A "First Responder" Plan for Online Harassment of Faculty
Office of Faculty Affairs and Success

Document History

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Rationale

In October 2020, The SSU Academic Senate passed a resolution reaffirming commitment to academic freedom and called on the Provost to develop a standing plan to respond to targeted online harassment. From the [October 2020 resolution](#):

> **Resolved**: that the SSU Academic Senate calls on the Provost to develop a standing plan for response to targeted online harassment that calls for the faculty member to be informed that Academic Affairs has been made aware of the harassment and intends to work with the targeted faculty member.

This is a standing plan to respond to the targeted harassment of faculty on issues pertaining to academic freedom. This plan is intended to occur alongside and in coordination with the standing plans of Strategic Communications with additional support and consultation from information technology, faculty governance, CFA, and Academic Personnel. The primary POC for this plan is the AVP for Faculty Affairs and Success.

The [AAUP reports](#) that between Nov 2016 and March 2018, it received over "100 reports of harassment" of faculty and "of these, 50 were instances of targeted harassment." Targeted online harassment disproportionately affects women, faculty of color, and scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Further, it is reasonable to believe such online harassment is under-reported.

At Sonoma State, faculty have shared personal experiences of targeted online harassment. For example, faculty were/are featured on TurningPoint's "Professor Watchlist" (a list compiled from Campus Reform, College Fix, and similar right-wing extremist outlets with the mission of "expos[ing] and document[ing] college professors who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom"); a faculty member has been doxxed (their personal information disclosed online by third parties, with the goal of precipitating harassment); and another faculty member learned their class content was being criticized on a Reddit thread for white supremacists (thus, making that faculty a target of white supremacists).

Priorities of Standing Response Plan

Priority 1: Immediate support and consultation.

In the instance that Academic Affairs learns of targeted harassment of a faculty member, the AVP for Faculty Affairs and Success, on behalf of the Provost, will immediately contact the faculty member and offer individualized consultations and resources of support. The focus of the initial consultations with the faculty member will be information gathering and gaining a full understanding of the scope of harm. In situations of targeted harassment, it is often the case that the faculty member's views or teaching practices are misrepresented, taken out of context, or completely fabricated. The consultation should be a supportive space for the faculty member to provide this crucial context and will help shape the next steps for resources and a plan for response.

Priority 2. Connecting with Resources and Coordinating Response Efforts

Based on the initial consultations, the AVP for Faculty Affairs and Success will assist the faculty member in identifying response and support resources. These include but are not limited to police services, human resources, information technology, SSU STAR (and their faculty advisor), associated students, CSU general counsel, free legal resources, the Office for the Prevention of Harassment and Discrimination (OPHD) and CTET. For example, the AVP for Faculty Affairs and Success will be prepared to locate assistance in removing the faculty's contact information from public directories and Sonoma State websites. To ensure consistency of support, the AVP for Faculty Affairs and Success will navigate resources in partnership with the faculty member, rather than simply providing them with a printed list.

Academic Affairs will closely coordinate with strategic communications, academic personnel, Deans, and Department Chairs to ensure consistency of messaging. AVP for Faculty Affairs and Success will also closely monitor communications, press responses and work to diffuse any that exacerbate the situation.

AVP for Faculty Affairs and Success will assist the faculty member in documenting and preserving all evidence such as emails, social media messages, phone calls, comments, postings, and personal threats. If the faculty member would rather not see these messages, the AVP for Faculty Affairs and Success will offer to handle this task.

Ongoing Strategies for Response and Prevention

Strategy 1. Institutionalize this plan

This plan is a new response and prevention plan for the campus. Faculty do not know who to contact in cases of targeted harassment. They will probably contact a Dean or Chair, rather than this plan's POC. As such, AVP for Faculty Affairs and Success will institutionalize the plan through these routine actions:

a.) Maintain a web page that explains that the AVP for Faculty Affairs and Success is the POC for handling incidents of online harassment (for both faculty being affected and for others who may want to report).
b.) Communicate with Deans and chairs that the AVP for Faculty Affairs and Success is the POC for helping faculty in relevant situations. Identify appropriate resources for chairs.
c.) Partner with AFS to help educate faculty that an office is prepared to help respond to incidents of online harassment.
d.) Periodically communicate to Strategic Communications that contacting the Provost's office is part of their 'playbook' when media requests are received concerning cases where academic freedom or online harassment of faculty are involved.

Strategy 2. Annual update and review

This plan shall be updated annually by the AVP for Faculty Affairs and Success and made available to stakeholders (e.g., AFS) for review.

Additional Resources

These resources may be helpful to future implementers for reference and guidance.

