

Faculty Under Attack

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The context in which faculty work today is different in significant ways from that of the past. Burstein (2016) argues that “the evolution of education as a state-sponsored enterprise has led to pressure for accountability to stakeholders beyond those directly involved in the educational enterprise--researchers, teachers and students” (p. 26). As public funding for state colleges and universities have faced dramatic cuts, they are increasingly dependent upon outside donors, individuals, foundations, and corporations. Barlow puts it bluntly, “the world of learning has become a wholly owned subsidiary of the corporate universe” (2016:2). This means that administrators now face greater pressure to respond to and satisfy demands coming from regents, boards, legislators, and donors threatening to withdraw funding when any public outcry or “crisis” arises.

Because of the growth of social media, it is now very easy to generate public outcry or create a “crisis” over things that would have been non-issues in the past. The Right is using social media to purposefully advance their political agenda, and attacking faculty that use teaching methods or curriculum that challenges that agenda in any way. “Trolling is the alt-right’s version of political activism” (Stein 2016:28). Under the guise of promoting free speech, many organizations and media on the Right are coordinating attacks meant to limit speech, limit academic freedom, and exert control over the curriculum. The individuals I talked to all felt it was an attempt to silence them. And in many cases they are successful.

Of course, faculty is only one group that has come under attack. According to Stein, 80 percent of writers for TIME magazine now avoid writing stories about certain topics due to fear of online harassment and abuse. Comments and threats that would never be made in person are common online. The security provided by anonymity and invisibility free people to release their anger, hatred, misogyny, racism and more. The ability to be heard by vastly more people than one can reach with any other method of communication provides a sense of empowerment and control for trolls (Stein 2016).

Under the guise of promoting free speech, the Right has twisted the meaning and use of various practices protected by academic freedom. For example, the University of Chicago’s letter to incoming students condemned the use of trigger warnings. The Right has reframed trigger warnings as an attempt to protect students from learning about potentially disturbing subject matter. The reality is the exact opposite: trigger warnings are a tool for warning students that the subject matter may be disturbing or highly emotional, so that those kinds of dialogues can then take place. Trigger warnings were initiated by faculty teaching about the reality of racism, sexism, oppression, and inequality (i.e. slavery, rape, lynching, etc.), subject matter that historically was not treated in depth, and that sectors of the Right would like to see eliminated from the curriculum. To advance these ends, they have turned to attacking individual faculty.

I have faced such attacks numerous times, sometimes far worse than others. Much of my research has focused on the Right and the white supremacist movement. The most significant attack I faced targeted me for my involvement in

the White Privilege Conference. Teaching about white privilege is more threatening than teaching about organized white supremacists (KKK, neo-Nazis, etc.) because it directly focuses on everyday, institutional, and cultural racism. As a result of this experience, I have reached out to others that have similarly come under attack to provide support. Our stories are remarkably similar, and we hope our collective knowledge can support other faculty and inform how Universities react. These attacks are occurring with more regularity and are not likely to stop. This is the world we inhabit today.

I have had conversations with five other women. Each has experienced both macro- and microaggressions as a result of the subject matter they specialize in. While the individual details of each person's case differs, we were each attacked via social media (some led to stories on Fox News television) for educating about subject matter at odds with right wing ideology (topics included human-made climate change, white privilege, and abortion).

These purposeful attacks are carried out in order to generate public attention, as well as to generate online harassment of the target in hopes of silencing them. Every case was planned and orchestrated. For example, in one case that developed out of a course discussion, the student appeared to be a mole for a right-wing online news site, put there specifically to challenge this professor, and come away with a statement they could use against the professor publicly. The student then dropped the course. Other cases took place at conferences, like the Annual White Privilege Conference, where "journalists" infiltrate each year and secretly record presentations and conversations (violating conference rules and, at times, the law).

