When Debate, Discourse, and Exchange Go Bad:

BULLYING IN THE ACADEMIC WORKPLACE

By Loraleigh Keashly, Ph.D.

"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)

Sternberg is not alone in his characterization of academe. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has published pieces on "Mob Rule" and "Academic Bullying," while Darla Twale and Barbara DeLuca's *Faculty Incivility* and Leah Hollis' *Bully in the Ivory Tower* describe a "bully culture" in academe.

Several popular blogs focus on faculty bullying, e.g., http://bulliedacademics.blogspot.com, http://www.mobbingportal.com/index.html, http://www.historiann.com/, and http://www.academicladder.com/gblog/2008/02/mean-and-nasty-academics-bullying.htm.

From both inside and outside of the university, faculty are often depicted as socially challenged, mean-spirited, arrogant, petty, competitive, conflict averse, and self-focused. There is even a guide for higher education staff and managers, by retired professor Susan Christy, about dealing effectively with faculty. In essence, often the perspective shared in public discourse is that hostility, mistreatment, and bullying are inherent to the nature of higher education and its institutional structure, as well as the professoriate.

This article is an attempt to better understand this perception. I focus specifically on workplace bullying involving faculty. This is because the voices and experiences of faculty reflect and also influence the tenor and content of institutional learning and working cultures and climates.

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—bullying, mobbing, social undermining, emotional abuse, generalized workplace harassment, and emotional tyranny, among others. I use the term "bullying" to represent these hostile relationships. Bullying is characterized by negative actions and communications, which:

- 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-existent 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. They show signs of emotional, psychological, and physical trauma and their job performance often deteriorates. Further, those targeted often become stigmatized in their places of work. Depending on their responses to bullying, they can be viewed as difficult and problematic workers, often losing the support of others. The long-standing and evolving process of bullying often draws in others, who may feel compelled to "choose sides" (often for their own survival), fueling cascading aggressive interactions that, if left unaddressed, result in hostile and toxic work environments.

FACULTY EXPERIENCES OF BULLYING
In our review of extant research, Joel Neuman and I found that 25–35 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, with coworkers running a close second. General workplace bullying is also more likely to be perpetrated 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 multiple actors (often their colleagues), while staff 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 freedom sets 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.

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 verbal abuse suggests that such normalization has occurred.

The university as an organization. Workplace bullying has been described as systemic in nature; stimulated and supported (and perhaps ultimately challenged) by organizational structure and environment. Denise Salin's discussion of enabling, motivating, and precipitating organizational practices and policies provides a useful framework for examining how the academic environment can "set the stage" for faculty bullying. These features are briefly described below; for a detailed discussion, see Twale and DeLuca's book, *Faculty Incivility*.

- Enabling features affect whether bullying is even possible.
  Rigid hierarchy, low perceived costs/risks; lack of enforceable policies; qualities of work environment such as perceived injustice and role state stressors; negative conflict climate.

- Motivating features frame bullying as a rational response to those viewed as threats or burdens.
  Internally competitive environment; perceived norm violation.

- Precipitating features trigger bullying, assuming enabling and motivating features are in place.
  Organizational change in the form of budget cuts, restructuring, or changing or unstable leadership.

The current higher education environment and institutions, in particular, manifest many of these features. In terms of enabling factors, despite the egalitarian philosophy inherent in the notion of academic freedom, there is a hierarchy of rank among faculty, with associated privilege and voice. Tenure protection contributes to the perception that there is little risk in engaging in negative behaviors. Subjective performance processes such as tenure, promotion, and merit decisions lay the groundwork for undue influence. The increased emphasis on scholarly and creative productivity and changes in funding priorities privileges certain faculty over others, and challenges faculty with different career trajectories. Shrinking budgets force interdepartmental competition. Changes in leadership and increased influence of administration and boards in the management of the institution pose threats to faculty voice and shared governance. This is an environment rich with status and face threat opportunities. In such a context, bullying becomes a strategy for survival, as faculty attempt to maintain credible and positive identities. Bullying can also be a strategy for maintaining or gaining power and influence at the expense of others. In essence, this is an environment that can pit faculty against one another.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION: WHAT COMMUNICATION HAS TO OFFER

This depiction of bullying can be discouraging. Yet, understanding can fuel relevant action. There are many ways in which communication perspectives can help faculty deliberately and mindfully create and support constructive and vibrant communicative climate.

A communicative environment that is grounded in academic freedom necessitates skill in disagreement, dissent, and critique, with simultaneous attention to others' ideas and perspectives. Thus, communicative competency among faculty is important. Dominic Infante and his colleagues' theories on traits of argumentativeness and verbal aggression and the influence of communication style speak directly to destructive and constructive faculty communication. These traits are concerned with presenting and defending positions on controversial issues but differ in the focus of attack. 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.

Building a constructive communication climate also requires an explicit discussion of how faculty communicatively creates and co-creates the working and learning environment. Surfacing and talking about how faculty talk and engage would allow faculty to examine the various discourses of power at play, the tensions and challenges they create, the voices that are heard and those that are muted, and how faculty behaviors reflect and resist these narratives. These conversations and analyses can facilitate the development of shared narratives. This lays the groundwork for the development of norms of relating that facilitate vibrant and constructive communicative cultures, where persistent aggressive communication would be inappropriate.

As diverse as faculty are, there is evidence that consensus on normative behaviors is possible. John Braxton and Alan Bayer's identification of "inviolable" norms for faculty behavior, the violation of which (e.g., condescending negativism, uncooperative cynicism) would warrant serious sanction, is evidence of this. A specific model for dialogue and consensus building around controversy is the department communication protocol developed by Larry Hoover, former Director of Mediation Services at the University of California-Davis.

These actions are future-oriented and preventive in nature. Yet bullying is very real in many faculty members' current lives. So what is it that Communication scholars can offer? Most broadly, we can share our research and understanding of the dynamics and systemic nature of bullying. This information can provide targets and witnesses with a way to make sense of their experiences—that bullying is not their fault, and that they are not alone. Our understanding of narrative structure and the dynamics of power can be invaluable in helping targets tell their story in a way that will increase their chances of being heard. A great example of this is Sarah Tracy, Jess Alberts, and Kendra Rivera's *How to bust the office bully: Eight tactics for explaining workplace abuse to decision-makers.*

We can also build capacity among faculty to respond to the relational transgressions of bullying. We know that bullying occurs in the presence of others, and sometimes with their participation. Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik and Gary and Ruth Namie of the Workplace Bullying Institute have examined how coworkers and other bystanders act as active and passive bullying accomplices. Other research has shown

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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 academe, 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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