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Undergraduate sexual culture is, more often than not, the equivalent of the swift, dangerous river. There are normative patterns of disrespect and pressure that do not themselves constitute violence, but that create the conditions in which violence becomes all too easy. In both casual hook-ups and more serious relationships, for example, consensual but unwanted sex is common, as is sexual shaming. If we want students to become mindful, empowered sexual agents, we need to create a culture in which that is easy, where the paths of least resistance offer opportunities for self-reflection and mutual recognition.

This change may seem impossible, but it most assuredly is not. Our campus cultures are, after all, constantly being created and recreated by the patterns, habits, and dynamics of day-to-day student life. And the students turn out to be our most powerful allies. Research in many fields tells us that transformation can be best accomplished through positive vision, which offers both motivation and guidance, and this turns out to be true. Students are inspired by the ambitious goal of eating the best social/sexual/romantic culture they can—in deed, the positive mission attracts a much more diverse set of students, allowing us to work organically across the various campus subcultures. This is very different from traditional peer educator work, in which students are asked to raise awareness of risk. Instead, students focus on the environmental level, identifying times, places, and practices where pressure or disrespect are normalized, and then building alliances to transform those dynamics into ones that instead foster mutuality and respect. This is the work we must take on, at every level, if we want campuses where our students can thrive.

"When you choose a career in academe, you need to be prepared not only for rough-and-tumble politics, but also for the verbal abuse that goes with it."

—Robert J. Sternberg, Professor of Human Development at Cornell University and former Professor of Psychology and Education and President of the University of Wyoming, The Chronicle of Higher Education (June 19, 2015)

What is Workplace Bullying?

Many terms are used to capture persistent and enduring forms of aggressive communication that are focused on degrading, demeaning, and devaluing others. Mobbing, social undermining, emotional abuse, — bullying, are general terms used to describe abusive behaviors with progression/escalation, patterned (variety of forms recurring frequently); Are repeated (occurring frequently); Are enduring (prolonged exposure over time); Are patterned (variety of behaviors with progression/escalation over time); Are focused on the identity and character of another; Involve a power imbalance between the parties (pre-existing or developed over time); Result in harm; Violate standards of appropriate conduct towards others.

Many specific behaviors may seem minor (e.g., micro-aggressions) and open to multiple interpretations; hence, focusing only on those specific behaviors does not do justice to the experience of bullying. It is the ongoing, patterned, and escalatory process of aggressive communication—persistence—that is responsible for the traumatic impact of bullying on targets and those around them. Over time, those targeted become increasingly unable to respond and defend themselves, becoming worn down and effectively disabled communicatively.

Faculty Experiences of Bullying

In our review of extant research, Joel Neuman and I found that 25-33 percent of faculty have been targets of workplace bullying, with 40-50 percent reporting they have witnessed someone else being bullied. The communications used include threats to professional standing (e.g., rumors, gossip, dismissing ideas), isolation/exclusion (e.g., ignoring, interrupting, turning others against them), and obstructionism (e.g., failing to provide needed resources and information, interfering in work activities). Women faculty and faculty of color appear to be at greater risk for bullying. Bullying among faculty is most often peer-to-peer, yet frequently the bullies are of senior status. Of particular note is that in approximately one-third of cases, more than one actor is involved, what Ken Westhues calls “academic mobbing.” These relationships are enduring, our research shows that almost half of them last more than three years. Targets and witnesses show signs of mental, emotional, psychological, and physical strain, decreased productivity, reduced job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, with increased intention to leave the job. These findings demonstrate the powerful impact of faculty relationships on shaping people’s experiences of their work. Ken Westhues’ writings on academic mobbing and a recent issue of Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor provide detailed cases of faculty experience.

The character of faculty bullying is different from what is documented in the general working population. In the United States, the rate of workplace bullying is 10-14 percent (much lower than that for faculty); such bullying is most likely to be associated with higher-status actors as the bullies, as co-workers running a close second. General workplace bullying is also more likely to be perpetuated by single actors mistreating one or more individuals than to be instances of mobbing. Given that faculty do not work in the typical office hierarchy characterized by supervisory relationships and the like, it is perhaps unsurprising that even within the same institution of higher education, faculty and staff experiences are different. Faculty report higher rates of bullying and are more likely to report being bullied by single actors who are typically their supervisors.

