Blog from the Chronicle of Higher Education on Mobbing

June 11, 2009

'Mobbing' Can Damage More Than Careers, Professors Are Told at Conference

Washington — It probably wouldn’t be that hard for faculty members to imagine that academic mobbing — a form of bullying in which members of a department gang up to isolate or humiliate a colleague — could derail their careers. But a discussion of the phenomenon today at the American Association of University Professors’ international conference on globalization, shared governance, and academic freedom illustrated that the consequences can be much worse.

The session, based on a paper titled “Mobbing as a Factor in Faculty Work Life,” began with a gripping story about how colleagues and administrators had ganged up on a highly productive tenured professor — think of being subjected to a stream of trumped-up complaints, ousted from an office, shut out of departmental meetings and committees, accused of an affair with a graduate student, and more. The professor was eventually fired and almost immediately afterward died of a stroke brought on by the stress of it all.

The story, actually a composite of the real-life experiences of several professors who were victims of mobbing, was written by Joan E. Friedenberg, a professor of bilingual education at Florida Atlantic University who herself has experienced academic mobbing. Collapsing many stories into one, she said, allows her to better communicate “the feelings of bewilderment and dread that victims of mobbing feel.”

Ms. Friedenberg and the paper’s co-authors, Mark Schneider, an associate professor of sociology at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, and Kenneth Westhues, a professor of sociology at the University of Waterloo, presented their research at today’s session. Mr. Westhues, who discussed his
studies of academic mobbing with *The Chronicle* in 2006, also offered a handout that included a list of 16 indicators of mobbing. Among them: If rumors are circulating about the target’s supposed misdeeds, if the target is excluded from meetings or not named to committees, or if people are saying the target needs to be punished formally “to be taught a lesson,” it’s likely that mobbing is under way.

But victims should not assume that notifying an administrator will help. Evidence suggests that administrators may find it easier to become part of a mob than to try to stop one, Mr. Schneider said. That’s because administrators are likely to think it’s better to have one person upset with them than a group. And faculty associations, he said, can’t really “confront and expose mobbing unless they are very strong.”

Ms. Friedenberg added that administrators should be forewarned that mobbing can have a boomerang effect on them: Some victims are “driven by detail and an intense need for justice,” she said, and may launch a “significant counterattack.” —Audrey Williams June

Comments

I figured there were others experiencing the same treatment I have received from a disrespectful group of nonproductive faculty that hate anyone who wants to do more than the status quo or supports the new dean who was hired to make change, but I did not realize there was a name for it. I regret everyday leaving my last college, and I log on every other day hoping to find a new one where motivated and caring senior faculty are the norm. Thanks for the therapy.

— sickofit Jun 11, 10:32 PM  #

This is a very important subject, and I’m pleased to see it receiving attention. I recommend Prof. Westhues’ comprehensive website, which I’ve visited on many occasions for insight and understanding.

It’s well worth noting that students can be victims of institutional mobbing.
as well as faculty and staff. Suicide is sometimes the tragic result in extreme cases, but extreme cases can also go in the other direction, toward violent lashing-out from a sense of desperation, abuse, and revenge. It therefore behooves even those who don’t see this as an important moral issue to give it serious attention, for institutional self-protection if for no other reason. Many of the free speech cases that organizations like FIRE deal with, for example — cases that blow up in the institutions’ faces — really result from a kind of political mobbing. Responsible academics of all stripes should learn to recognize the mobbing dynamic and step forward to shut it down when it appears.

— RJO  Jun 11, 11:17 PM  

Thanks for this article

— a friend of one who was mobbed  Jun 12, 01:41 AM  

Mobbing seems to be part of a wider phenomenon of dysfunctional group solidarity (gang behavior really). A long-running blog in the UK-based Times Higher Education Supplement points to university administrators simply closing ranks to bully bothersome people of any kind, including those bullied by colleagues. Other bureaucracies seem to show the same feature: high schools, local government and the (UK) National Health Service. Remind the individuals concerned that they live in a society governed by centuries of evolved common law: sue and publicize for the damage caused. Also, these groups are often not very competent and, with a little patience and imagination, can be embarrassed and deterred on the basis of their own rules and procedures.

— AWD  Jun 12, 05:39 AM  

Not to trivialise the important matters discussed in this article, but when my eye fell on “a form of bullying in which members of a department gang up to isolate or humiliate a colleague,” the first thought that came to my mind was “tenure review process.”
This is simply playground/sandbox bullying in academic clothing.

True leaders stop mobs. It doesn’t just have to be a department head. A few colleagues can stop the worst damage just by speaking up and calling it what it is.

