



Bullying on Campus: How to Identify, Prevent, Resolve It

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Workplace bullying is a hot topic in higher education, judging by the overflow crowd that spilled into the aisles and out the doorway of the panel session on designing and implementing anti-bullying and faculty incivilities programs, held at the CUPA-HR conference in Las Vegas in October.

Surprised by the turnout, presenting organizer **Lamont Stallworth** asked participants why they had attended. Some had been targets of bullying or had friends who were, and some were HR employees working on active bullying cases.

Stallworth, a professor in the Institute of Human Resources and Employment Relations at Loyola University Chicago, is also founder and chair of the Center for Employment Dispute Resolution in Chicago. The panel also featured **Christine Newhall**, senior VP of the American Arbitration Association in Boston, and **Toni Robinson**, ombudsperson at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Together, they discussed how to identify, resolve and prevent bullying from becoming a force on campus.

What is bullying?

“Defining workplace bullying is like defining beauty or pornography,” said Stallworth. “You know it when you see it.” He defines it as “behavior that threatens, intimidates, humiliates or isolates people at work, or undermines their reputation or job performance.” It can range from subtle or unconscious slights to obvious and intentional emotional abuse, and it can be an isolated incident or systematic.

Sometimes it’s the nonverbal cues. “Their words may be fine, but the ‘micro-inequities’ add up,” he said. It’s the little things, the “micro-aggressions” that aren’t in your face but take place behind your back.

And sometimes it’s more blatant hostility—such as cyber bullying, berating or belittling someone, insulting or putting someone down, yelling or cursing, spreading malicious rumors, impeding or sabotaging someone’s work, or delivering excessively harsh job performance criticism.

Isolation is another form of bullying, especially in academe, where employees already work in silos. Detrimental actions include not copying someone on emails, excluding them from meetings, giving them the silent treatment, intentionally leaving the room when someone enters, and failing to return their phone calls or emails.

There are mental and physical health repercussions for targets of bullying. Depression is a frequent result: 30% of targets experience post-traumatic stress disorder. And witnesses of bullying also report psychological distress.

Bullying isn’t always at face value. “How many cases of bullying have underlying issues, such as race, gender or sexual orientation?” asked Stallworth. “People seeing a new face have different expectations. And the problems are primarily with white males.”

Bullying on campus

“University politics are vicious precisely because the stakes are so small. University politics make me long for the simplicity of the Middle East,” Henry Kissinger once famously joked.

What makes higher education so a ripe for bullying? It starts with the egos. Higher education hires on expertise, so people think they’re experts on everything, said Stallworth. “The game of academe is proving how smart you are.”

Academe is also a very solitary profession, creating an “every person for themselves” culture. And there’s a climate of tolerance; academe tolerates a lot of things others wouldn’t, he said. In addition, faculty members can use students as tools to get at others, such as on dissertation committees.

Why don’t bystanders and witnesses stand up and do something? Not everyone has tenure, and others don’t want to rock the boat or risk becoming targets themselves. Some want the target’s job.

In addition to the psychological effects of marginalization, the economic ramifications of bullying are great. It interferes with workplace performance and productivity, strains departments, contributes to a negative culture and climate and increases turnover.

A whopping 70% of targets leave the organization, resulting in costs for turnover plus for workers comp, disability and legal issues. In 2000 the average cost to defend an EEOC case was \$96,000. “The most vital organ in the organization’s body is the pocketbook,” said Stallworth. Economic consequences alone might be enough to move a school to action to design and apply policies to prevent and resolve workplace bullying.

Solutions for schools

Early intervention by administrators is fundamental to eradicate bullying. Training deans and chairs on the laws and implications of bullying is crucial, as is training on how to provide empathy for targets.

Leaders need to demand an anti-bullying culture and workplace.

Be proactive through training and developing an organizational anti-bullying policy, including:

- Statement of commitment to eliminating bullying
- Institutional definitions of bullying
- Duties/accountability of administrators
- Flexible reporting procedures and communication channels
- Options on whom to contact: HR, an ombudsperson or a special appointee
- A procedure for contacts
- Campus-wide training and information blitz
- Monitoring
 - A disciplinary process
 - Using internal conflict management systems Working with an external arbitrator is one option.

The American Arbitration Association is a fact-finding organization that offers an independent, neutral thirdparty perspective. “We get the facts so people can start communicating,” said Newhall. It offers different levels of service, from fact-finding to mediating to arbitration. Its mission is to educate workers and employers, and to resolve conflicts.

Installing a university ombudsperson is another tool against bullying. The post offers an independent, confidential, neutral and informal resource for faculty, staff and students to turn to for advice on dealing with problems on

campus. Robinson said at MIT they work with anybody and everybody on campus. “We teach people how to say things in a better way, to get better results from people.”

They explore the issues, the stakeholders, the rules and the resources, giving the employee “responsible options” and helping them to weigh the pros and cons. Ombudspople help them use leverage to get a resolution and advocate for fair process. They’ll even act as “shuttle diplomats” between the target and “the alleged dirty doer,” said Robinson.

The ombudsperson is not a “place of notice,” so everything is off the record. Telling the ombudsperson is not telling the organization. But if someone wants to go that route, the office can provide information on how to do it.

This independent resource is especially helpful because employees don’t always have faith in HR, she said, believing HR acts in the best interest of the organization, not necessarily the employee.

On the national level, the proposed National Employment Dispute Resolution Act (NEDRA) is a policy designed to promote using alternate dispute resolutions early in a bullying situation. It would apply to federal contractors and to organizations receiving federal funds, each of whom would need to have its own organizational-specific policies in place.

Solutions for individuals

If you are a target, start by naming it and legitimizing it.

Then, to bully-proof yourself:

- Check your mental and physical health with the professionals.
- Research your state and federal legal options.
- Compile data on the economic impact of the bullying.
- Start a search for a new job.
- Finally, consult the campus office most appropriate for your situation and decide how to proceed.

Like in the schoolyard, office bullies go after the weak, the marginalized and the least likely to fight back. But only by standing up to bullies can schools eliminate their negative effect on individual careers and the campus workplace.

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Farrington, Elizabeth L. (2010, March). *Bullying on Campus: How to Identify, Prevent, Resolve It*. **Women in Higher Education**, 19(3), p. 8-9.

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