

## **THIS IS WHY THEY LEAVE YOU: WORKPLACE BULLYING AND INSIGHT TO JUNIOR FACULTY DEPARTURE**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Workplace bullying may be an understudied area in higher education, yet the most vulnerable population, junior faculty members, receive even less attention. Based on a data collection in late 2016/early 2017, this data analysis of 257 graduate students and junior faculty from nine countries considered the question, what is the frequency of workplace bullying for junior faculty and graduate students? A second research question was, does workplace bullying influence career decisions for junior faculty and graduate students. Findings showed that close to 63% of respondents faced workplace bullying. Many of their comments revealed shock and dismay that administration turned a blind eye to bullying behaviors. Further, close to 80% of the respondents stated that the organization did not take action when learning about bullying, and 32% considered leaving the higher education sector. For further consideration, this study included the open-ended comments of junior faculty as they reflected on workplace bullying and how it had an impact on their career trajectory.*

**KEYWORDS:** Workplace bullying, junior faculty, higher education

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Since 2011, I have been speaking at colleges and universities about workplace bullying. The subject includes microaggressions, the impact on women, how bullying hurts diversity, and the health issues endured by the target. At the conclusion of these talks, I often receive a side-podium confessional from a junior faculty member struggling to make sense of his or her workplace bullying experiences. These targets of workplace bullying are flabbergasted that the elements in the lecture were eerily close to their experiences in their departments. In fact, one woman insisted that the treatment she received was beyond bullying, but instead hazing, a rite of passage to enter the professoriate. Another audience member welled up in tears when briefly recounting her experiences. She was relieved for a short moment that she was not alone, and that bullying was more common than she originally anticipated.

My studies on four-year colleges and universities and two-year community colleges show respectively that 62% and 64% face workplace bullying on the job (Hollis, 2016). Respondents from these studies reported dynamics in which the power differential between them as the target and the bully are at the root of the bullying experiences. Such comments were consistent with various researchers' findings on workplace bullying (Branch, et al., 2013; Fritz, 2014; Glasø & Notelaers, 2012). Further, those without power, who tend to be women, underrepresented minorities, and gender/ sexual minorities are more likely to endure bullying in higher education (Fox & Stallworth, 2005; Hodson, et al., 2006; Hollis, 2016c; Hollis & McCalla, 2013). In this context as a researcher, I recognized that junior faculty members striving for tenure are in particularly weakened positions within their organizations. Most faculty members can reflect on the dedication required to earn a tenure-track position and then earn tenure. Kezar and Maxey (2013) reported that in 1969, 83% of faculty positions were tenure track; however, in 2009, there were only 33.5% of faculty positions that were tenure-

track positions. With a heightened reliance on contingent workers during the recession of 2008–2009, higher education has decreased its use of tenured and tenure-track faculty.

Therefore, any academic must be particularly devoted to pursuing this path, relinquishing at times their youth, family time, childbearing years, and even higher-paying jobs to engage in a tenure process that creates a particularly humbling experience professionally. Specifically, Keashly and Neuman's (2010) comments aligned with Einarsen and Mikkelsen (2003) that one of the more frequent types of workplace bullying is how faculty members threaten professional status for targets, isolate targets, or obstruct a target's ability to achieve important goals and milestones. Therefore, this analysis may provide insight as to why junior faculty members leave an institution after sacrificing close to a decade to earn that tenure-track position and then compete for tenure.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Considering this power differential between junior faculty and those granting tenure, logically junior faculty would be subject to workplace bullying. To address this, I conducted a data collection via SurveyMonkey™ with a thirty-question instrument that focused on graduate students, junior faculty, and other members of The Academic Ladder, a writing club led by Dr. Gina Hiatt. The data collection occurred in late fall 2016 and early 2017. Descriptive statistics were utilized in the data analysis.

This recent study on bullying and cyberbullying,  $n = 257$ , included forty-seven junior or untenured faculty. The majority of junior faculty members were ages thirty-one to forty-nine across all academic disciplines. Of the respondents, 61.7% were white/Caucasian, and 94% of the junior faculty respondents in this sample were women.

