

# Professor and Victim: Cyberbullying in the Higher Education Workplace

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## Introduction

- Cyberbullying has become a regular occurrence on college campuses. Indeed, 62% of college administrators report having observed cyberbullying or have experienced cyberbullying, themselves (Hollis, 2015).

- The U.S. government describes cyberbullying 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).

- College professors have increasingly experienced cyberbullying:

-in one study of community college professors, 35% of faculty members stated that they had been victims of cyberbullying (Tran, 2019).

-in a study conducted at a university in the Northeastern United States, 10% of faculty claimed that they had been recipients of cyberbullying (Molluzo & Lawler, 2014).

-another study at a Canadian university indicated that 17% of faculty surveyed had experienced cyberbullying, and 23% of faculty were “extremely concerned” about the issue (Cassidy et al., 2014).

-a survey of extant literature indicates that professors receive cyberbullying at the hands of various actors: their students, faculty colleagues, administrators/supervisors, and the general public

- The professors who are victims of cyberbullying cite declines in their mental and physical wellbeing as well as deteriorated professional and personal relationships.

- The present research provides a literature review of cyberbullying directed at college professors and offers research-supported suggestions to curb cyberbullying that targets professors

## Cyberbullying of Faculty Perpetrated by Students

- While uncivil online behavior often occurs between fellow students, increasing numbers of students engage in disrespectful communication with their professors (Wildemuth & Davis, 2012).

- At an online university in the United States, 33.8% of faculty respondents self-reported that they had been victims of cyberbullying initiated by students (Minor et al., 2013).

- A study at a university in Canada found that 12% of faculty reported being electronically bullied by their students (Cassidy et al., 2014).

- female faculty were more than twice as likely as males to report being victims of student-orchestrated cyberbullying (14% of females to 6% of males, respectively. (Cassidy et al., 2014).

- faculty of color were three times more likely to report being bullied by students (24%) compared to Caucasian faculty (8%) (Cassidy et al., 2014).

- Cassidy and colleagues (2014) found that faculty members who spent more of their time online to complete job-related activities were more likely to report being a victim of cyberbullying.

- A large number of faculty (85%) attributed the bullying to their teaching practices and style while 54% of respondents also believed their position at the university had played a role in the incidents of cyberbullying.

- A significant population of victims, 31%, felt that their age could be an explanation for why they were particularly chosen as bullying targets.

- Tenure appears to bear little effect on cyberbullying of faculty as Cassidy and colleagues determined that a similar percentage of tenured and non-tenured faculty claimed they had been bullied by their students (Cassidy et al., 2014).

- Students bully their professors electronically through a variety of mediums including email, online course websites, and professor-rating websites.

## Possible Causes of Increased Numbers of Students Engaging in Cyberbullying of Professors

- Students might engage in bullying because of students’ dissatisfaction with a professor’s grading. In some cases, students hope to exhort pressure on the faculty member to raise particular course grades (May & Tenzek, 2018).

- Students have a heightened sense of entitlement based on students’ particular position on campus. Student bullies can further feel entitled as “consumers” of higher education (May & Tenzek, 2018; Wildemuth & Davis, 2012).

- Students’ increasingly use email and other electronic forms of communication to correspond with faculty members. Electronic communication is less personal in nature and often asynchronous, leading to a greater likelihood of disrespectful communication.

- Campus culture has changed to attribute less formality to professors. Some universities encourage students to call professors by their first name, and many universities require professors to be increasingly responsive to students’ needs (Wildemuth & Davis, 2012).

- College campuses have increasingly become epicenters of heated political discourse. Indeed, faculty have increasingly come under fire for discussing controversial or politically-sensitive topics in their published research, classroom lectures, public comments on campus, and online communications (Kamenetz, 2018).



Image Credit: Kamen, S. Creative Commons. Cited in Mitchell, K. (2017, July 24). “It’s a Dangerous Business, Being a Female Professor.” The Chronicle of Higher Education. <https://community.chronicle.com/news/1862-it-s-a-dangerous-business-being-a-female-professor>

## Cyberbullying of Faculty by Their Faculty Peers

- Cassidy and colleagues (2014) reported that 9% of faculty claimed they had been “cyberbullied” by a fellow faculty member. Gender played a significant role in whether or not a faculty member had been bullied electronically by another faculty colleague.

