



# Confronting CAMPUS BULLIES

How bullying shows up in the halls of academe, and what we can do about it

BY VIRGINIA MYERS

**W**E ALL KNOW the playground bully: that big, cartoonish oaf towering over a scrawny schoolmate before he delivers a gut punch and knocks the lunch money from his little victim's pockets.

What ever happened to this menace?

According to some, he's moved down the hall—the hall of academe.

Once thought to be bastions of collegiality and high-mindedness, college campuses turn out to be no more immune to bullying than your average workplace, or your average grade school. It may not be called “bullying” here—more likely, the term will be “incivility”—but the aggressive, manipulative, intimidating behavior, when it escalates, can create the same sort of misery.

### **This is not your father's bully**

Workplace bullying looks quite different from the schoolyard variety. It is typically nonvio-

lent (how likely is it that one professor or student adviser will deck another?). But it can be devious and pervasive, a collection of incidents that seem inconsequential when taken individually but are devastating when they build up over time.

Take, for instance, the deliberate snub. Your colleagues are tackling a departmental dilemma: how to cope with a budgetary shortfall, perhaps. You offer what you think is a well-constructed contribution to the discussion, and the woman running the meeting rolls her eyes and scoffs. “Thanks for that lovely little idea,” she says, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Anyone else?”

You want to slink under the table.

Then, in the hallway, this same woman turns her back to you as she plans to grab coffee with other faculty and staff. You are excluded. Later in the week, you note that you've been assigned a parking space all the way across campus, and you discover your meetings and classes are scheduled in the least popular time slots.

Any one of these incidents might be surmountable, but when added together, they could be the mark of a bully at work. Other

common behaviors include constant condescension; talking over another person so he or she cannot be heard; not returning phone calls, e-mails and memos; and consistently ignoring certain colleagues at meetings.

Perpetrators can be found at all levels of an organization: Supervisors might overload victims with work and demand they meet unrealistic deadlines, deny raises or promotions for no valid reason, ignore contributions, or give little or no feedback on work. Colleagues might publicly question a victim's competence or intelligence, criticize his or her work, or spread rumors about professional integrity or personal life. The academic bully also might withhold information necessary for the victim's success, hurl insults, glare, engage in name-calling, or steal credit for ideas and finished work.

"We all have the idea that we have good, civil discourse, that we're sitting around under trees like Socrates," says Charlie Parrish, president of the AAUP-AFT local at Wayne State University in Michigan. "That's not how it ultimately happens." By its very nature, academe frequently requires strong argument and conflict, and "vigorous dissent should not be viewed as bullying," he says. But when someone crosses the line and threatens a member, the union is quick to intervene.

If left unaddressed, says Loreleigh Keashly, who teaches dispute resolution at Wayne State, "incivility spirals and cascades. It can quickly make an environment toxic."

### Welcome to the club

If you have witnessed bullying at your college, you are in good company: Joel Neuman, an AFT member and the director of the Center for Applied Management at the State University of New York at New Paltz, presented a session on bullying at last year's AFT Higher Education conference, and indicated that 49 percent of adult Americans are affected by bullying, either as targets or witnesses. According to a 2007 Zogby International survey of nearly 8,000 employed people, 37 percent are bullied at work, and 12.3 percent have witnessed bullying behavior. Seventy percent of the victims may quit or lose their jobs, and 17 percent transfer.

When the subject of academic bullying comes up in trade publications such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*, cascades of comments detail readers' experiences; at least a half-dozen websites offer opportunities to share experiences and

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY SELÇUK DEMIREL

## SEE A BULLY, STOP A BULLY

IF YOU'VE IDENTIFIED BULLYING on your campus, you'll need tools to address it. The AFT's "See a Bully, Stop a Bully" campaign, designed to raise awareness of bullying and help victims, bystanders and institutions address it effectively, can guide K-12 teachers and support staff. Here are some tips for AFT members who encounter bullying in higher education, whether it's in the classroom, the office or the board room:

### FOR INSTITUTIONS

- Adopt a clear bullying policy that includes a definition of unacceptable conduct, examples of unacceptable behavior, protection from retaliation, and reporting and enforcement procedures.
- Intervene early, addressing bullying situations before they escalate.
- Be firm, but nonconfrontational, when challenging bullying behavior; calmly present institutional policy regarding incivility, while holding the line on what is unacceptable.
- Model respect: Administration and union leaders should model disciplined and reasonable behavior in conflict situations.

### FOR INDIVIDUALS

- Identify the problem as bullying: Is it consistent, directed and unreasonable?
- Carefully document individual incidents: Together they could add up to bullying.
- Share your feelings with co-workers to see if they agree the situation is untenable.

- Consider what action would be best:
  - Assertively but calmly challenge the bully's behavior;
  - Get institutional support: If the bully is within management, consult your local union chapter. Consult with your human resources department or employee assistance programs;
  - If it seems the situation will be short-lived due to limited work assignments or other factors, let the situation run its course; or
  - Leave the institution for a friendlier environment.