**Table 1. Demographics**

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62% White/Caucasian
17% Black. African American
8% Asian/ Pacific Island
7 % Latino/ Hispanic

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Further, this study collected data from participants across the globe. Though the majority of the respondents were from the United States, 22% of respondents were from other countries. See table 2.

**Table 2. Multinational Participants**

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80% United States	1% Denmark
6% Canada	1% Belgium
2% South Africa	1% Sweden
2% China	1% Australian
2% Germany	.5% from following countries: India,
2% United Kingdom	Lebanon, Mexico, Nigeria

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## The Study

To consider the frequency of workplace bullying for presumably the most vulnerable positions in higher education, the following central research questions were developed and posed to junior faculty and graduate students in late 2016, early 2017. These questions were addressed through descriptive statistics.

RQ1 What is the frequency of workplace bullying for junior faculty and graduate students?

RQ2 Does workplace bullying influence career decisions for junior faculty and graduate students?

## THE FINDINGS

To address research question one (RQ1), the frequency of reported workplace bullying among this group is 62.7 %, which is consistent with previous studies at two-year and four-year colleges (Hollis, 2016). Within the group of untenured faculty, 52% perceived that untenured faculty members are most likely to be the target, more so than other positions such as dean, department chair, or other administrators.

To address research question two (RQ2) when asked if bullying influenced their careers, 44% specifically stated they were trying to leave higher education. See table 3.

**Table 3. Impact bullying has on junior faculty career trajectory**

I tried to leave (applied for job and/or interviewed)	28%
I think about leaving, but there are few positions	44%
I am considering leaving higher education	32%
The problem isn't bad enough for me to leave	26%

The instrument also posed opened-ended questions that garnered the following remarks on how junior faculty members felt bullied. When asked about workplace bullying, one assistant professor remarked, “[I was] told I have stupid ideas, I am a dreamer, I am unrealistic” (personal communication, October, 2016). Another assistant professor remarked on lacking support on the job as a form of bullying. The respondent not only felt bullied by aggressive students but also felt ignored when asking for help to resolve the problem. The respondent commented, “Students use the Internet to harass and shame faculty into grades. The chair and dean allow this (they want to keep enrollment). Academic integrity isn't [the] goal—survival now is...” (personal communication, February 2017).

The perception of an apathetic administration continued when junior faculty reflected on how their respective organizations dealt with a known bully in the department. When asked, “How did the organization deal with a bully?” 80% of junior faculty stated the organization “did nothing.” See table 4.

**Table 4. Perceptions of junior faculty**


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Question: How did the organization deal with a bully?	
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Did nothing	80%
Coached the bully	16%
Fired the target	8%
Transferred target to another department	3%
Transferred the bullying to another department	4%

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These responses were consistent with other studies on workplace bullying in American higher education (Hollis, 2016). Participants also provided open-ended comments about how administration responded to bullying. See table 5.

**Table 5. Participants' comments about bullying**

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- Coordinator of the department joined the bullying. She is a weak person
  - In one case, [I] was told [it] was a cultural issue and should not object because the person's culture was hierarchical. Thus objecting to being talked down to and treated as a lesser person due to gender and relative academic position was being culturally insensitive.
  - Why recruit people to only haze them when they arrive?
  - I am AMAZED this is allowed to happen- wouldn't this affect our strive for R (Carnegie Research) ratings?
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Disengaged and unhappy employees result in the cost of lost productivity (Hollis, 2016). In this context, I recall a junior faculty member recounting how she felt bullied and also felt powerless to address it. She had received a message from a senior member of the department openly criticizing her in a department wide e-mail about a student advising issue. She felt embarrassed and shamed in front of her colleagues. Shame is a reflexive reaction that stalls someone's thinking, especially if the shame occurs in a public space (Hollis, 2016a; Kerfoot, 2007). This colleague spent fifteen minutes prior to a meeting and another forty-five minutes in that meeting ruminating and reflecting on how to best respond. Should she respond in kind? Ignore it? Tell the chair? Walk over to the sender? She spent sixty minutes on one incident. When one considers that the targets of workplace bullying on average spend approximately four hours a week dealing with a bully (Hollis, 2016), this calculates to five weeks a year lost in personnel hours strategizing about how to deal with a bully.