How is this form of bullying any different than the sort of bullying that happens in other jobs? As humans, we are group-oriented by nature. Thus, like a pack of wolves, we seek out those who are weak and gang up on them. We must learn to play the political game if we hope to survive at work. The need to play the political game particularly well is especially important in academia. I have worked in numerous environments (hospitals, retail, military, etc…) and I have never worked in a more political climate. In short, if you hate political games, don’t take a job in academia. If you play politics particularly well you will be more than happy in academia. In fact, you will probably rise to become a President. That is the nature of the beast.

Columbia U.’s School of Social Work operates by mob rule. Faculty or students who question mismanagement are systematically ostracized. It’s a perfect storm of a second-rate academic field meeting a brand-focused university.

Very interesting, I’ll pay closer attention to the behaviors of my peers to see if this phenomenon exists at my University.

I had this experience at my last institution. Resolving it was hopeless as administration would not even discuss the issue with me. I have since left. My health has improved, I increased my salary by 43% and my new colleagues are for the most part the best I have ever had the
privileged to work with. If you are this kind of sick environment your only sane option is to get out.

— Living well is best revenge  Jun 12, 08:57 AM  

In yesterday’s Chronicle, there was an article about how to deal with a faculty member who appeared to be emotionally disturbed. Anyone who has spent time in academia has met more than a few such people. While “mobbing” as described above is unfair and hurtful (especially anonymous allegations of misconduct), keeping someone ‘out of the loop’ is sometimes a rational response to individual (often tenured) faculty who are needlessly disruptive, damaging to the climate of a department, complain constantly about everything, and who operate by their own set of rules.

— David S  Jun 12, 09:04 AM  

Unfortunately, I’ve seen this happen with both faculty and administrators. Commenter # 6 suggests that true leaders stop mobs, but I’ve witnessed the case where the leaders are the cause. Usually jealousy is behind this behavior. Thanks for bringing this to light.

— Administrator  Jun 12, 09:16 AM  

Oh, my. The Wisconsin system, at least in a couple of their campuses allows mobbing. I do know of at least one occasion when a ‘system’ administrator participated in the mobbing at one of the campuses. The Wisconsin system has no controls in place to put the stops to administrators hell bent on mobbing. The current research and presentations permit light to shine on these ugly and mean-spirited practices. #11: I agree that there could be such personalities operating in any system but it is sometime difficult to tell how much of a person’s strange behavior is actually just his/her personality or how much of the behavior is related to a crappily-administered and dysfunctional department, college, university.

— Ann  Jun 12, 09:17 AM  

In Wikipedia, mobbing is often referred to as “consensus.”
John’s post in No. 6 is spot on. It is beyond comprehension that this is how the most ‘educated’ (term used loosely) among us can behave.

Before graduate school I held a data processing/programming position in a factory. The interpersonal politics outlined in this article are the same, if not worse, than those I observed in a very non-academic environment.

Thuggery at its finest!

I have proof of mobbing. The justice Sudies association banned me! In their letter to me it was stated “…you make too many people uncomfortable”. An academic can be silenced in a supposedly PROGRESSIVE association in 2009!

As long as faculties are largely composed of irresponsible, cowardly, careerist professors lacking the courage to speak truth to power, “mobbing” and intellectual corruption will always be the norm in higher education. Just take a look at those who have commented here. How many have not dared to even use their entire names? The situation is worsening. Vigorous debate, cornerstone of democracy, has been replaced by PC and diversity/multiculturalism on far too many campuses and implanted in the minds of far too many professors. My reaction to having been “mobbed” was not to croak, but rather to create (publishing since 1998) an entire literary journal devoted to democracy and dissidence. The state college where the “mobbing” (general silence and indifference is a form of “mobbing”) occurred is named in every issue of the journal: Fitchburg State College (MA). And the journal is on the shelves of institutions including Harvard, Brown, Buffalo, and Yale. Thus, Fitchburg State is also upon those shelves and in a highly negative light. Thank you, Chronicle, for not censoring my comments. One of your competitors
has been censoring them.

G. Tod Slone, PhD and Founding Editor The American Dissident: Journal of Literature, Democracy & Dissidence A 501 c3 Nonprofit Providing a Forum for Vigorous Debate, Cornerstone of Democracy www.theamericandissident.org 1837 Main St. Concord, MA 01742

— G. Tod Slone  Jun 12, 09:39 AM  

Now I have a name to put to what happened to me many years ago. I was “lucky” in that the institution had a strong faculty advocate who stepped in for me between the dean, chair and department. When it became clear that I would not resign, and that they were going to have to grant me tenure, the faculty voted to close the program in which I taught. But I got a full year of salary and graduate courses covered.

