

# **Cyber-Bullying in the Online Classroom: Faculty as the Victims**

Michael T. Eskey, Ph.D.

Michael T. Eskey, Jr., DPA

## **Abstract**

The increase of online learning resulted in a subsequent rise of cyber-bullying. Bullying has typically been found in the workplace and between students in the classroom, outside of the classrooms, and in many forms of social media. Most recently, faculty members have become targets and victims of online bullying. For many, there are not established policies or training on how to react. The current research addresses the scope of the problem, a review of the findings of cyber-bullying related to a university with a majority of students and instructors online, and a plan for addressing the problem through policies, training, and professional development.

## **Rise of Cyber-Bullying**

Bullying in schools is not a new phenomenon. Many students and instructors have been involved in bullying as the recipient, witness, or even perpetrator in the capacity of instructors, administrators, or students. Typically, bullying is first associated with elementary and junior-high school. For many, this progressed to high school; but, this has progressed less frequently at the college and work-place level.

The number of students enrolled in online courses is increasing on an annual basis. With the growth, online learning there has been an increase of cyber-assaults, written & verbal assaults, and other forms of cyber-bullying. There is an increasing amount of research on both student and faculty-related cyber-bullying. Additionally, there are a number of related definitions and strategies in the process of development to combat this growing problem. In the fall of 2011

there were 17.7 million college students of which only 16 percent were attending as traditional 4-year college students living on the college campus (Allen and Seaman, 2013).

Experiences with online learning have noted increases in verbal assaults and cyber-bullying (and online learning increases the potential for cyber-bullying). This changes many “classroom” philosophies. Students are becoming the “customer” and higher education, following more of a business model, which increasingly expresses a shifting of focus on the student, is inclined more so treating the student as a customer than as a traditional student.

Cyber-bullying can be defined as the use of electronic devices such as computers, iPads, cell phones, or other devices to send or post text or images intended to hurt, intimidate, or embarrass another person, to include such behavior as:

**Flaming: Online fights using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language.**

**Harassment and stalking: Repeatedly sending cruel, vicious, and/or threatening messages. Even one message could constitute cyber-bullying depending on the circumstances. Often times when this occurs instructors are unprepared to react and where to seek support.**

**Mobbing: This is a group of students cyber-bullying a particular instructor.**

There are certainly a number of other related - definitions that may be added to this critical problem (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011).

The Internet has only been around for a few decades. The legal system is still changing and evolving to respond to changes in technology and social media. Cyber bullying laws in particular are part of this dynamic legal landscape. As of July 2014, only one state did not have

cyber-bullying laws. Unfortunately, many of these laws really just apply to kids in high school, middle school, and grade school. These laws ignore the fact that this behavior could continue into college and the workplace. As such, college students and college professors are often not protected. However, some states do have laws protecting citizens from cyber-bullying. Some localities could also have anti-bullying laws.

Although no Federal law broaches cyber-bullying a myriad of states have enacted laws that could apply depending on the factual scenario. Beyond that, many educational institutions have created their own student codes of conduct that could apply to cyber-bullying – depending on how they are written. This section will explore these issues.

As Noted: No Federal laws specifically apply to cyber-bullying, per se. For example, Park University has 40 campus centers located in 21 states, the following examples of state laws denote the diversity of cyber-bullying laws in three states where Park is located – North Dakota, Georgia, and Florida. Not only are they different, but enforcement is different; for example:

**North Dakota - House Bill 1465** defines bullying and requires school districts to have bullying policies by July 1, 2012. “Bullying” means: a. Conduct that occurs in a public school, on school district premises, in a district owned or leased school-bus or school vehicle, or at any public school or school district sanctioned or sponsored activity or event; b. Conduct that is received by a student while the student is in a public school, on school district premises, in a district owned or leased school-bus or school vehicle, or at any public school or school district sanctioned or sponsored activity or event. “Conduct” includes the use of technology or other electronic media.

**Code 12.1.17-07 (2009)** makes harassment via phone, in writing or via electronic communication a Class A misdemeanor.

Georgia - **Proposed: “The End to Cyber-bullying Act”** – includes off campus and cyber-bullying

**SB 250 (2010):** Students found bullying third time in school year are sent to alternative school, requires that policies against bullying be posted in all middle and high schools, requires that bullying policies be included in student and parent handbooks.