- Faculty First Responders: https://facultyfirstresponders.com
- AAUP Webinar on Faculty First Responders
- Example Campus Harassment Response and Prevention Plan from UMass

Templates for adequate responses to online harassment

Example 1

Faculty speech is protected by the First Amendment, by the American Association of University Professors's (AAUP) principles of academic freedom, and by our university policies, including our Faculty Bill of Rights. We trust that our faculty engage in speech—inside the classroom, in their research, and in the public sphere—that is well-reasoned, principled, and deliberate.

However, we live in a world in which centuries of injustice have left much to be frustrated and angry about. If our faculty member decided to express him/her/them-selves in a manner deemed harsh by others, we assume they did so with good reason.

Soure: Dr. Paolucci Callahan

Example 2

Professor X is an expert in the study of Y, a respected scholar, outstanding teacher, and a valued member of our Seawolf community. We therefore have taken her at her word when she explained to us that XXXX story offers a gross misrepresentation of her work, and the broader academic field in which these arguments are situated.

Soure: Dr. Paolucci Callahan

Example 3

Context: The Syracuse Chancellor responded to the false accusation that a professor was calling for violence with a similar [statement](#).

They insist that the University -- and that I -- denounce, censor, or dismiss the professor for her speech. [...] I can't imagine academic freedom or the genuine search for truth thriving here without free speech. [...] Our faculty must be able to say and write things -- including things that provoke some or make others uncomfortable -- up to the very limits of the law.

Example 4

Context: When statements from a convocation speaker were replayed on Campus Reform, Fox News and elsewhere, Hampshire College released a [statement](#).

We are appalled by the vicious and explicitly racist, misogynistic and homophobic threats being directed against Professor Taylor in response to her remarks. And we condemn the actions of those who are inciting violence by willfully taking information out of context and fanning the flames of prejudice and hate.

Examples of inadequate responses to online harassment

Bad Example 1

A NYU spokesperson responded to an adjunct profoessor's participation in a protest, stating:

> NYU opposes the views that have been reported: the University abhors violence, rejects calls for violence, has longstanding ties to Israel — including a campus there — and is opposed to acts of vandalism on the public transit system, which is needed and shared by all New Yorkers. […] It is, however, the case that among the thousands of part-time faculty we hire each year, some will disagree with NYU's positions.

Why is it bad? (Source: https://facultyfirstresponders.com)

- NYU was accepting the narrative claim of what happened. In doing so, it reinforces claims about the professor's relationship to violent protest.
- It insinuates that the professor is antisemitic.
- It also clearly sends the message that "part-time faculty" at NYU are not considered equal members—and therefore not afforded the same protections as other faculty.

Bad Example 2

The president of Texas A&M responded to a 2017 attack on a prominent philosophy professor, stating:

> As you may know, a podcast interview by one of our professors that took place approximately four and a half years ago resurfaced this week on social media, seen for the first time by many of us. The interview features disturbing comments about race and violence that stand in stark contrast to Aggie core values – most notably those of respect, excellence, leadership and integrity – values that we hold true toward all of humanity.

Why is it bad? (Source: https://facultyfirstresponders.com)

- It assumes that the professor was actually advocating violence. In fact, he was describing a long tradition of Black communities relying on self-defense in instances when police departments failed to prevent (or actively promoted) violence against Black people. This quote was dug up by a right-wing blogger, misconstrued, and then launched into the right-wing media ecosystem.
- The president of Texas A&M could have noted that anti-Black violence, systemic racism, and the police's complicity in it—namely what the professor was actually denouncing—is what should be condemned.
- Instead, assuming that the professor advocated violence against white people simply adopts the false script narrated by the group harassing the professor.

Bad Example 3

The president of Boston University released a statement after a faculty member was attacked for statements interpreted as being racist against white students.

> Boston University does not condone racism or bigotry in any form and we are committed to maintaining an educational environment that is free from bias, fully inclusive, and open to wide-ranging discussions. We are disappointed and concerned by statements that reduce individuals to stereotypes on the basis of a broad category such as sex, race, or ethnicity. I believe Dr. Grundy's remarks fit this characterization

Why is it bad? (Source: https://facultyfirstresponders.com)

- This statement adopts the harasser's incorrect assumption that "white" is a natural racial category, rather than a social construct. As such, the university adopts the false claim: criticizing whiteness is a form of "stereotyping" an individual based on natural traits.
- Had the administration taken time to understand how sociologists actually understand race and whiteness they could have avoided reducing the professor's comments to the non-scholarly, partisan usage deployed by harassers.

Bad Example 4

Sonoma State University released a statement after a faculty member was attacked for course content interpreted as being insensitive:

> A spokesperson for Sonoma State, XXXX, told The College Fix via email that the university "is working to determine the most appropriate way to address the concerns raised while still protecting the rights of everyone involved."

Why is this bad?

- It insinuates that one party's concerns need to be addressed, legitimizing those concerns (implicitly).
- It suggests that academic freedom conflicts with what might be the administration's desired way to resolve conflicts. Academic freedom should be one of the goals of the institution, rather than viewed as an impediment to resolving conflicts.