Cyberbullying in Higher Education: Implications and Solutions

Gina S. Smith
Walden University

Maria A. Minor
Kaplan University

Henry M. Brashen
Walden University

Cyberbullying exists in all levels of education, from kindergarten to postsecondary. Few studies have been conducted to examine the impact of cyberbullying in higher education. Minor, Smith, and Brashen (2013) identified the need for colleges and universities to set policies and standards on how to handle faculty being cyberbullying by students. Their study revealed that the majority of respondents were unaware of a policy in existence and/or the proper steps to take when bullying occurs. Six steps have been designed to assist college administrators when creating an antibullying policy and setting standards.

Keywords: *cyberbullying, higher education, faculty*

Introduction

The purpose of this research article is to offer implications and recommendations for faculty and administrators in higher education to consider when dealing with cyberbullying, specifically faculty being cyberbullied by students. Background information and related research is included to provide historical data. Recommendations include committee implementations, training, and policy development.

Literature Review

The following section includes a review of definitions and legislative information related to traditional bullying and cyberbullying. This section also encompasses research related to adult bullying, workplace bullying, and, specifically, cyberbullying teachers in higher education. While there are many resources that address bullying and cyberbullying in the kindergarten through 12th grade sector, there is lack of research in the topic of cyberbullying in secondary and postsecondary education.

Definitions

Traditional Bullying

Traditional bullying includes an aggressive behavior that is repeated over time (Olweus, 2012). Bullying also includes an imbalance of power or strength, which can be in the form of verbal, social, or physical acts ("Bullying definition," n.d.; Olweus, 2012). Verbal bullying includes name-calling, taunting, threats to cause harm, and inappropriate sexual comments ("Bullying definition," n.d.; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Olweus, 2012). Social bullying or relational bullying is the intent to harm

an individual's reputation ("Bullying definition," n.d.; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Olweus, 2012). Physical bullying includes the taking of possessions, spitting, hitting, tripping, or making inappropriate hand gestures ("Bullying definition," n.d.; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Olweus, 2012).

Bystander

A bystander is an individual who purposefully ignores a bullying situation or witnesses a bullying event and does not take appropriate actions ("Bystanders' Role in Bullying," 2013). Some bystanders may believe that the bullying scenario is none of their business, or may fear that offering help will make them the new victim of the bully. Bystanders have also noted that intervention rarely seems to improve the situation (Thomas, Falconer, Cross, Monks, & Brown, 2012; "Bystanders' Role in Bullying," 2013). There is minimal data related to bystanders in cyberbullying situations. "Very little research has been done around bystanders to Cyberbullying, however students would still have considerable opportunity to demonstrate positive bystander behavior in cyber space" (Thomas et al., 2012, p. 7).

Cyberbullying

 "Cyber bullying is when a child or teenager is harassed, humiliated, embarrassed, threatened or tormented using digital technology" (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, para 3). Bullying by digital technology is defined as cellular phones, the Internet, any digital device that is capable of sending text or images that are intended for the sole purpose of hurting or embarrassing another individual (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008; The National Crime Prevention Council, 2010). While there is an emergent concern of cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011), cyberbullying definitions are vague in description and are typically limited to an age range of 6–18 years (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Cyberbullying encompasses many types of shared information—including disturbing material such as pornography or human tragedy, private or personal material online inappropriate solicitation, illegal peer-to-peer networks, threatening chain letters, and spam (Kowalski et al., 2008, Olweus, 2012)—and can be accomplished through chat rooms, texting, online forums, and e-mail (Olweus, 2012).

Federal Laws and State Legislation

There are no federal laws that directly address bullying ("Federal Laws," 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). There is federal legislation in place that addresses civil rights. These behaviors include the following ("Federal Laws," 2014; The United States Department of Education, 2013):

- Severe, unacceptable, ongoing behaviors
- Hostile behaviors from another or others that limit a student's ability to access or participate in school events or opportunities
- Behaviors that discriminate against a student's origin, sex, disability.

The first antibullying law was established in 1999. In 2002, there were nine states with antibullying regulations. At the beginning of 2011, 49 out of 50 states adopted antibullying laws ("Policies and Laws," 2014). As of April of 2012, all but one state had adopted legislation to address bullying. The state of Montana advocated for antibullying regulations in 2005; however, they were unsuccessful due to gay U.S. rights and family organizations fighting over victim definitions (Montana Senate, 2005). New Jersey was the first state to adopt a cyberbullying law in 2007 (New Jersey Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act, 2011), and in 2008, other states followed (see Figure 1).