**O.C.G.A. 20-2-751.4:** “...by use of data or software that is accessed through a computer, computer system, computer network or other electronic technology of a local school system...”

**Florida - HB 609,** signed by governor in May 2013, took effect July 1, 2013. Added “cyber-bullying” to bill and includes explicit language allowing schools to discipline students for their off-campus harassment that “substantially interferes with or limits the victim's ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or opportunities offered by a school or substantially disrupts the education process or orderly operation of a school.”

**H.B. 699 s. 1006.147:** School Safety “Jeffrey Johnson Stand Up for All Students Act”:  
Consequences must be made clear by the school district (Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J. (2012).

As of 2014, there are forty-nine states have Department of Education (DOE) harassment policies (which is normally how bullying is handled) (Beale & Hoel, 2011). Thirty-six states include cyber-bullying in their policies. Only 13 states give schools the ability to intervene when behavior off campus creates a hostile environment at school (Sacco, et al, 2012). Most colleges have student conduct policies and faculty human resources policies. Enforcement is sometimes problematic and coverage can often take on protection of the student first.

Other laws could also apply depending on how the bullying is manifested and escalates into other criminal areas (e.g., battery, assault). Conflicting legal concerns can include violating the free speech of individuals, or the bullying of students by the school. Despite concerns expressed by children, staff, and parents, many school districts are unwilling to develop the anti- cyber-bullying guidelines without legal support from the courts. Though not the direct topic of this study, it is well worth watching the changes occurring in the State of Florida schools concerning the suicide of Rebecca Sedwick blamed on cyber-bullying of classmates (Heller, 2013).

### **Institutional Codes of Conduct and Policies**

Even though most states are in the process of enacting legislation to protect school-age children from cyber-bullying, these may not always protect adults. As most state cyber-bullying laws and school districts have laws that focus on K-12, the majority of colleges and universities have their own handbook of student conduct. There are ways for colleges and universities to help prevent incidents of cyber-bullying. It is very important in formal and informal discussions and lectures “to try to make sure the students understand that number one, it is against the law; number two, it’s against school policy (Breitenhaus, 2010). Beyond legal protection, many universities have student codes of conduct or policies on cyber bullying that would protect instructors or rely on the Human Resources office. Instructors should report cyber bullying to the university as soon as it occurs, often with a level of ambiguity of “exactly” what should be reported and when it should be reported. As part of the current research the student handbooks and codes of conduct for 15 colleges and universities (a mix of private and public, for profit and not-for profit) were reviewed. The specific focus was on specific types of behavior that constituted student misconduct. This typically addressed harassment, intimidation, and disruption to the learning environment but do not specifically address cyber-bullying or electronic harassment (or limited

activities or behavior related to electronic devices).

These codes vary to the extent in which they define inappropriate behavior and the degree in which those found in inappropriate behavior and the degree in which those found in violation of these codes will be punished. While the terms 'disrupt', 'disruptive', and 'harassment' appear numerous times in many of the institution's codes of conduct, 'bullying' only appears in three of the selected institutions' handbooks. 'Stalking' is generally included in the institutions' sexual harassment policies, although Valdosta State University actually using the term "cyber-stalking" to define one of the prohibited practices, implying that the transmission of virtual unwanted advances or other forms of harassment warrant similar punishments as those made in person.

Kennesaw State University employs the term “cyberbullying” to differentiate between traditional bullying, harassment, and intimidation and bullying done with electronic device, but does not designate an alternative punishment, either more or less severe. However, the use of this modern term implies an awareness of both the practice and protocol of online harassment by the institution’s administration. Excelsior, a private institution with over 35,000 online students has forbidden and how perpetrators will be punished upon being found in violation of the non-permissible action. Some of the student conduct policies include prohibited activities, but provide little in terms of repercussions. Other codes of conduct provide little specifics in prohibited activity, but are very detailed when describing punishments, often providing multiple classifications and varying levels of severity for particular actions. However, without consistently providing explicit details in regards to appropriate and inappropriate conduct as well as specific detailing of repercussions when perpetrators are found in violation, institutions may be leaving themselves open to possible scrutiny.