## DISCUSSION

Respondents in the fall 2016/winter 2017 data collection offered insight about why they leave after working so hard at an institution. For example, open-ended comments included that junior faculty felt that the administration “resolutely pretended that they were unaware of any issues” (personal communication, October, 2016). Another junior faculty member commented, “I am biding my time to get out of there—no growth” (personal communication, October, 2016).

The junior faculty perceptions of workplace bullying affect career trajectory, with some respondents commenting about being “unhappy and disengage[d].” One junior faculty member commented, “Makes wonder me why I am in education. This is a common experience in my department” (personal communication, February, 2017). Another junior faculty member remarked, “I have friends in other departments who cry a lot” (respondent personal communication, February, 2017). Despite these problems, faculty apparently felt silenced as 51% of respondents commented they were afraid to speak up to defend against bullying.

If a colleague endured this pressure of shaming and silencing through their junior faculty experiences, their leaving would not be surprising. The combination of these incidents created apathy for the department and for the institution that had allowed for aggressive bullying behaviors. In a reality that many face, that abusive and bullying behaviors in the academy are often covert and ignored (Twale & De Luca, 2008). In comparison, close to 70% of respondents said a positive attitude of colleagues and respect from colleagues could create a positive environment; nonetheless, the positivity of organizational peers did not alleviate the strain of a potential power differential between themselves as the target and the workplace bully. Disengagement, job searches, and other counterproductive work behaviors are the product of negative relationships between people at work (Samnani, et al., 2014). In short, those with more negative emotions for the job and negative work relationships are more likely to be counterproductive. Workplace bullying certainly contributes to these negative dynamics; yet supervision and management has the power to mitigate employees’ negative emotions with positive workplace relationships that can lead to increased faculty retention.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Survey campus climate, but protect anonymity: During campus visits to speak on workplace bullying, colleagues shared their experiences about administering campus client surveys and questionnaires to better understand why faculty leave, especially women faculty in the science, technology, engineering, and medical disciplines (STEM). Some administrators commented that 360 Evaluation reports are great; however, if the instrument included demographic questions that pinpoint departments and there is (for example) only one woman in the physics department, she would be highlighted by answering and often forgoes participation.
2. Practice equity in assigning resources and salary: Faculty should not be punished because one is a better negotiator (and hence got a higher salary). Organizations should be equitable in assigning resources and course loads. The practice of rewarding the most aggressive negotiator typically rewards the men. Less aggressive people should not be punished for being less aggressive. Inequity in pay sends a message to junior faculty that the ones with lower pay have lower value with the institution.

3. Maintain a faculty development office: Seasoned personnel and senior faculty can better support junior faculty in the face of disruptive students. Unless emerging from a teaching family or former teaching assistant position, many junior faculty members have not had formal training in classroom management. Feeling awkward and shamed in front of a class of energetic sophomores may not make for the best afternoon. Further, the higher-education culture has shifted to students being more demanding and aggressive. Some students shame faculty about classroom practices with Internet posts and public lists about faculty practices. Junior faculty can find this disconcerting at best. Seasoned faculty and department leadership can offer concrete strategies and departmental policy to support faculty managing difficult classrooms.
4. Maintain a visible ombuds office. Ombuds officers may or may not report to human resources. However, ombuds can be a neutral resource to help junior faculty navigate a contentious environment (Hollis, 2016b). Further, ombuds can collect data about trends, complaints, and turnover from respective departments. This data can be used to inform executives about emerging problems and hotbeds of bullying behavior on campus.

## CONCLUSION

Educators often enter the field for the love of serving students, the academic stimulation, and the opportunity to connect with rising scholars. Few enter the field anticipating making wages comparable to corporate sectors. However, the inspiration to teach and research can change to a need to defend one's well being in the wake of an aggressive boss who bullies the staff in need of career support and grooming. Leadership can stem the abuse through proper training, explicit policies prohibiting bullying, and additional personnel such as ombudsman. Without intervention from leadership and support from those with more power, junior faculty members are left defenseless in a very competitive and stressful field. Hence, as the power differential is exploited and turns abusive...this is when they leave.

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