Once published, even on relatively minor websites, each story went viral, and a wide range of online media all along the right-wing spectrum picked up the stories. In most of these cases, the stories were reprinted, verbatim, on Fox News' website, websites like Breitbart.com and The Blaze, as well as on the websites of white

supremacist/ nationalist organizations (websites such as Stormtrooper, or Destroy the Parasites). Social media facilitates organizations all along the spectrum of the Right Wing to pick up the stories, and bring far greater public attention to them. One story was taken on by Sean Hannity, who turned it into a debate on Fox News television. Some stories ended up in mainstream newspapers.

In each case, the publication of what was turned into a "story" immediately triggered a flood of harassing emails targeting the faculty member (140 to 200 in the first two days). In each case, the emails ranged from reprimands to the more frequent name-calling, harassment, abuse, and outright threats (i.e. fat cunt, traitor, Communist Jew pig, you deserve to be raped, you deserve what is coming to you, I know where you will be and I will be there).

The Attack

We all felt betrayed, violated, shocked, and vulnerable. We had materials such as syllabi, email correspondences, audio and video recordings, and presentations designed for a specific audience and a specific context, pulled out of context and shared with the world. We all felt both mental and physical trauma. One woman reflected that it took two months to move away from the physical manifestations. Some found it difficult to do anything for the first couple of days due to the shock, trauma, and flood of emails. Some felt their entire semester became a disaster and found it hard to focus on work. One person explained that for weeks afterwards they were just "trying to recover from having been laid out on the line." Someone else described it as "physically revolting, I still feel that physical response. When something triggers that experience, my mind goes to that place." This is something I can relate to, every time I discuss or write about this subject, I feel a knot in my stomach, and my entire body tightens.

The long-term impact continues. Numerous people characterized it as "never feeling safe.

You never know when something can happen.” The context of guns on campus made some people feel even less safe. One individual described horrible nightmares occurring even months after the event-- nightmares about being brutally attacked both physically and sexually. More than one of us has been fighting depression since the event. Most individuals also raised concerns about their family, especially their children. Three women expressed fears for their children’s safety, and a few worried about their mothers finding out about the attacks.

Anger was also common: anger that our lives faced such a significant disruption and became so difficult; anger that our reputations were being attacked; anger that the experience of teaching would never be the same; anger that we might never feel safe again; anger that this incident was changing us, and we would never again be the same. As one woman described it, “I never thought such brutality could come out of the classroom.” Another said, sadly, “I don’t expect people to do the right thing anymore.” Many described shock at the level of hatred and brutality that was so quickly aimed at them by strangers. It made us question many of our views: of education, politics, news, of the possibilities for civil discourse, and, more profoundly, our views of the world, of other people, of humanity.

Difference and Privilege

The experiences of vulnerability differed in some important ways. Two other women expressed feeling especially vulnerable because they had to read all of the abusive emails themselves. Other women had partners, or assistants, that volunteered to read them and report the threats to the police. One woman reflected that having an assistant who agreed to do this for her “allowed her to step out of the entanglement” and minimize some of the traumatic impact. Whether or not we had allies was also key. One woman reflected feeling let down by her colleagues, most of whom did not say anything about the incident at all. She only

had a couple of colleagues come up to her and ask her how she was doing. The lack of support from colleagues made the trauma all the more difficult to deal with. Another woman found that the tremendous support she received from friends and people who knew her work was amazing. Allies make a difference. In fact, “One...strategy now being employed on social media is to flood the victims of abuse with kindness” (Stein 2016).

Gender, class, and race always make a difference. Faculty that were not tenure-track felt their jobs, and their livelihood, were at risk (they had temporary, renewable contracts and at the end of any semester/ quarter, administrators could decide not to renew them, without any reason). One woman is a single mother supporting her family on the low pay contingent faculty receive.

All of the women expressed doubt that men faced this kind of abuse in the same situations. They are probably right. Stein found in his survey of writers at TIME magazine that “nearly half the women on staff have considered quitting journalism because of hatred they’ve faced online” (Stein 2016). None of the men had considered this. The majority of online harassment is performed by men, and targets women (whether journalists, celebrities, or faculty). The abuse thrown at women is often more brutal and sexual. Two of the women I spoke with saw a real difference in how men and women attacked them over e-mail, men using homophobia, misogyny, and writing about physical and sexual violence. The women were generally more civil and likely to reprimand them and express disappointment (of course, gender is often not clear, and can be altered online).

