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# Cyberbullying Within Higher Education: Has it Improved?

Social media has demonstrated its educational utility time and time again. Through its ability to assist educators and students in communicating and engaging with one another both on and off-campus, social media connects people in ways that were, until recently, impossible due to geographical, language, social, or other barriers. Clearly, it has evolved the platform of higher education and will continue to evolve it in unprecedented ways. At the same time, however, social media has also carved out a harmful niche in the fabric of society. It can be a dangerous tool, serving as a breeding ground for cyberbullying among users. Higher education is not immune to this problem. Just as social media is now part of the educational experience (Sarwar et al., 2019), cyberbullying is as well. How well are educators managing cyberbullying within higher education?

In a large (N=1587) international survey of higher education professionals, Luker and Curchack (2017) discovered that, regardless of their country of origin or institution type, most participants agreed that cyberbullying among college students was a negative behavior that often leads to negative outcomes; however, certainty about being able to successfully manage such a situation, or choosing to act at all, was another matter entirely. Despite recognizing that cyberbullying was bad, many of the participants from this study lacked self-confidence in the matter, indicating they felt unprepared to handle cyberbullying among students should a case be brought to their attention. In fact, only one in every 10 participants reported feeling “completely prepared” to handle cyberbullying if the problem was reported to them. Perhaps most shocking, however, was almost 11% of all participants reported they would “do nothing” if faced with a cyberbullying situation. A similar low vote of confidence was given to participants’ institutions.

When estimating the abilities of one’s institution, a stunning 85% of all participants from this international study lacked complete confidence in their institution’s ability to handle a cyberbullying situation (Luker & Curchack, 2017). Knowledge of the existence (or absence) of an official institutional cyberbullying policy was also disappointing. Just over half of participants (53%) were unsure if their institution even had a cyberbullying policy on record. Of those that did know, almost half (48%) reported that their institution did not have one.

These are just some of the many findings Luker & Curchack, 2017 found in their international survey of higher education professionals. Based on these findings, a plethora of possible scenarios and outcomes could occur for a student involved in cyberbullying within higher education. Management and resolution of cyberbullying could take a variety of different forms depending on the institution and individuals involved.

Since the initial investigation (Luker & Curchack, 2017), cyberbullying within higher education has become the focus of much scholarship, and institutions are taking the behavior seriously. Researchers are investigating cyberbullying from a variety of different angles, including its

consequences on one's mental health (Beduna, K. N., & Perrone-McGovern, K. M., 2019; Shenoy, 2019), its prevalence within higher education (Khan & Roshan, 2020; Pörhölä et al., 2020), perpetrator versus victim characteristics (Kanwal & Jami, 2019), etc. Some institutions are even working to eliminate cyberbullying behaviors before they begin by promoting training and education specifically aimed toward reducing occurrences (e.g., Barlett et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, despite efforts and scholarship geared toward understanding and eliminating cyberbullying behavior, some higher education professionals continue to feel less than completely prepared to handle such a situation if it were to occur (Corriveau, 2020). Research by O'Connor et al. (2018) highlighted that higher education institutions still lack consistent policies to specifically address cyberbullying. Perhaps students are realizing these inadequacies. Khan and Roshan (2020) found that students are not consistently reporting incidents to professionals at their respective institutions. Instead, "respondents more often report cyber harassment experience to family members and friends than to officials due to higher rate of satisfaction from the responses from the earlier than the later" (p. 80). It would behoove higher education to address these shortcomings.

Dr. Luker and Dr. Curchack are curious to investigate in more detail what has changed and what has stayed the same within higher education since 2017. A follow-up study is being planned to revisit the perceptions that higher education professionals have regarding cyberbullying among students. Do professionals still feel unprepared to handle cyberbullying among students? Corriveau (2020) suggests this is still the case within Minnesota. Have more institutions developed a policy on the matter? O'Connor et al. (2018) argue that more work is needed, at least within the midwestern United States. What about institutions abroad? The long-term impact of cyberbullying can be devastating for a student as well as for the reputation of the affiliated institution. Such outcomes underscore the importance of identifying and handling roadblocks to address cyberbullying within higher education.

## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Julie Luker is an assistant professor of psychology at Concordia University, St. Paul. Her academic background includes degrees in psychology and education. She earned her B.A. in Psychology from The University of St. Thomas and her M.A. in Cognitive and Social Processes from Ball State University. She then completed a graduate certificate in online instruction from The College of St. Scholastica, followed by an Ed.D. from Hamline University. In addition to teaching, Dr. Luker has consulted for institutions and organizations to design and develop course curriculum. She has authored and co-authored publications that investigate cyberbullying within higher education. In addition to her research on cyberbullying, Dr. Luker is initiating an oral history project that will capture and retain neighborhood histories within the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

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