Policy Statement on Online Harassment

Academic staff are vulnerable to online harassment that undermines academic freedom and free expression.

Definition

Online harassment encompasses single events and concerted ongoing campaigns. It includes:

- sending abusive, vexatious or threatening comments or displays to a person or persons, and/or encouraging others to do the same,
- circulating or posting malicious or defamatory comments and material about a person or persons,
- engaging in online impersonation by circulating in the name of another person material that is embarrassing, inflammatory, or illegal, and
- sending pornography or other graphic material to a person or persons that is known or ought reasonably be known to be offensive.

Online harassment does not include the sharp expression of conflicting ideas within the parameters of generally accepted academic discourse.

Harm

Online harassment can force the subject of attack to withdraw from social, academic and political activities, negatively affecting career advancement and personal well-being, and curtailing academic freedom and free expression. Academic staff engaged in controversial or unpopular areas of study, and those from traditionally marginalized groups, are particularly subject to online harassment.

Immediate Response – Preservation of Evidence

A common first reaction to online harassment is to delete the offending material, destroying proof of harassing activity. Individuals who are subject of online harassment should:

- keep a written record of all harassing activity, and
- preserve unedited/unaltered in both electronic and print form (if possible) all offending communications including emails, text messages, comments, blog posts, social media posts, tweets, and voice mail messages.

Notifying the Institution

Academic institutions are contractually, legally and ethically obligated to protect staff from abuse and intimidation, and also have a positive obligation to protect the academic freedom of staff. Institutions can advise on appropriate responses to online harassment and provide support on IT matters, personal security and general legal rights. Those subject to online harassment should:

- notify the department chair, unit head, or equivalent of the problem and request support,
- independently, or in coordination with the department chair, unit head, or equivalent, notify more senior levels of administration and request support, and,
- if warranted, independently or in coordination with other levels of administration, notify campus security or local police services and request support.

DRAFT

If the harassment relates to matters that are protected in (or ought to be protected in) human rights legislation, individuals subject to harassment should also:

- notify the campus human rights/equity office.

Notifying the Association

Individuals subject to online harassment should also notify their academic staff association and request support. Associations can:

- explain and enforce relevant collective agreement rights, including rights related to harassment, discrimination and academic freedom,
- advise on the processes and services available from the administration, and
- mobilize broader political support.

Online harassment targets not just the individual subject to attack, but the core values associated with academic life, including academic freedom, free expression and freedom from discrimination. Those subject to such harassment must receive the full support of the institution as a whole.

New draft policy statement approved by the
CAUT Academic Freedom and Tenure Committee, March 2019.
New draft policy statement approved by the CAUT Executive Committee, June 2019.

DRAFT