### FOR UNIONS

- Craft contracts to include access to counseling/employee assistance and education programs for bullying prevention.
- Form collaborative labor/management committees to discuss bully-related issues.
- Provide orientation for faculty and professional staff on the nature, prevalence, causes and consequences of aggression/bullying.
- Work out approaches for dealing with member-on-member bullying.
- Collect data on the prevalence of aggression/bullying on individual campuses.
- Establish core values at each campus.
- Don't just focus on what's wrong—draw strength from what's right.
- Design interventions to foster respect, civility and personal development—not just discipline.

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strategies to overcome bullying in higher ed.

That's because those who encounter bullying know it can be debilitating: Coming to work becomes a chore, and victims begin to withdraw from campus activities, skipping meetings and refusing committee work. Some struggle with depression or anxiety, or become physically ill; others leave jobs they otherwise love. In severe cases, victims have been driven to suicide. One of the most publicized of these cases, the death of Kevin Morrissey, an editor at the *Virginia Quarterly Review* at the University of Virginia, has been linked to workplace harassment.

### Bully breeding ground

College campuses often have anti-bullying campaigns for their students, protecting them from discrimination due to gender preference, race or ethnicity. Most of us recognize that these programs are essential in keeping our students safe from tragic incidents like the suicide at Rutgers last year, prompted by a cyberbully who posted footage of his roommate having a sexual encounter in the dorm room.

It's fairly easy to document college administrators who bully their faculty and staff—that's why we have unions, to protect the workers' right to a respected voice regarding working conditions.

But it's also important to address bullying among the faculty and staff.

The decentralized nature of a college campus, with small departments and laboratories, creates an environment where bullies can flourish, says C.K. Gunsalus, special counsel and adjunct professor in law and medicine at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and an expert on business ethics and professionalism in academia. She's even labeled specific academic bullies: "Memo bullies" send destructive messages to



JAMES FERRARA

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—JOEL NEUMAN, management professor, SUNY-New Paltz

entire mailing lists, and "insult bullies" use destructive verbal aggression.

The high value academics place on intellectual prowess makes people especially vulnerable to verbal barbs, as well. "I hear words and comments here ... that I never heard in the business world," Allan Gilmour, president of Wayne State University and a former Ford Motor Company executive, told faculty and staff at the beginning of the school year. "Harsh, disrespectful, rude comments about others and their thoughts, opinions and decisions." While he admits that it's only a small portion of the community that practices these incivilities, he says he finds the degree of discourtesy "appalling" and urges staff to adopt a more collegial culture.

But collegiality means different things to different people, says Keashly: "Collegiality can be interpreted as, 'You don't tell me what to do, and I don't tell you what to do.'" When one of the most important ways to combat bullying is bystander engagement, and bystanders are reluctant to challenge their colleagues on aggressive behavior for fear of being accused of curbing someone else's freedom of speech, the destructive environment remains.

It doesn't help that victims and bystanders often rely on peer review for advancement: To confront the bully, even if he or she is a

colleague, might mean destroying any hope of promotion.

### Banishing the bully culture

Despite the reluctance to call a bully on his or her behavior, Keashly says, peer pressure is the best way to stop it. But first, the behavior must be identified.

Neuman recommends starting out by determining whether the problem behavior is properly identified as bullying: Is it consistent? Are you being singled out? Do others agree that the behavior is unacceptable? If so, start documenting the experience. Consider the impact, both work-related and emotional, the bullying has on you. Then consider your options: Do you want an apology? A public admission of wrongdoing? What is a reasonable expectation?

Finally, think about what actions you can take: Should you confront the bully? Maybe the person doesn't realize the behavior is offensive. Should you go to your supervisor or human relations office? This might work if you're sure the behavior is deliberate, though it could be complicated depending on the political alliances in your office. Other situations might call for healthcare intervention for anxiety or depression, or even for leaving the organization.

Institutionally, the school administration must take a stand that incivility will not be tolerated, and it should demonstrate that in its own ranks. Clear policies and procedures, and an unequivocal showing of campus commitment, are important as well.

Unions can play a major role in preventing bullying on both an individual and institutional level. "They're incredible employee advocates. They're always holding management accountable," says Keashly, who, until she became a department head a little more than a year ago, was a long-standing member of the Wayne State local.

"Unions and the administration must work together in each institution to identify important values, define acceptable behavior, and institute policies and practices that reinforce the positive—not just punish the negative," says Neuman. "Unions must continue their initiatives to create and maintain respectful work environments, sensitize people to the problems, and facilitate conversations among all stakeholders." As a participant in many joint management-labor programs, Neuman says, "I believe that working together, we can make a difference."



**Harriet Knevals:** "Nothing will change until the bullies are made accountable. No one has the right to harass another human being just because 'they' feel like doing so. We need to stop blaming the victim."

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