- Female professors are much more likely to be victims of cyberbullying instigated by their faculty peers (Cassidy et al., 2014).

- most incidents of faculty-upon-faculty cyberbullying occurred through email (90%); however, 22% of faculty were cyberbullied on social media platforms such as Facebook.

- 64% of victims believed the bullying was a result of work-related issues such as disagreements, competition, and power struggles. An equal number of victims, 27%, felt their experience of cyberbullying related to their gender and their age (Cassidy et al., 2014).

- Due to the global reach of the internet, faculty-on-faculty cyberbullying also can occur between faculty members from separate universities.
- Lloro-Bidart (2018) documented how she had been bullied by a professor from another university for her published work. The antagonistic faculty member posted bolded excerpts of Lloro-Bidart’s (2018) article abstract on his blog which regularly ridiculed faculty members at various universities across the United States.
- Cyberbullying of faculty members by their work colleagues proves to be widespread across the world.

- Mirawati and collaborators (2019) examined cyberbullying among faculty of universities in Indonesia. The researchers particularly studied cyberbullying that occurred in the WhatsApp application, the most popular social media application in Indonesia.
- According to Mirawati and colleagues (2019), the greatest percentage of victims (40%) experienced cyberbullying in department-related WhatsApp chat groups.
- Professors would publicly post defamatory comments about other faculty members in chat messages which all members of the chat group would receive. The most common topics of bullying among fellow faculty members involved the marital status and physical characteristics of faculty (Mirawati et al., 2019).

## Cyberbullying of Faculty by Administrators/Superiors

- Cyberbullying, like other forms of bullying, involves a power imbalance.
- Administrators can abuse their power over faculty in the virtual realm through malicious cyber aggression.
- Yet, compared to research on student and faculty-inflicted cyberbullying, research on cyberbullying instigated by administrators against faculty members proves somewhat limited.
- However, research has investigated general bullying behavior of faculty by their superiors (in which cyberbullying was one of many possible forms of bullying). In one study of bullying at a Finnish university, 60% of faculty reported that they had been victims of bullying or inappropriate behavior. Among those faculty, 34% of victims reported they had been bullied by university administrators (Meriläinen et al., 2016).

- Keashly and Neuman (2008) found similar results at a study concerning bullying among faculty and staff at the Minnesota State University-Mankato. Overall, 68% of faculty and staff reported experiencing at least occasional bullying. Of faculty surveyed, 36% identified their administrator as the source of bullying, while 39% of faculty identified their fellow colleagues as perpetrators of bullying (Keashly & Neuman, 2008).
- According to social dominance theory, administrators who have aggressive personalities might choose to engage in cyberbullying in an effort to preserve their authority and overall power (Sidanus & Pratto, 1999; Washington et al., 2015).

- Dominant social groups who are concerned with losing their status and power might choose to target individuals who belong to historically marginalized races, genders, or social groups (Sidanus & Pratto, 1999).

## Cyberbullying of Faculty by the General Public

- There have been several reported incidents of the general public committing acts of cyberbullying against faculty members.

- According to Kamenetz (2018), many of these incidents involve bullies who are unaffiliated with a particular university who choose to target professors based on professors’ published research.

- The incidents often begin with social media influencers posting their discontent with an academic’s research or commentary. The social media influencers encourage their followers to voice their indignation, which leads to additional acts of electronic taunting and harassment.

- Media outlets, particularly politically partisan websites, often report on the stories, adding fuel to the outrage of individuals who disagree with the academic’s research conclusions or viewpoints.

- Later, in unfiltered online chat rooms, anonymous users work collaboratively to “dox” targeted professors by making professors’ personal information public.

- Some embittered individuals go as far as to work collaboratively to spread rumors about professors, voice their outcry to university officials, or even create imposter social media accounts (Kamenetz, 2018).

- The prevalence of social-media related cyberbullying correlates with the public’s increased digital access to professors’ statements and scholarly work via audio recordings, open-access articles, forwarded emails, and social media (Cain et al., 2019; Flaherty, 2013; Kamenetz, 2018; Professors in the Political Crosshairs, 2017).

- Kamenetz (2018) documented that within a year and a half period from 2017-2018, right-wing internet campaigns targeted over 250 university faculty based on faculty members’ research, social media commentary, or teaching activities.