One of us is multiracial, the rest of us are white. Three women commented on their white privilege, observing that many people of color face this kind of harassment regularly, and that, when under attack, they faced the added dimension of racism. According to one woman, “I don’t experience fear every day I walk outside; it’s not something I have experienced before, as a result of my white privilege.” Another

observed, “I think about my daughter, but at the end of the day, she is a white girl” and does not face the daily dangers and threats boys and girls of color frequently do. For some of us, this trauma made us much more cognizant of the depth of trauma people of color face in our culture. When someone told me to just deal with it and move on, I thought about how often people of color are told to just ignore racist comments and jokes. I understand better now how the daily wounds of microaggressions add up to harassment, abuse, and often trauma.

Self-Censorship

We all knew that the goal of these attacks was to silence us. We struggled with that in different ways. Stein found that the people he talked to began employing various forms of self-censorship as a safety measure, whether decreasing their use of social media, or even changing careers to end the harassment and constant fear. Many of us were considering changes to our jobs. One woman thought, “I don’t get paid enough to deal with this.” Two women concluded that they only want to teach online, where they felt safer than face to face in a classroom. Another woman decided she only wanted to teach face to face classes. She expressed feeling more vulnerable online, and felt that “if the class were face to face, students would see me as a nice person, could see the real me” and would not be as aggressive. One woman decided she would no longer teach the same subject matter. Another concluded, “I’m done, I don’t want to do this job anymore, it makes me want to put less effort into my teaching.” Another reflected, “my intelligence was being attacked over and over again. This is my life, my livelihood, if it is not being valued in this job, I should put it to other use.” Alternatively, some of the women saw the attacks as a sign they were doing good work, and were effective at it. “I knew I really hit a chord, or people wouldn’t bother. In addition to the fear response, it was important to know I was doing something

important.” Another woman concluded, “I think about it [safety] now, I never had to before... and you know, if I go down doing this, that’s an okay way to go.”

Universities Respond

For most of us, the responses from our universities compounded the problems we face. A number of women felt it was clear that the University’s first concern was preventing a lawsuit and managing public relations. Some women felt their university expressed a very haphazard response, and plans seemed to change from one moment to the next. One person expressed frustration with the University’s expectations of her when they demanded she attend a meeting with just four hours’ notice. Another was asked to write a public response the university could use, and then felt it was edited to eliminate the points she felt were most important. Some administrators responded so harshly that faculty feared being reprimanded or even fired. “I did not get reprimanded but was made to feel like I was the cause of the problem.” Many of us were made to feel that we were harming the university’s reputation, and consuming inordinate amounts of administrators’ time. In other words, universities engaged in victim blaming. A number of women did not feel the university cared about their safety nor understood the traumatic impact of what they were experiencing. One woman asked, “why isn’t the university framing this abuse as abuse? Why are they legitimizing the complaint by taking it seriously?” Some felt the university did not prioritize their safety. One individual was told by an administrator that “now is not the time to talk about safety.” Another woman was concerned about her daughter’s fear for their safety. Her daughter asked, “How can the university not take care of you?” Another woman felt the university was ignoring the safety of other students in the classes, many of whom expressed fears. Another woman concluded, “the university

does not care about the Truth, they just want to put the fire out.”

Many of us felt that the only support we received was from our campus police department. In these cases, they were advised to turn over any threatening emails to them and they not only took our concerns seriously, but also expressed genuine care. All of the individuals were advised not to respond to any of the emails. While agreeing with this approach, one woman expressed frustration that her lack of response was being interpreted by harassers as an affirmation of their accusation.

Many universities do not understand the depth of abuse, trauma, and damage faculty under attack experience. Women wanted to share the following statements directly with universities:

“Campuses should have no tolerance” for this abusive discourse. They need to “take a stand. But because they are worried about lawsuits, they let faculty endure horrible hardships.”