In addition to the relatively vague policies dictating impermissible virtual behavior, often the institutional codes of conduct do little to differentiate between inappropriate conduct for students and faculty/staff. Codes are generally written in an all-encompassing manner, only referring specifically to faculty members when the subject matter involves student disruptive behavior in the classroom, (in none of the codes was student bullying of faculty members included in this particular area). Ultimately, the non-specific nature of the included institutional codes of conduct reveals that the institutions are lacking in both their policies specifically related to student conduct towards faculty members as well as overall institutional conduct in the virtual realm.

Colleges and universities generally are using their existing codes of conduct to address these cases, but not specifically covering or discouraging that behavior directly related to cyber-bullying. Some policies seem to define harassment and disruption narrowly (physical harassment or disruption of the classroom) and this may not apply to all levels and types of cyber-bullying. It should be noted also that there is a difference in restrictions that can be restricted and enforced in public, private, or for-profit institutions, especially in the restriction of restricting “free speech” and “academic freedom.”

### **Focus of Research**

The current research intended to address five questions and issues:

- What is the extent of online faculty cyber-bullying by students?
- Are online instructors aware of the policies and processes in place to handle issues of cyber-bullying at the institution?
- How have online faculty addressed the issue of cyber-bullying? Was this effective?
- Based on the results, what preventive measures, policies, and training are needed to reduce and discourage future cyber bullying in the online education settings be addressed (Steps to address cyber-bullying)?

- Address the needs of an institution in ensuring that our students are protected and prevented from partaking in behavior that will affect their future careers

## **Sample**

The research focused on a little-examined area of the online faculty experience of being a victim of cyberbullying. Few studies have focused on this rising phenomenon. In the fall semester of 2013, a sample of 550 online instructors were contacted resulting in a total of 202 online faculty members (103 males and 99 females) responses (37% response rate) to a 49 question instrument between the period of September 1 to October 1, 2013. Respondents were informed that the survey was voluntary and that their responses were confidential. Respondents included full-time and adjunct online instructors at Park University that had actively taught an online course in the last two academic years.

Most respondents were from the Colleges of Liberal Arts & Sciences, School of Business, School of Education and School for Public Affairs. Instructor observations of college students in classroom settings, a baseline survey of students, conversations with instructors at other U.S. colleges, and a literature review suggest student classroom uses of digital devices for non-class purposes causes learning distractions. This launched a research agenda focused on studying student classroom uses of digital devices for non-class purposes, and the effects such behavior may have on classroom learning. Eighty percent of respondents were adjunct instructors. The online instructors are slightly older than the average f2f faculty with 70% over 45. Nearly 80 percent of the respondents classified themselves as white; 1/3 had a terminal degree; and, nearly half (44%) have taught online 11 plus years

## **Findings**



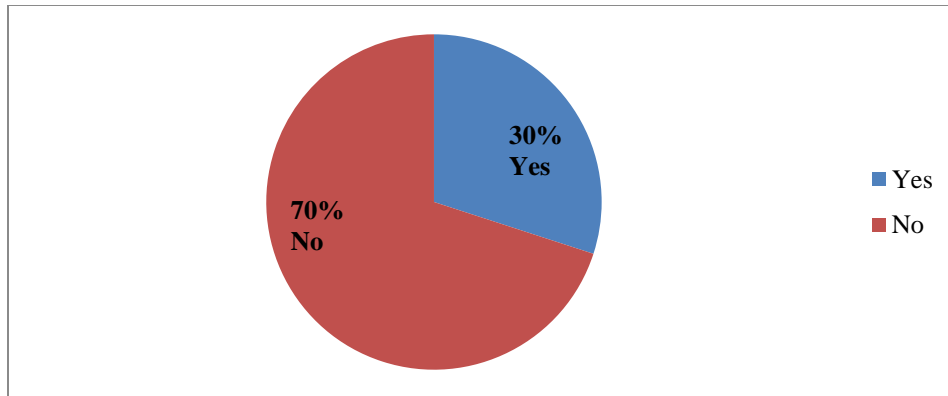
The preliminary analysis of the respondents indicated that 50 percent had personally experienced student cyber-bullying. Of these, 14 percent had experienced it once, 29 percent - “2 to 5 times”, and eight percent, six or more times. Additionally, 23 percent of the respondents were aware of other faculty members that had been bullied online. The isolation of online instructors may contribute to this relatively small percentage. Findings by past research (Minor, Smith & Brashen, 2013 and Smith, 2007) support the findings that 17 – 30 percent of faculty respondents have received email or instant messaging that “threatened, insulted, or harassed.” Many “threats” were targeted at going to the chair or administration over grades or other assignment- and course-related matters.

