



Workplace Bullying in Higher Education

What the Research Says

Several recent studies point to the fact that higher education faculty are increasingly facing uncivil and bullying behaviors in academe. According to *Bully in the Ivory Tower* by Leah Hollis, 62% of higher education professionals report experiencing workplace bullying. These actions can manifest in direct ways, such as taunting, intimidation, or public humiliation. This is significantly higher than the 35% of the general public who, according to the Workplace Bullying Institute, report workplace bullying.

However, the bullying behaviors most cited within academic contexts are indirect in form, such as exclusion of contingent faculty, threats to professional status and obstructive behaviors designed to inhibit employees achieving their goals. (Keashly & Newman, 2008) Additionally, it's been found that as higher education institutions continue to face budget issues and external pressure, the incidences of bullying are on the rise. (Lester 2012).

The cultural climate within higher education may, in fact, represent unique context in which bullying may thrive. Perceived injustice (e.g., student evaluations in relationship to personnel decisions; subjective evaluations, workload demands, etc.) and entitlement expectations (e.g., competition for limited research resource; autonomy restrictions, etc.) have been found to result in higher levels of direct and indirect forms of bullying within the ranks of faculty (Keashly & Newman, 2008).

What are the Health Effects of Workplace Bullying?

Workers who try to “cope” or “adapt” to the conditions in silence may pay a big price with their health. The symptoms of bullying can be far-reaching. Several studies have shown that bullying can lead to symptoms such as loss of concentration and memory disturbances, clinical anxiety and depression. Additionally, research has shown that targets or victims of work-related bullying experience other physical and mental health problems including:

- High stress much like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Unresolved, chronic stress causes physical changes in the brain that can lead to depression. Stress is also linked with high blood pressure and heart disease.
- Reduced self-esteem.
- Musculoskeletal problems.
- Phobias.
- Sleep disturbances.
- Digestive problems
- Financial problems due to absence

A demoralized person is much less productive and engaged. Many bullied workers ultimately give up and involuntarily leave their jobs and professions because they just “can’t take it anymore”.

Collective action results in *collective* solutions so talk to your union leadership about this issue.

You have a right to respect and dignity at work. Workplace bullying cannot and should not be tolerated.

What Can You Do?

If you are being bullied, don't suffer in silence. Seek help from your personal physician and/or an employee assistance program (EAP) to address any "bullying – related" health problems. Give the physician detailed information about the situation at work that may be contributing to your symptoms so that the doctor can give you concrete advice on how to control the impact of the bullying and reduce exposure. Track your symptoms/illnesses and bullying incidents with dates and times. You and your union may need that documentation to make a case for change.

Contact your union. The union and your steward or building representative can help assess the situation and give you advice and tips on using the contract and/or other policies to stop the abuse. Your union representatives may suggest that they accompany you to meetings with management to investigate the bullying and work for a resolution.

Remember that if you are being bullied, you probably are not alone. Encourage other colleagues and coworkers who are being bullied to contact the union, too.

Does your Work Culture Measure up?

Think about the culture at your institution. A good work environment should set implicit standards or codes of professional behavior. The AFT believes that every higher education institution should have a bullying policy that includes a code of conduct.

Sample Code of Conduct

In our institution, we

- Treat each other with respect
- Work with colleagues to achieve goals
- Maintain high standards of work and behavior
- Promote the values and the aims of the institution

The code of conduct is probably not enough to eliminate the practice. Legal prohibitions are needed. Neither the federal government nor any state government has adopted comprehensive workplace bullying laws. However, several of our higher education locals have taken the lead in negotiating strong policies.

Union of Rutgers Administrators-URA-AFT

Article 26 NON-HOSTILE WORK ENVIRONMENT

The university and the union agree that the working environment shall be characterized by mutual respect for the common dignity to which all individuals are entitled. It is therefore agreed that verbal harassment of an employee or a supervisor is inappropriate and unacceptable.

Any claims of a violation of this provision by employees covered by this agreement shall be the subject of a labor management conference. A full and fair investigation into any alleged violations of this provision shall be the sole and exclusive duty of the university.

The Labor Management Conference shall be presided over by the Office of Labor Relations and attended by the employee, a representative or representatives of the union, a representative of the department associated with the alleged violation. Any mutual agreements reached at a Labor Management Conference at which representatives of the Office of Labor Relations are present will be reduced to writing. Such agreement shall be binding on the parties to the agreement.

Should a particular supervisor be the subject of more than one allegation under this Article and should the parties at a Labor Management Conference (see Article 19) agree that responsive action by the University is warranted to address a claimed violation of this Article in more than one such instance, then repeated or continuing behavior by the same supervisor may be grieved pursuant to Article 12.

The parties also acknowledge that the University Policy Prohibiting Harassment (University Policy Library Section 60.1.12) prohibits harassment based on certain enumerated protected categories. Employees may use the University Harassment Complaint Process to report and remedy complaints covered by the Policy Prohibiting Harassment.