & Lawler, 2014). At a Canadian university, researchers found that 17% of faculty surveyed indicated that they had experienced cyberbullying instigated by students or by their faculty colleagues (Cassidy et al., 2014). Significant numbers of faculty—regardless of whether or not they have been personal victims of cyberbullying on campus—expressed concern over the issue. In the aforementioned Canadian study, 23% of faculty respondents reported being “extremely concerned” and 52% “somewhat concerned” about cyberbullying (Cassidy et al., 2014). Faculty victims of cyberbullying document experiencing significant mental health problems such as anxiety, stress, and depression. Many faculty also discuss feeling a sense of powerlessness (Cassidy et al., 2017).

The present chapter purports to provide an overview of the various forms of cyberbullying that faculty members can experience in the higher education workplace. Next, the specific cyberbullying actors that attack faculty—specifically students, fellow faculty members, administrators, and the general public—will be discussed. Apart from examining the various types of cyberbullying that faculty may experience in the workplace, this chapter will also describe the substantial negative professional and psychological implications for faculty who are victims of cyberbullying. Finally, the chapter will conclude with possible solutions that universities can take to reduce incidents of cyberbullying in the higher education workplace.

The Many Forms of Cyberbullying

Extant academic research (Li, 2007; Watts et al., 2017; Willard, 2005) describes cyberbullying occurring in various forms such as cyberharassment, denigration, cyberstalking, flaming, masquerading, trickery, outing, and exclusion. Cyberharassment features a bully repeatedly sending antagonistic correspondence via email, chat platforms, social media, and other electronic forms of communication. Denigration involves spreading rumors about another person in hopes of ruining the victim’s reputation. Cyberstalking is cyberharassment or denigration that includes threats which incite fear in the victim. Flaming occurs when a bully sends indignant and obscene language to provoke an online quarrel. Other forms of cyberbullying explicitly involve deception. Masquerading features the bully falsely assuming the online identity of another person and posting negative comments under the victim’s name. Similar to masquerading, trickery happens when the bully deceives the victim to reveal incriminating or embarrassing personal information, which the bully proceeds to share online. Bullies utilize masquerading and trickery in an attempt to get the victim in trouble, tarnish the victim’s reputation, and/or strain the victim’s personal relationships. Outing differs from trickery in that the bully, himself/herself, directly reveals a victim’s private information in hopes of belittling the victim. Another form of cyberbullying, exclusion, involves

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