Yet without this advocate I would have had to resign, and be faced with a personnel file containing lies about work output, and other inappropriate behavior which never occurred.

— Carl  Jun 12, 09:39 AM  

I bet there is a gendered aspect to this phenomenon. A bunch of secretly scared scholars who use bullying and stances of intellectual superiority and righteousness to hide their insecurities. So, to keep the critical gaze of their peers off of them they organize and graft their fears onto someone they perceived as weaker or outside the bounds of normative male academic decorum.

— Brian  Jun 12, 09:40 AM  

Academic incivility was common at the last institution I was at. The Faculty Council too often gave the floor to a few tenured faculty members who ranted about how their academic freedom and leadership potential was being usurped by their enemy for that particular semester. Their “enemy” was always another faculty member who had the distinction of being highly productive. In
between faculty council meetings, they carried out their rants at smaller meetings or in “special” meetings of their senior faculty group. One by one the targets of their incivility left the institution, including me. Then they turned their venom on the vice president and skulked off to the college president with a list of complaints. (The president of this college, unfortunately, is known to reward such behavior.) The result of this academic incivility (or mobbing if you prefer) has been a dramatic decrease in enrollment, low faculty morale, and loss of potentially good new faculty who all leave as soon as an opportunity opens for them. The ringleaders of this group in the meanwhile have been promoted to full professor and appear to be safe from any repercussions for their behavior. They continue to have the floor of the full faculty council to conduct their mobbing. This is not so much acceptance by the rest of the faculty as it is a sign that the habit of incivility toward colleagues is so inbred that it goes unnoticed by everyone but the victims. If this was once a good place, I don’t know. I spent my first two years looking for a new job and left as soon as I found one.

— Helen  Jun 12, 09:56 AM  

Excellent comments. Sometimes mobbing can be more subtle, including changes in campus culture especially those that reward mediocrity. Since I am not a biologist, I cannot verify if this is true. I heard that when one catches crabs, all you have to do is put them in a bucket. A cover is not needed. If one tries to escape, the other crabs will reach up and pull it back in.

— seen_it_too  Jun 12, 10:04 AM  

Um, well, perhaps I will be mobbed by the contributors to this forum for expressing a contrarian view but need to raise this issue. How does the victim tell the difference between “mobbed” for reasons unrelated to competence and performance and being criticized and ostracized for being impossible to get along with, emotionally hypersensitive, exhibiting mediocre performance or other at least semi-legitimate reasons? In both cases, if the standard of determination is the
subjective experience of the “victim”, it will feel the same. The victim is in a particularly ambiguous position for making the judgment about whether s/he is being bullied vs receiving the standard reaction given in academia (where judgments of the quality of performance are inherently subjective and so vulnerable to interpretation and debate in the extreme) to colleagues who aren’t pulling their weight. It COULD be happening, but the fact that the victim THINKS it is happening doesn’t mean it is by definition so; there is a judgment call involved. This makes intervention by others outside the possibly-bullying system incredibly awkward, unless they enter the system and gather evidence first hand. Are we blaming the victim or offering an out for every colleague who feels unappreciated? The key question is: what are the data? And the answer can’t be: it is so because I feel it is so, a necessary but not sufficient condition.

— lily Jun 12, 10:14 AM

Administrators can also be victims of mobbing, even by those who report to them. Unpopular decisions may earn retaliation in the form of mobbing until the victim resigns.

— Jeanne Jun 12, 10:20 AM

this was exactly what happened when I was at Southern. it was a very abusive relationship, with the acting chair frequently screaming at me simply because i would not do grade changes. evidently the department didn’t like the fact that i had published a new book, and ganged up on me day after day. i found my self giving my best effort in a city that i did not know, and students complaining, usually with automatic success, that i had arrived one or two minutes late to class or that i had “cancelled” class—which meant that i had closed class early, and they had showed up for class 50 minutes after the start time.

— raj Jun 12, 10:23 AM

Lily, I understand your point but having well qualified colleagues that have experienced “mobbing”, it is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. Putting our heads in the sand and saying victims may just
be incompetent is not the answer.

— Kyle David  Jun 12, 10:24 AM  #

I believe jealousy by colleagues who are lazy or complacent is sometimes a cause of mobbing. I published a lot, edited journals, won a fulbright, did a lot of things to get my institution recognized in positive ways, but was mobbed by colleagues who didn’t want to put forth the effort. While on my fulbright, my office was “taken over” (and not “returned” to me) and I was given shared space upon my return “temporarily”, and was treated shabbily in other ways. I ended up leaving because it was obvious the administration wasn’t going to do anything; my dean even suggested I not try to “show up” my colleagues “so much”.