1999 . GA	2000 . NH	2001 . CO LA MS OR WV	2002 . CT NJ OK WA	2003 . AR CA RI	2004 . VT	2005 . AZ IN MD VA TX TN ME NV
2006 . ID SC AK NM	**2007** . DE IA IL KS MN OH PA	**2008** . NE KY UT FL	**2009** . NC WY AL	**2010** . MA WI NY MO	**2011** . ND HI MI	**2012** . SD

Figure 1: *Antibullying Law Passage Calendar*

The data in Figure 1 is the initial passage date. The states in red have perfect A++ ratings according to their efforts in improving their antibullying laws ("Policies and Laws," 2014).

Adult Bullying

There are many similarities related to traditional bullying and adult bullying; however, Olweus (2012) noted specific additions in adult bullying that include more than verbal, social, and physical:

1. Narcissistic adult bully: This type of adult bully is self-centered and does not share empathy with others. Additionally, there is little anxiety about consequences. He or she seems to feel good about him or herself but, in reality, has a brittle narcissism that requires putting others down.

2. Impulsive adult bully: Adult bullies in this category are more spontaneous and plan their bullying out less. Even if consequences are likely, this adult bully has a hard time restraining his or her behavior. In some cases, this type of bullying may be unintentional, resulting in periods of stress, or when the bully is actually upset or concerned about something unconnected with the victim.

3. Physical bully: While adult bullying rarely turns to physical confrontation, there are, nonetheless, bullies who use physicality. In some cases, the adult bully may not actually physically harm the victim, but may use the threat of harm, or physical domination through

looming. Additionally, a physical bully may damage or steal a victim's property rather than physically confronting the victim.

4. Verbal adult bully: Words can be quite damaging. Adult bullies who use this type of tactic may start rumors about the victim or use sarcastic or demeaning language to dominate or humiliate another person. This subtle type of bullying also has the advantage—to the bully—of being difficult to document. However, the emotional and psychological impacts of verbal bullying can be felt quite keenly and can result in reduced job performance and even depression.

5. Secondary adult bully: This is someone who does not initiate the bullying but joins in so that he or she does not actually become a victim down the road. Secondary bullies may feel bad about what they are doing, but are more concerned about protecting themselves. (para. 3)

There are serious physical, mental, social, and emotional effects related to adult bullying, which include the following (Olweus, 2012):

- Stress
- Absenteeism and low productivity at work
- Lowered self-esteem and depression
- Anxiety
- Digestive upsets
- High blood pressure
- Insomnia
- Trouble with relationships due to stress over work
- Posttraumatic stress disorder.

There is minimal research available specifically related to adult cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying in the Workplace

Workplace bullying involves an individual or a group of individuals in the work environment who single out another individual with the intent to embarrass or intimidate (Olweus, 2012, Workplace Bullying Institute, 2014). Workplace bullying can include shouting, swearing, unjustified criticism, exclusion, humiliation, repeated practical jokes to a specified individual (Olweus, 2012; Workplace Bullying Institute, 2014). Thirty-five percent of workers may be victims of workplace bullying and 50% of workplace bullying goes unreported (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2014). Twenty percent of workplace bullying develops into harassment (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2014). As noted in the research related to adult bullying, there is minimal research that specifically focuses on cyberbullying in the workplace.

Cyberbullying in Higher Education

While there is data related to cyberbullying between students in the kindergarten through 12th grade sector, there is a distinguishable gap in research related to the cyberbullying of teachers in higher education. The literature available did include notable data related to the bullying of teachers in secondary education. Smith (2007) found that 17% of teachers stated they had been cyberbullied through emails or unwelcomed texts. In addition, 53% of the participants stated that they were unaware if their school had a policy to address cyberbullying. Thirty-nine percent stated

that their school did not have a policy. Daniloff (2009) noted a specific case in 2007, whereby a Boston University music professor was cyberbullied by a former student who was discontented. The student created a Facebook profile in the professor's name and posted derogatory remarks about the professor. The profile prompted other students to post harmful comments on the page. The professor stated, "It was incredibly anxiety-producing. I didn't know how long this would go on. You're forced into the fairly lonely situation of going to see an attorney and facing the prospect of some kind of litigation" (Daniloff, 2009, para. 3). In a similar study, Smith (2010) noted that a professor reported a false Facebook profile was set up claiming he that he enjoyed sexual relations with both sexes (Smith, 2010, para. 11). With the assistance of a Facebook administrator, and after many months, both Facebook profiles were removed (Daniloff, 2009; Smith, 2010).

Rate My Professors (http://www.ratemyprofessors.com/) is a professor review Web site that generates more than 14 million student ratings, which include 1.3 million professors and 7,000 schools across the United States. The rating categories include clarity in instruction, helpfulness, ease of course, and humor in the classroom. The survey also includes a place to freely comment about the professor. The site allows students to anonymously rate their professors (Daniloff, 2009). The site also compiles a top list of the highest rated professors, which includes the "hottest" professors (Daniloff, 2009). According to Daniloff (2009), the Web site has included false accusations of professors, resulting in emotional distress and growing concerns amongst professors (Daniloff, 2009).

While there are efforts being made to address bullying and cyberbullying in the age range of 6–18 there is minimal data to reveal postsecondary efforts to address cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011). Cyberbullying is a growing problem in North America because of the increased use of digital technology (Dilmac, 2009). In addition, cyberbullying is difficult to monitor and regulate (Brady & Conn, 2006). Therefore, education and training is necessary to better educate society on the cases in and effects of cyberbullying.

Study and Findings

In January 2013, a survey was conducted at a large online university (Minor, Brashen, & Smith). The researchers of this study were interested in examining whether student cyberbullying of instructors in higher education occurred in the online classroom and, if so, what affect it had on instructor performance and morale. Based on the research conducted, the recommendations in this paper were developed. The following is a summary of the study highlighting the study research questions and findings.

 The research questions posed were as follows:

1. What are the experiences that college faculty in online settings have with cyberbullying from students?
2. If they have experienced cyberbullying from students, how have they handled the situation?
3. If an instructor does not do anything about the problem, why?
4. How should cyberbullying in online education settings be addressed?

Both full- and part-time graduate management faculty were surveyed. The qualitative survey was designed to see if faculty felt they had been bullied by students and, if so, how the bullying was handled and how they felt bullying should be addressed at the higher educational level.

The survey had a 20% rate of return; 85% of the respondents were part-time faculty, 15 % full-time, 59% male, and 41% female. Thirty-four percent of the respondents acknowledged having been bullied, 62 % said they had not been bullied, and 4% were unsure. The definition of cyberbullying was presented to the instructors and defined as "the use of the Internet, cell phones, or other devices to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person" (National Crime Prevention Council, 2010, para. 2). Sixty-two percent of respondents shared experiences that were clearly identified as bullying.

When asked to give examples of bullying experiences, several themes emerged. The first included threats such as filing lawsuits, verbal abuse, aggressive language, repeated aggressive e-mails, and even verbally intimidating phone calls. The second theme was escalating or threats of escalation. The third theme included students using the public discussion forum in the classroom to humiliate the instructor and rally support from classmates. (Minor et al., 2013)

When faculty were asked how the situation was handled, 22% of those who acknowledge bullying by students said they handled the issues themselves, 12% said their program director (direct supervisor of faculty) handled it, 2% said someone else handled it, while 4% said it was not handled by anyone. Of those who acknowledged cyberbullying, 27% out of 38% felt it was handled effectively. Six percent said it was not handled effectively, and 6% said it was handled somewhat effectively. When asked if participants felt there were resources available to help instructors properly handle a cyberbullying situation, 40% said yes, 20% said no, and 40 % simply did not know (Minor et al., 2013).

When asked how cyberbullying should be handled, answers included having clear processes in place, training for faculty on how to recognize and address cyberbullying, and having a policy manual that clearly identifies what cyberbullying is and how it will be handled. Instructors responded to the question of what barriers exist to reporting cyberbullying to the appropriate people by stating they were

- unsure who to go to when encountering cyberbullying,
- worried that faculty member won't be supported by immediate supervisor or above,
- embarrassed for reasons including being seen as ineffective, not in control of class, a complainer,
- afraid of losing their job due to low evaluations or complaints from students, and
- afraid that dealing with the issue would take too much time.

As noted in the percentages above, the survey revealed that the majority of faculty who said they were bullied attempted to handle the situation themselves, while the minority referred the matter to a supervisor. Overall, the respondents felt the bullying was handled properly. When asked if resources were available at the university to help deal with the bullying, an alarming 40% said they were unsure, and 21% said no resources were available (Minor et al., 2013).

Implications

There were 65 comments on the survey responding to the question concerning why no action was taken when cyberbullying of an instructor took place (Minor et al., 2013). Comments from respondents supported the five themes mentioned previously. These comments included the following:

- "Some instructors might feel embarrassed or ashamed that they let themselves be bullied. Instructors are supposed to be 'in charge' and have 'control' at all times. If they have been or are being bullied, maybe they feel like they don't and are reluctant to report it."
- "Knowing who to report to. Risk of loss of respect from the person reporting to which might mean the loss of contracts."
- "The time it takes out of a busy schedule to have someone attend to the situation."
- "For adjuncts: Fear of losing job. For all: Fear of administration believing the student."
- "Faculty not supported by administration."

If this problem continues to fester in the classroom, concerns include faculty performance and morale, student performance and morale, and retention rates. These implications should be addressed in a timely manner. Doing nothing does not solve the problem.

Recommendations

The study conducted by Minor et al. (2013) has validated that cyberbullying of online instructors by students occurs in higher education. It is the responsibility of the college or university to ensure the safety of faculty, staff, and students. This includes an environment free of harassment through the form of cyberbullying. Educating faculty on how to handle this form of bullying will lead to a safer, violent-free, and threat-free online environment. Understanding the college policies and procedures on how to handle occurrences can only be obtained through school required training.

We suggest the following recommendations. First, establish a committee to examine bullying online, and then implement a task force that develops education and future training programs on the prevention of bullying for students, faculty, and staff. This initial recommendation has already been implemented at the university where the study took place. It is led by the university's Center for Faculty Excellence. The Center for Faculty Excellence at this university is responsible for developing faculty through education, training, coaching, and mentoring. Other universities may have similar centers, but if not, this committee should be initiated by the college leadership team.

Second, create a policy on cyberbullying if one is not already in place. This policy should be created and housed in both the student handbook and the faculty handbook, available at all universities. In this way both faculty and students are better educated on what constitutes cyberbullying and are informed of the consequences should they engage in it. This policy should also be communicated in the first course of any program. The college or university must have a zero tolerance policy on cyberbullying, not only of instructors by students, but also of students to other students. The policy must be enforced fairly and equally to those that violate it. Leaders should act immediately when a report is filed by faculty. They must investigate the occurrence and, should the reported offense be found to be valid, discipline the offender without delay. Following up all reported offenses is critical to ensure a satisfactory resolution of the issue. After an initial warning to the violator, the next step should be carrying out the consequences identified in the policy. If cyberbullying continues after a warning, it should lead to suspension and ultimately expulsion.

Third, develop faculty training so that not only is faculty able to recognize cyberbullying, but they are able to successfully address it. Mandate faculty to acquire at least one professional development class in bullying education that reviews the school's policies on bullying, awareness of the issues, and the steps to be taken on how to handle the incidences. This professional development class would not be delivered as a training session, but rather an information piece designed to clarify

roles and responsibilities of faculty when encountering cyberbullying. It would be designed to heighten awareness on steps to address cyberbullying.

Also, create a faculty training program if one is not in place that includes (a) documentation tips and techniques, (b) self-awareness training, and (c) conflict training.

Documentation Tips and Techniques

In the online environment, there needs to be a paper trail to support the assertion of cyberbullying.

Self-Awareness Training

Are we coming across to others the way we think we are? Sometimes how we see ourselves is not how others see us. Self-awareness can be developed by recognizing our own body signals during communication with others, asking for feedback from those that know us, watching or listening to how others respond to our messages, and taking self-assessments designed to enhance our self-awareness. This training should also cover nonverbal communication. Research has shown that 93% of what we communicate is nonverbal (Mehrabian, 1981). Topics should include body language; use of personal space, artifacts, and paralanguage (how something is said); and the written word. The latter two are most important in the online environment, as there are far fewer nonverbal cues than in face-to-face encounters. In fact, Mehrabian went on to say that 55% of all communication is body language, 38% is vocalic (how something is said), and only 7% is the words themselves (Mehrabian, 1981).

Conflict Training

Conflict is natural and inevitable. How we deal with conflict determines the kinds of relationships we have with people. Conflict training should include an assessment tool which helps faculty understand their styles of conflict and when and how to use each style appropriately. An assessment tool such as the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974) would allow participants not only to better understand their preferred method of addressing conflict but, more importantly, to identify other styles that they may need to develop. Conflict styles such as collaboration, competition, compromise, avoidance, and accommodation are neither right nor wrong, but there are appropriate times to use each style. Faculty should also be trained on how to address counterproductive behaviors including aggressive, passive-aggressive, and unassertive behavior. Aggressive behavior might be categorized by forceful and direct attacks. Passive-aggressive behavior might be characterized by hidden, covert aggression. Unassertive behavior is characterized by passiveness whereby the person does not express his or her thoughts and feelings directly. The conflict assessment should be followed by introducing conflict-resolution techniques including assertive skills, listening skills, negotiation skills, feedback (giving and receiving), and collaboration skills. Faculty should have the opportunity to practice these skills so they will be ready to utilize them if and when the problem arises. Faculty should also be taught how to respond to "unfair" conflict techniques, such as guilt induction (this person attempts to change another's behavior by making them feel responsible for causing pain; e.g. "if you don't give me at least a B in this class, I will lose financial aid and then my home") or gunny sacking (this person is passive and calm initially, but she/he keeps her/his feelings pent up inside and eventually erupts in a hostile and aggressive way, or the blamer—this person blames the other person for a problem rather than assuming any responsibility for his or her role in the conflict and without trying to find a solution).

Fourth, develop supervisory training. Faculty supervisors must be trained on the importance of recognizing and addressing cyberbullying in the classroom. They need to understand their role in supporting faculty and addressing cyberbullying by following the guidelines in their school's policy. It would be helpful for supervisors to also enhance their self-awareness and conflict-resolution skills.

Fifth, create student training on cyberbullying in the classroom. This training should include expectations of behavior in the classroom and consequences for violating those expectations. Many students are new to the online environment and may have been out of school for years. They may not understand when they commit cyberbullying and need to be educated as to what it is and why it will not be tolerated. Case studies could be developed and utilized so that participants could test their skills in identifying cyberbullying. This training might be housed in a new student orientation. There should also be a link offered in the first course, and students should be required to review it.

Sixth, conduct training for the school leadership team on addressing cyberbullying in the online classroom. School leaders need to ensure they hold supervisors accountable for supporting faculty who are cyberbullied by students. This leadership training should not only be informative, outlining cyberbullying policy, but should include, at the very least, an overview of the training supervisors receive so that school leaders can reinforce the appropriate steps supervisors should take when faculty report being cyberbullied by students.

Cyberbullying in the online classroom is a dangerous problem that impacts faculty performance and morale. Further study needs to be done on the impact that cyberbullying of an instructor has on other students not involved in the cyberbullying as well as the impact of students cyberbullying other students. Several questions need to be addressed in future research:

- What is the impact on student morale when faculty are cyberbullied by other students?
- What is the impact on student performance in a hostile classroom created by cyberbullying?
- What is the impact on the morale of faculty who are cyberbullied?
- What is the impact on the performance of faculty who are cyberbullied?
- What are the implications of student's cyberbullying other students?
- What are the implications of staff being cyberbullied by students?
- How prevalent is cyberbullying of instructors by students? Would similar results be observed in other online institutions?
- What are the retention rates in classes where cyberbullying is identified compared to similar classes where it is not?
- What criteria do students identify as necessary for an appropriate learning environment?
- What criteria does faculty identify as necessary for an appropriate learning environment?

Faculty and students alike deserve a safe and comfortable environment for learning. When this is provided, the opportunity for growth and learning is greatly enhanced, as is the quality of the educational experience. It is not enough that we provide solid curriculum and qualified faculty for our students. We owe it to them to provide the appropriate learning environment, and we owe it to our faculty to provide them with an online classroom environment free of hostility.

In 2013, Minor, Smith, and Brashen acknowledged that colleges and universities need to set policies and standards to address faculty being cyberbullied by students. This study expands upon those findings to include six steps that may assist college administrators when creating an antibullying policy and setting standards. In addition, questions for future research are offered so that colleges and universities can effectively address issues related to cyberbullying.

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