Fifteen percent of the respondents reported that students had attacked their educational backgrounds or qualifications. The major reason students bullied online instructors was over grades or assignments. Nearly 1/3 of respondents reported that students used the Park e-mail to personally attack the instructor by sending e-mails to the rest of the class.

Only 30 percent of respondents reported that they were aware that Park has a process in place to handle cyber-bullying. Twenty percent of respondents admitted that they had been cyber-bullied by a student and no taken any action. Only 30 percent felt that Park had resources to handle cyber-bullying. Fifty percent reported they “didn’t know” what resources were available; and 20 percent said “definitely not” concerning knowledge of resources. That is, a total of 70 percent of respondents were not feeling confident in Park resources to handle cyber-bullying.

### **Figure 1**

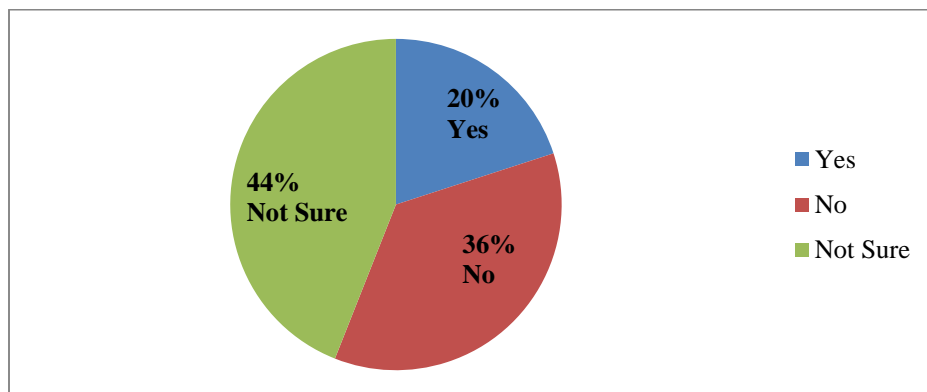
#### **Awareness That Institution Has a Process in Place to Handle Cyber-Bullying**



Unfortunately, when asked if reporting bullying might be held against a faculty member, only 20 percent felt it would not. 40 percent felt it would be held against them; and, 40 percent were not sure. This is a disturbing number, especially during these economic times. That is, nearly 80 percent of respondents had a concern that reporting a violation of cyber-bullying would be held against them and possibly keep them from teaching in the future, especially during these economic times. That is, nearly 80 percent of respondents had a concern that reporting a violation of cyber-bullying would be held against them and possibly keep them from teaching in the future.

**Figure 2**

**Feel Reporting Bullying Will Be Held Against You**



## **Conclusions**

The majority of respondents did not know how to identify cyber-bullying or the process to follow when it occurs. It is important for instructors to provide a first line of security and safety for other students in the class and to feel confident and assured that they have the means to protect themselves. It is important for the institution to provide online instructors with the training and access to prevent and properly address cyber-bullying in their classroom

**First**, there may be a need to change the current policies, either by adding-to or changing coverage to include electronically generated, cyber-generated abuse, threats, stalking and the like. Specific definitions for harassment, intimidation, and bullying (including the electronic variants) are strongly recommended.

**Second**, it is important to add cyber-bullying training to the initial training of online instructors. This will not add too much to the length of initial online instructor training. Awareness is the key. It is important to ensure that new instructors aware of what to look for, how to address it, and how to report it. This includes an emphasis and assurance to instructors that this will have no negative repercussions on them, in fact, they should be encouraged to report all cyber-bullying. This will provide, initially, the identification of repeat offenders in different courses.

**Third**, it is useful to incorporate a professional development segment for all online instructors oriented on cyber-bullying recognition, prevention, and reporting. Procedures for preventing cyberbullying course with materials for all instructors would include workshops, staff training, and curriculum enhancement. At Park University, Instructors are required to take PDL750 prior to teaching; however, that means that there are now 550 active instructors that have already

completed this training and would not benefit by adding a bullying portion to this course. A separate portion on cyber-bullying is needed.