I have to thank them, in some ways, because the university that hired me APPRECIATED me and my efforts and accomplishments and encouraged me to continue. The difference was night and day.

— anonymous-2  Jun 12, 10:30 AM  #

These experiences seem to me to argue for a strong and objective (read: organizationally independent) ombudsperson and internal audit functions. Complaints should be investigated formally and either substantiated or formally refuted.

Often times the problems are specific and it is not a case of a faculty member being entirely incompetent or dishonest, but who has a blind spot that needs reform.

For instance, there are faculty who bring in healthy and prestigious grants but think this gives her/him the right to spend funds as s/he pleases because the money is there, ignoring very specific guidelines. Such persons are frequently enormously talented, and with a few adjustments ought to be allowed to carry on with their illustrious careers.

But insightful, expert, sensitive, fact-finding is necessary to pinpoint
shortcomings—or firmly refute them.

The overwhelming majority of faculty are amenable to the changes needed, and certainly their imperfections are no worse than those the rest of us could have easily fallen into.

— greeneyeshade  Jun 12, 10:37 AM  

Unfortunately, if you have been in academia for a long time you have probably witnessed instances of this kind of behavior. Part of the problem is that a great many faculty have big egos coupled with a lot of insecurity, which tends to make them paranoid. I’ve known faculty members who would feel they were being mobbed if they didn’t carry the day at a faculty meeting, so you always have to consider the source. I have also seen jealousy lead to productive and effective faculty being ganged up on, especially in the context of P&T. And yes, administrators have been mobbed, but having a thick skin is part of what it takes to survive in an administrative position where those you are supposed to be leading are quite likely as smart and as accomplished as you are, but may not have your thick hide.

— CW  Jun 12, 10:41 AM  

Wow, so I’m not alone! I experienced every one of the 16 “mobbing” symptoms described, and it was hell. The department chair formed and led the mobs to ensure no opinions contrary to his would even get expressed. The mostly non-tenured faculty went right along with it, some because they enjoyed the constant drama and others because they were in fear for their own jobs.

Every single faculty member who expressed an idea or opinion the chair didn’t like was warned to keep quiet in future or become a mob victim. Faculty and students were required to shun the mobbing target or become a target themselves.

Everyone unwilling to go along with this behavior eventually left the department; and thankfully I too got out. Now I’m in a very supportive environment and my old department is happily of only one
mind and opinion on all issues.

The university administration would do nothing about even the most egregious behavior because they wanted to always support the department chair. Thank goodness for the AAUP which put a stop to many of the “punishments” the mob tried to inflict.

Students too became targets if they spoke out. Even lawsuits with big financial payouts to past students couldn’t get the administration to put a stop to this behavior. I’m just grateful that in spite of the mob’s attempt to destroy me in my profession I was able to get out and get elsewhere. My health is slowly improving.

What hypocrisy that such mob behavior, gossip, rumours and lies are so tolerated and supported in academia, where we’re supposed to care about facts, truth, and free expression of different points of view.

— Chris  Jun 12, 10:44 AM

Mobbing and bullying in academe are serious problems. Ken Westhues and others have been at the forefront of documenting and analyzing this problem.

For those who would like more sources, blog commentaries, etc., the following entries from my blog “Minding the Workplace” will be helpful:


http://newworkplace.wordpress.com/2009/06/01/more-on-bullying-academe/

David Yamada Professor of Law and Director, New Workplace Institute Suffolk University Law School, Boston

— David Yamada  Jun 12, 10:45 AM

To #21: You make a good point. I think the answer is in HOW criticism is
handled. Most victims of mobbing or incivility have been the recipients not of personal, constructive criticism, but of unfounded public rants by (as #26 suggests) complacent, minimally productive faculty. When a rant begins, a good leader knows to stop it. He or she reminds the faculty as a whole of the mission of the college, the goals of the meeting, and suggests that tone be kept civil and that facts and not feelings be discussed. In the absence of an appointed leader, other senior faculty should assume this leadership role. What actually happens, however, is that the bully (or group of bullies) has carte blanche to rant on and on about the victim. Usually, the rest of the faculty sit there silently and never voice the need for collegial and civil interaction if the college is to function well (or at all). I personally believe that a great deal of incivility and/or mobbing could be avoided by the presence of strong and effective leadership, whether the leader is appointed to this role or assumes this role. In reality, those doing the mobbing believe they are not only the leaders but the best leaders civilization has ever seen. A bully is usually a severely damaged individual and his or her energy source is the joy of belittling and hurting others. They are not going to stop so rules for civil behavior have to become the norm of the college. I think, dear #21, that the difference between mobbing and constructive criticism is the difference between incivility and civility in the manner of approach.