“I want to feel I am being covered in that moment, and I did not.”

“Universities exist to pursue truth and serve the public good. In the climate we live in, universities need to seriously think about how to protect faculty on the receiving end.”

In only one case did a faculty member feel their university was supportive and treated her with concern and care: “I regularly thank them, because I know there are costs.” Universities do have to immediately respond to those they are beholden to: donors, boards or regents, and, if publicly funded, legislators and citizens. They also have to deal with student and parent complaints. Nevertheless, this need not occur at the expense of faculty. Below are a list of recommendations for universities and individuals, based on our collective experience and wisdom.

Recommendations for Universities

1. Be prepared with a protocol in place. Be proactive, not reactive.
2. Put safety first.
3. Universities should publicly condemn the form of the attack itself. Universities must support civil dialogue, and name abuse and harassment for what it is.
4. Provide faculty member with resources (who to call for help of various kinds) and information about what they may experience next.
5. Some people want to be kept in the loop and know what is going on, others don't-- honor that.
6. Provide someone to review emails (preferably someone in public safety who can recognize threats more easily) so the attacked faculty member does not have to. (Consider providing two different people, because just reading hundreds of emails of this type is disturbing).
7. Have presence of public safety in face to face classrooms where an attack has occurred, and offer faculty an escort on campus.
8. Ask faculty members what they need. Provide psychological services to faculty under attack.
9. Respect faculty members' desires for modification of future teaching responsibilities.
10. Treat the crises as immediate but also ongoing. The impact on faculty does not end after the fire is put out.
11. Do not individualize the problem. See these attacks as coordinated and planned. This is a systemic and cultural problem. Administrators across the nation should be discussing how to both prevent and deal with these incidents. They are not going to stop.
12. Learn from organizations with more experience in facing these challenges, such as: Southern Poverty Law Center, Planned Parenthood, Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights, etc. Part of

Planned Parenthood's goal is to respond with "Care and Compassion." This is something universities can learn from.

Advice for Individuals

(Some of these recommendations come directly from organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center, which face these kinds of attacks all the time and are experienced at risk assessment.)

1. Talk to police on campus and in your neighborhood. (this and the next two points must be assessed by the individual to determine the degree of safety they feel in contacting law enforcement)
2. If any threatening messages are received, report them to your local FBI office.
3. Someone must read every message, and identify those that seem threatening (give those to the campus police, local police, and FBI).
4. Save every message. Do not delete them. (Save them somewhere where you will not have to see them again).
5. Do not respond to emails ("responding would have done no good, it's like kicking a hornet's nest"). Harassers want you to engage with them. It can only make things worse.
6. You will need to vent. It is essential to find someone to talk to throughout this experience.
7. Seek support from people who know your work. (One woman suggests "Talk to people; spread the word. Let your community know what is going on so they can support you. Invest energy where useful and talk about it to good use").
8. It can be helpful to know others are dealing with this. Seek support from someone who has experienced this in the past.
9. Mindfulness practices were cited as very helpful by a couple of the women.
10. Take protective measures where you can. One person shut down her social media sites

so there was no public access. As a frequent speaker, she removed her calendar of future speaking engagements, and registered in hotels under a false name until she felt safer. For faculty members, class schedule and location may be public, so some of these measures cannot be taken. Consider asking for a campus police escort.

Throughout history, there have always been people willing to take great risks for larger, more meaningful goals or values. Most faculty members today have never thought they might have to make that choice. They shouldn't--universities have an obligation to not only protect academic freedom, but to protect faculty at the same time.

Abby Ferber specializes in privilege and intersectionality, the Far Right, and the construction of racial and gendered memory. She is widely published, and recently published the fourth edition of Privilege: A Reader, with Michael Kimmel. She is currently President of Sociologists for Women in Society, Treasurer of The Privilege Institute, and editor of the online journal Understanding and Dismantling Privilege.

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