## Difficulties Faced by Faculty Victims

### Decline in Work Productivity and Professional Relationships

- Among faculty who were bullied by students, 85% felt that their relationships with students and/or other faculty members had been negatively affected (Cassidy et al., 2014).

- More than two-thirds of faculty cyberbullying victims (69%) reported that cyberbullying had affected their work, including their productivity.

- more than a third of faculty victims reported negative consequences in their professional relationships with students and colleagues (Cassidy et al., 2014)

- Over a third of faculty victims considered leaving their job as a result of the lasting pain caused by the cyberbullying incidents (Cassidy et al., 2014).

- Notably, several victims avoided communicating with others via email after being victims of cyberbullying (Cassidy et al., 2017).

- Cyberbullying of faculty by the general public has also caused some faculty members to experience increased professional scrutiny, undergo investigation by their universities, or resign from their jobs (Cain et al., 2019; Cuevas, 2018; Kamenetz, 2018; Lloro-Bidart, 2018).

### Damages to Mental and Physical Wellbeing

- more than a third (38%) of faculty victims of cyberbullying stipulated that they had experienced significant mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Cassidy et al., 2014).

- Twenty-three percent of faculty victims also reported feeling physically and emotionally threatened and that they had experienced negative physical side effects (Cassidy et al., 2014).

### A Feeling of Powerlessness

Faculty members often feel a diminished ability to prevent cyberbullying. As Minor et al. (2013) document, less than 40% of faculty at one online university felt that sufficient resources were available to help faculty effectively handle instances of cyberbullying.

Faculty respondents in the study identified specific obstacles for reporting cyberbullying:

- Faculty’s lack of awareness on how to report cyberbullying as well as faculty’s concern that administrators would not provide support (Minor, 2013).
- Faculty’s fears of embarrassment or of receiving negative professional ramifications, such as being fired for negative student reviews (Minor, 2013).
- Faculty feeling that reporting cyberbullying would lead to an exorbitant amount of effort and time (Minor, 2013). Cassidy and colleagues (2017) drew similar conclusions in their qualitative findings.
- Faculty feeling a lack of support from colleagues, administrators, and/or university officials (Cassidy et al., 2017).

- In addition, faculty often experience on-going or repeated incidents of cyberbullying. Indeed, Eskey and colleagues (Eskey, 2014) found that 37% of professors reported being a victim of cyberbullying on multiple occasions.

- For the faculty that did choose to report cyberbullying incidents, 21% of said faculty disagreed with their supervisors’ handling of the situation (Eskey, 2014).

## Possible Solutions

- University administrators will likely search for possible ways to reduce cyber aggression directed at professors, since a majority of faculty members hold the university and its officials accountable for reducing cyberbullying (Cassidy et al., 2014).

Some possible solutions include the following:

- Universities can establish formal policies to address online behavior and cyberbullying (Smith et al., 2014; Washington et al., 2015).
- Universities can create a system and process for the anonymous reporting of cyberbullying.
- Universities can promote the creation of cyberbullying awareness and prevention organizations on campus.
- School officials should provide mandatory training to students, faculty, and administrators (Smith et al., 2014).
- Institutes of higher learning can impose communication filters on university-affiliated emails, websites, and online academic platforms, which censor and remove derogatory and inappropriate language.
- Since many states lack cyberbullying laws to address cyberbullying on college campuses, university administrators, faculty, staff, and law enforcement agencies to collectively lobby elected officials to establish additional legislation specific to cyberbullying within higher education (Washington et al., 2015).
- Universities can revise the faculty evaluation process to include an evaluation category for collegiality. In this category, professors could evidence how they support their faculty colleagues in research, service, and teaching, and could complete evaluations of fellow faculty.
- Institutes of higher learning can revise the staff evaluation process to include two-way evaluations between faculty and their administrators. Faculty and administrators would have the ability to provide a yearly evaluation of each other, holding both groups accountable for their behavior and communication.
- University officials can reaffirm their commitment to academic freedom, defending faculty members’ rights to engage in research or publicly comment on politically sensitive topics, as long as faculty members provide factual evidence for their claims.
- Universities could pursue legal action against news media outlets and individuals who defame professors and/or invoke violence.
- University communication departments could bolster efforts to engage with reputable media outlets, which would further encourage factual coverage of professors’ positive work.

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