Bullying in Academia: What Faculty Need to Know

Lynn Ridinger, Old Dominion University
Donna Pastore, The Ohio State University
Jim Strode, Ohio Dominican University
Robert Baker, George Mason University
Pam Baker, George Mason University
Heather Lawrence-Benedict, Ohio University
Andy Gillentine, University of South Carolina

Teaching/Learning - Professional Development (Other) Thursday, June 7, 2018
60-minute symposium, roundtable, or workshop 2:10 PM
Abstract 2018-061 Room: Sable B

Bullying behavior, often associated with a tough kid on the playground, is now viewed as a more complex and widespread problem seen in many contexts throughout life (Faucher, Cassidy, & Jackson, 2015). Within the sport literature, most studies on bullying have focused on youth sports or physical education classes (Case, 2015). Scant attention has been given to investigations of bullying in sport management industry or academic settings. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of research on general workplace bullying, cyberbullying and harassment that includes an emerging understanding of bullying in academia. Higher education is a unique workplace environment that may allow bullying to thrive. The purpose of this presentation is to discuss the nature and prevalence of bullying in higher education. Additionally, we will identify causes and effects of bullying and provide prevention and management solutions to bullying situations in university settings.

Nature and Prevalence of Bullying in Higher Education

While there are multiple definitions of bullying, most contain three key features: repeated aggressive behaviors that are intended to cause harm to a victim with relatively less power to defend themselves (Olewas, 1993). Bullying in the workplace has been defined as harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s work. It has to occur repeatedly and regularly and over a period of time. Bullying is an escalated process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003). When bullying is done by a group rather than an individual it is called mobbing. When the repeated and intended abuse occurs in various online forums it is called cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015).

Although harassment is sometimes associated with bullying, they are not the same. Harassment is a type of illegal discrimination that includes offensive and unwelcome conduct, serious enough to adversely affect the terms and conditions of a person’s employment, which occurs because of the person’s protected class (e.g., race, color, religion, sex, age, disability). Harassment can result from a few serious incidences whereas bullying tends to be an accumulation of many small incidents over a long period of time. While harassment is illegal, bullying in the workplace is not (Washington State Department of Labor and Industries, 2008).

Workplace bullying often involves an abuse or misuse of power and thus, supervisors and administrators are often identified as the perpetrators. However, research on bullying in university settings has found that colleagues were more likely to be identified as bullies by faculty while superiors were more likely to be identified as bullies by frontline staff (Keashly & Newman, 2010). The competitive, individualistic, and hierarchical nature of higher education is such that formal and informal power can be used when bullying colleagues (Crookston, 2012). The most common bullying behaviors in academia involve threats to professional status and isolating or obstructive behavior designed to undermine one’s professional standing, authority, and competence or impede access to key resources such as money, space, time, or access to quality students (Keashly & Neuman, 2010). Due to tenure, which results in faculty interacting with each other for many years, academia is a particularly vulnerable setting for the long-term persistent nature of bullying (Hollis, 2012).

While there is no doubt that bullying and cyberbully exist in higher education, findings vary on the prevalence of these behaviors. Taylor (2012) found that 12% of faculty indicated they were targets of bullying while Hollis (2012) reported 62% of faculty and other university personnel had been bullied or had witnessed bullying at their workplace.
in the last 18 months. Results range from 25-39% of faculty being targets of cyberbullying (Faucher Jackson, & Cassidy, 2014; Vance, 2010). Research also shows women are more likely to be bullied in the workplace and men are more likely to be the perpetrators of bullying (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2014; Sallee & Diaz, 2012). Furthermore, racial and sexual minority individuals appear more vulnerable to bullying (Sallee & Diaz, 2012).

Causes and Effects of Bullying Anger and aggression are frequently associated with perceptions of unfair treatment (Neuman, 2004). Institutions of higher education may present some unique opportunities for such perceptions by faculty. Faculty evaluations often involved subjective, often ambiguous, criteria for judging scholarly, teaching, and service contributions. Such judgments could lead to perceptions of distributive and procedural injustice (Keashly & Neuman, 2010). Moreover, faculty members are often in competition for scarce resources and hidden agendas can abound, especially at the department level (Higgerson & Joyce, 2007). Most faculty expect extensive autonomy due to academic freedom, and they may become frustrated if their expectations of autonomy are not met. In organizational settings, frustration has been positively correlated with aggression against others, interpersonal hostility, sabotage, work slowdowns and employee withdrawal (Spector, 1997). Frustration and perceptions of injustice can increase the likelihood of aggression and, by extension, bullying (Keashly & Neuman, 2010). Bullying, in turn, can have detrimental effects on individuals and organizations.

Victims of bullying can experience significant physical and mental health problems that could include high stress, reduced self-esteem, sleep disturbances, depression, anxiety, and digestive problems (Washington State Department of Labor and Industries, 2008). Bullying can also be costly to organizations by reducing job satisfaction and productivity while increasing turnover. If bullying behaviors go unchecked, situations can escalate and result in a toxic climate and an increased likelihood of further aggression and bullying (Keashly & Neuman, 2010).

Prevention and Management of Bullying Early action is critical in preventing situations from escalating into increasingly hostile and damaging situations. Having clear policies and procedures for promotion, tenure, and merit review as well as transparent decision making regarding resources will help reduce perceptions of injustice that can lead to frustration and aggression (Keashly & Neuman, 2010). Studies of university incivility, cyberbullying, and harassment have emphasized the importance of having clear policies and codes of conduct, as well as awareness, education, and training for university personnel including staff, faculty and administrators (Crookston, 2012; Hollis, 2012; Keashly & Neuman, 2010). Additionally, there needs to be support for victims and measures taken to promote an inclusive and respectful campus culture (Adams & Lawrence, 2011; Hollis, 2012). Hypothetical examples of bullying situations in academia will be presented and solutions for dealing with these incidences will be discussed.