**Fourth**, if your institution has a resource website for your instructors (as there is at Park University – PDL751) place detailed information on addressing and reporting bullying. Create a professional- development training course so that instructors will recognize cyber-bullying, address the issue, and report the issue. Pass a policy on instructing and warning students of online behavior during the conduct of the online course. Make it mandatory that students read it, understand it, agree to and will comply. Include: Graduated consequences and remedial actions; procedures for reporting; and procedures for investigating; and Specific language that if a student’s off-school speech or behavior results in “substantial disruption of the learning environment,” the student can be disciplined (both through the school and the criminal justice system)

### **A Two-Pronged Approach to Administration, Faculty, and Students**

As instructors in the criminal justice and other various disciplines, we have a responsibility to prepare our students for a profession in society. It is very important that we instill public values in our students, as they will be working in the public and private sector. As was noted in the student conduct codes of sample institutions utilized in the research, students found guilty of violation to include cyber-bullying can be barred from future enrollment, assigned a failing grade, suspended, or, based on the severity of the student’s violation of policy, even withdrawn from the institution. Most importantly, violations can be permanently annotated in a student’s academic record to reflect action taken by the institution in response - to the student’s violation of policy.

Further, this will result in notification of educational institutions, licensing or certification boards, employers, or others who have previously received a transcript or that will be receiving transcripts in the future. Clearly, this can have a detrimental effect in the professional career of a student with intentions of advancing their professional or educational goals.

It is important to look to a two-pronged approach of prevention and enforcement. Use prevention by including realistic training and demonstration in your courses utilizing constructive feedback. Work toward a constructive feedback design. Provide training for both faculty and students.

This is especially important in our leadership courses, as well as other courses where we can simulate face-to-face interaction and simulate synchronous interaction. We can teach by typing, using constructive criticism designs, but ensuring that our students realize the consequences of their communication and instill in our students public values as they will be working in the public service area.

It is very important to simulate the interaction of students, especially synchronous interaction. It is important to provide examples, videos, and written material. Above all, from the institutional and individual standpoint, be positive. Incorporate acceptable behavior in assignments. Use the syllabus to address proper etiquette and netiquette. Instructors have an important responsibility to their students and need to address it, through prevention and enforcement. Institutions have an important responsibility to prepare their instructors.

## **References**

Allen, J.E. and J. Seaman (2013) Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States, Babson Survey Research Group and Quahog Research Group, LLC), January, 2013.

Beale, D. and H. Hoel (2011). "Workplace bullying and the employment relationship: exploring questions of prevention, control and context." *Work, Employment and Society* 25, no. 1(2011): 14. eScholarID:[192170](#)

Breitenhaus, C. (2010) Addressing Cyber bullying in Higher Education, Peter Li Education Group, October, 2010, retrieved October 3, 2013 at [http://www.peterli.com/cpm/resources/articles/archive.php?article\\_id=2784](http://www.peterli.com/cpm/resources/articles/archive.php?article_id=2784)

Heller, D. (2013) Why didn't Florida's new cyber bullying law help Rebecca Sedwick?" First Coast New, October 16, 2013. Retrieved October 23, 2013 at <http://www.firstcoastnews.com/topstories/article/332053/483/Why-didnt-Floridas-new-cyberbullying-law-help-Rebecca-Sedwick>

Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J. 2011, (2011, February). High-tech cruelty. *Educational Leadership*, 68(5), February, 2011, pg. 48-52.

Hinduja, S. and J. Patchin (2013). State Cyber bullying Laws: A Brief Review of State Cyber bullying Laws and Policies, Cyber bullying Research Center, July, 2013. [http://www.cyberbullying.us/Bullying\\_and\\_Cyberbullying\\_Laws.pdf](http://www.cyberbullying.us/Bullying_and_Cyberbullying_Laws.pdf)

Minor, M.A., G.S. Smith & H. Brashen (2013) Journal of Educational Research and Practice, Volume 3, Issue 1, Pgs. 15–29

Smith, A. (2007). Cyber-bullying affecting 17% of teachers, poll finds. *Education Guardian*, Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2007/jan/19/schools.uk>

U.S. Department of Education, Analysis of State Bullying Laws and Policies (2011).