What Promotes and Permits Bullying?

While communicatively enacted at the interpersonal and dyadic level, workplace bullying is contextualized and constructed in an organizational cauldron as exemplified in climate and culture and reflected in policies and practices. Faculty bullying cannot be fully addressed without an understanding of the context within which it is born and bred.

Academe’s principles and rules of engagement. Academic freedoms set the university and the faculty apart from other workplaces and workers. Academic institutions are grounded in the exploration and broadening of knowledge and experiences, which requires that all voices be drawn out, heard, and debated. In order to do this, faculty members in their capacities as scholars, creative artists, and teachers are granted unrestricted academic freedom, including freedom in their research, publication, production, and teaching. Tenure provides protection from retaliation for controversial or unpopular stances. Shared governance ensures that faculty perspectives and knowledge are central in the development and nurturance of the institution and its programs and practices.
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These principles create an environment where ideas and concepts are subjected to rigorous (some would say perpetual) criticism. Disagreement, dissent, and argumentation are expected and embraced, and are enacted through debate, discourse, and exchange. So Sternberg’s description of academe as “rough-and-tumble” politics may not be far off the mark! This has relevance for faculty bullying, as these rules of engagement permit and promote critique of ideas and challenges to expertise and authority that in other work environments would be seen as inappropriate or even abusive. Indeed, this framing of the purposes and principles of academe may help others such as staff, administrators, students, board members, and the public understand that disagreement, dissent, debate, and critique are at the core of faculty communicative being and critical to ensuring knowledge exploration.

However, this framing can also be subverted and used by faculty as a way to camouflage alternative, sometimes destructive motives such as removing or silencing opposing voices or undermining others to gain access to desired positions and resources. By framing their actions as expected academic debate and discourse (i.e., appropriate conduct), bullying faculty members normalize their behaviors, thus fending off criticism and sanction and implicating the target and others as undermining academic freedom. Indeed, Sternberg’s admonition to be prepared for competition, taking and de-escalation strategies, can facilitate ongoing dialogue in the face of threat. Argumentativeness focuses on the positions others take on issues, while verbal aggressiveness focuses on the self-concept of the other (a characteristic of bullying communication). While argumentativeness could be experienced negatively, an affirming communicative style can enhance the chances that critique is received constructively. Complementary skills of conflict management, particularly perspective-taking and de-escalation strategies, can facilitate ongoing dialogue in the face of controversy. Educating faculty, indeed, all institutional members, in the skills of effective argumentation, affirming communication, and conflict management would promote a communicative climate that supports vibrant debate, making room for many voices.

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how coworkers can provide support, help targets make sense of and label their experiences, and protect them. In the context of academic, faculty responses (or lack thereof) to others’ behaviors communicate what is appropriate and what is unacceptable. Thus, there is great “power of the peer.” Given the importance of faculty peers in academic life, developing peer efficacy and responsibility to take ameliorative action in bullying situations is vital.

In our research on faculty bullying, Joel Neuman and I have learned that faculty are often unsure of what to do and, perhaps even more importantly, whether they have the legitimacy or responsibility to take action regarding a colleague’s behavior. Utilizing the bystander intervention model of social psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latané, I have developed intervention training for faculty that is anchored in research on workplace bullying and organizational communication. Initially, faculty members learn about the nature and dynamics of bullying and why action is needed. I focus on helping faculty recognize their professional and personal responsibility for the community and the resultant commitment to take action. Once participants understand and (hopefully) embrace this responsibility, we discuss different goals for action and identify and practice actions to achieve each goal. Participants have expressed heightened confidence that they can take action in harmful situations that will be effective.

IN SUMMARY
Bullying is an all-too-familiar and destructive experience for many faculty. Left unaddressed, bullying results in profound loss...of faculty, staff, and students; threatens to undermine academic freedom; and degrades the purposes and nature of higher education. Given that bullying is constituted and enacted communicatively, Communication scholars have much to offer to the understanding and amelioration of bullying. And we have the responsibility to offer our expertise. I have identified a few actions. There are many more to be explored. ■

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