

We need a bigger conversation about bullying in academia

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“I was routinely humiliated by my head of department. Universities must tackle bullying with proper policy”

By Anonymous Academic

According to a US survey, women and ethnic minorities are more likely to experience workplace bullying. Photograph: Alamy

The first time my department chair was hostile to me was during a private lunch, moments after I expressed curiosity about their field of specialisation. The second time was a humiliating email copied to college administrators. The third time was a dressing down in front of an administrative assistant. For anyone familiar with [workplace bullying](#), this is known as “[repeated mistreatment](#)” or – more euphemistically – “escalated incivility”.

The [Workplace Bullying Institute](#) in the US, where I’m based, defines bullying as abusive conduct that is threatening, humiliating, or intimidating; work sabotage, or verbal abuse. [Bullying](#), like harassment, is often performed in secret, hard to prove, and operates along a continuum. How badly it hurts depends on where, when, who, how hard, and how often.

We’ve been talking about harassment in the workplace lately, thanks to campaigns like #MeToo, but bullying is just as common – [particularly for women and ethnic minorities](#). For both genders, recent studies in the US show that [38% of workers](#) witness or experience bullying during their careers – yet few workplaces have effective policies to deal with bullies. For every bully who is caught, [ten times as many victims](#) lose their jobs through transfers, layoffs, termination, or quitting.

As a [university lecturer on a casual contract](#), I work at the bottom of the professorial totem pole, and count myself among the most vulnerable employees. We have very little job security: we are the first to lose work assignments, and the last to gain those assignments back.

In the past six months, I have counted at least 10 instances where my head of department has acted in ways that are demeaning, intimidating, disrespectful and disheartening. They have undermined my authority with students by addressing complaints about the course without consulting me first, forcing me to implement actions that were inappropriate to the circumstances and unfair to other students in the class.

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When low enrolments meant a staff member needed an additional teaching assignment, despite having other options, my head chose to break my contract and give my course away. After a colleague expressed concern about the impact – to me, to the students, and to the department as a whole – of not honouring my contract, they played bait-and-switch with me: offering additional classes to teach, then refusing to discuss the offer.

My head tried to sabotage one of my research grants by insinuating in an email to the granting agency that I was unworthy, then failing to inform me when the grant was awarded. When I contacted the agency and discovered the good news, my head forbade me to engage in any further communications with the agency and went into micro-management mode for all of my grants, dictating how I spend the monies. Most heads of department are overwhelmed with administrative duties, so it is highly unusual for them to oversee a relatively small grant. My head has even dictated how I can, or cannot, decorate my office.

The highly competitive, hierarchical atmosphere of academia is well-known as a fertile breeding ground for bullying behaviour. Yet protections seem to me to be inadequate. Although my university has policies on workplace bullying prevention, it is up to individual campuses to develop their own protocols. Mine hasn't done so. This means the targets of bullies have no recourse and everything my head of department has done is perfectly legal.

Discovering that my head's behaviour fits into [bullying categories](#) [pdf] takes some of the emotional sting out of the equation. Yet every time I receive an email from my chair I tense, expecting another grenade. The rise in recognition of bullying in academia won't help targets like me until there are enforceable policies, training programmes, and ombudsmen dedicated to helping both bully and victim.

https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2018/jan/26/we-need-a-bigger-conversation-about-bullying-in-academia?utm_content=bufferd5e69&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer