

Is higher education soft on workplace bullies?


YES
The academic environment promotes it

BY CORLISS OLSON

WORKPLACE BULLYING in higher education occurs, unchecked, because it is promoted by workplace structures, policies and procedures; personal characteristics and behaviors; increasing pressure to do more with less; and denial.

Structural issues that encourage bullying include hierarchy and power differentials, supervisors who lack relevant training and an unresponsive grievance process. The medieval origins of institutions of scholarship have left intact an emphasis on status between and within departments and disciplines, and a pecking order that is tacitly agreed to by many and nearly impossible to overturn by those who disavow it. This hierarchy sustains the will and behavior of the powerful, and allows abuse of power based on position, reward, coercion, expertise, charisma/personality, information and connection.

Bullies are creative, manipulative and charming, so that administrators and grievance procedures fail to see the bully's culpability. The institution dismisses problems as personality conflicts they are powerless to resolve. Worst of all, there is an unwillingness to name the problem.

In higher education, we find fluctuating levels of self-doubt, competence and ego. Bullies resent competence and take advantage of self-doubt. Most people are nonconfrontational, and have a sense of institutional loyalty and a belief in the rational. These beliefs reinforce the idea that a target of bullying must be at fault. Targets come to resemble victims of domestic violence. They internalize negative messages and are unable to act in their own defense. Bullying, like discrimination, requires copious documentation to establish a malicious pattern—a burden of time and energy for a target and his or her representative.

Intelligent people with options realize that staying in an environment that allows bullying can be suicidal, personally and professionally. Targets and witnesses know bullying will not be addressed and leave the organization without reporting problem behavior.

The final ingredient in the toxic mix is diminishing resources and increasing workloads, which add stress, increase competition and bring out the bully's need for control.

The effects of bullying are long-term and devastating to all: health issues, lowered productivity and stifled creativity. We must demand an end to bullying in higher education and a culture of respect in which people thrive.

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NO
Unions provide tools to set strong boundaries

BY INES O. AGINA

THE LATEST STATISTICS show that one in 10 people will be a victim of bullying in the workplace. Fortunately, union members in higher education have tools to build support for each other and to confront bullies—whether the offender is a peer or in top management.

Unfortunately, bullying is the way some people manage, and higher education is not always great about training otherwise sharp people to be good managers. Since bullying can cause high levels of stress and anguish, bullies must be shown that such abusive behavior can have serious consequences for the perpetrator as well as the victim.

Within our union, we've encouraged anyone who feels like he or she has been bullied or has witnessed abusive behavior to reach out to a union representative to talk about the best course of action to end that behavior. It is important to confront the situation before bullying creates a level of stress that damages a victim's self-esteem and mental well-being.

Calling a union representative to discuss bullying behavior before it escalates can help stem further antagonism. Simple problem-solving measures or mediation can go a long way toward setting appropriate professional and personal boundaries. With a union, no one has to go it alone.

Institutions of higher education tout their leadership in educating and empowering students to stand up for their rights with integrity.

In dealing with students, our schools have come far in building a culture of respect.

Campus attitudes reflect genuine concern about preparing graduates to be tolerant of gender, race and religious differences in the workforce and society in general.

My colleagues and I find great satisfaction in assisting students through traumatic times and hardships in their academic and personal lives. And as a newly unionized local, we also are learning to help one another get through difficult times on the job by challenging inappropriate behavior. We live in a free country and have an opportunity to shape the higher education institutions in which we work into places where everyone—students, faculty and staff—is treated with the dignity and respect we deserve.

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