If you asked what workplace issue has gained the most salience or relevance for me over the past four years, workplace bullying, and related climate problems, would probably rank near the top of my list. In part, this is because I probably underrated the problem before. Bullying is a problem for kids, right? We should have thicker skins—especially in higher education, where we must prize free expression. Whoops.

While I haven’t changed my views on the importance of free speech, I have definitely become more educated about the behavioral and power dynamics underlying workplace bullying, as well as the very real ways it can damage lives, careers, and institutions. In addition to the very real nightmare of bullying, there’s also the difficulty of sorting out the line between difficult, prickly individuals or personality conflicts on the one hand, and intolerable patterns of destructive behavior. If I used to be concerned that we were all having to adapt to the person with the thinnest skin, now I’m as likely to wonder why the person with the thickest skin gets to call all the shots.

Leah Hollis’s recent study, *Bully in the Ivory Tower: How Aggression and Incivility Erode American Higher Education*, highlights the scope of the problem and offers some productive strategies for addressing the problem. While most of her specific strategies are most easily implemented by human resources and managerial types, they are useful places to begin for anyone advocating for policy changes on campus.

Hollis surveyed administrators in higher education, with the somewhat startling result that “close to 62% of respondents . . . confirmed that they had been bullied or witnessed bullying in their higher education positions in the last 18 months” (36). And while “African Americans, women, and members of the LGBT community experience proportionally higher levels of bullying,” Hollis found that men in higher education still reported rates of bullying higher than the national rate (41, 42). Hollis argues that these differential rates demonstrate that there is considerable intersection
between bullying and harassment, which may expose colleges and universities to legal jeopardy. There is also a qualitative portion of the study, which draws on interviews to paint vignettes of bullying that will ring probably ring true to many readers.

One of the most important suggestions Hollis makes is for management to actually, you know, manage. Her study found that 16% of respondents had moved jobs because of bullying, which creates an economic as well as a moral case for addressing the problem. Rather than using “fit” as a category to arbitrarily exclude people, Hollis suggests thinking seriously about cultural dynamics: “If the search committee knows the department it’s searching for doesn’t support shrinking violets, then don’t bring in a weak personality who can end up being a target. Even a Harvard Ph.D. cannot compensate for a personality that will not weather an aggressive department” (115).

There aren’t a lot of excellent suggestions for people who are the targets of a bully. Hollis recommends preventative care: having a sense of self that doesn’t depend wholly on work, being professionally agile, and modeling civility.

Many higher education institutions will try to cope with bullies by waiting them out or ignoring the problem. Hollis does argue for clear, consistent interventions, and facilitating “networking to unlearn bullying behaviors. The cultivation of mutual respect, civility, and meaningful rewards systems are essential for higher education staff. Higher education . . . is a knowledge-based culture that requires formal education of its employees” (127). Rather than managing by assertion, or hoping that people will just sort of know how to behave decently, some amount of explicit training is probably appropriate.

A couple of grains of salt: Hollis does run a consulting firm that offers training on bullying and other issues, so she has an incentive to dramatize the problem. And the format of the study—an e-mail invite and SurveyMonkey instrument—arguably leads to self-selection issues, so it will be helpful to have additional studies. That said, I suspect that folks who’ve paid attention to workplace climate issues in higher ed will find her descriptions accurate. My other qualm is that Bully in the Ivory Tower can sometimes argue through moral assertion rather than through evidence. A good example of this occurs early on, when Hollis tries to link concerns about American higher education’s “production of viable scientific graduates” with a “potentially toxic work environment” (4). To me, the problem of bullying is significant enough for any organization to want to address it, without having to posit tenuous connections with students.

On balance, however, Bully in the Ivory Tower is well worth reading by anyone with an interest in academic workplace issues. You can also check out her argument in a podcast interview here.
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