

New policy at UW-Madison aims to discourage faculty bullying



3 HOURS AGO • BY [PAT SCHNEIDER](#)

Derogatory remarks. Unwarranted physical contact. Sabotage of a colleague's work. Use of threats or retaliation in the exercise of authority.

Sounds like seriously bad behavior in the workplace, especially for faculty at Wisconsin's flagship university.

But Soyeon Shim, dean of the School of Human Ecology, says she has heard of many incidents fitting one or all of those behaviors at UW-Madison.

This kind of bullying is not limited to UW-Madison, or to academics, Shim stresses.

"It's human behavior. It's everywhere," she says.

But the occurrence of such hostile and intimidating behavior at a university threatens the fundamental tenet of academic freedom that allows faculty to search for and express truth in individual ways, Shim says.

"Lack of respect or making someone feel unwelcome or unable to voice their opinions goes against academic freedom. You should be able to voice your opinion without being threatened or sabotaged in promotion," she says.

"I was looking for a way to deal with those issues and I couldn't find any procedure or assistance," Shim says.

And Shim, who came to UW in 2012 from University of Arizonam says that's unusual. "The gap in the system I noticed as a new person made me think we need to do something about this."

Shim joined forces with Francois Ortalo-Magné, dean of the Wisconsin School of Business, to start work on a policy defining bullying and setting up informal and formal processes to deal with it.

As relative newcomers to the campus – Ortalo-Magné arrived at UW-Madison in 2001 from the London School of Economics and was named dean in 2011 – the pair noticed a gap in human resources policy perhaps not obvious to longer term faculty, Shim said.

An ad-hoc committee with representation from diverse work and demographic groups on campus was formed to develop the new legislation, she said. The [final version](#) was presented by the University Committee, the executive committee of the Faculty Senate, to the full senate and approved on Nov. 3.

The policy prohibits hostile or intimidating behavior that exceeds "the range of commonly accepted expressions of disagreement, disapproval or critique in an academic culture." It covers verbal and visual expression, physical contact, exclusion, sabotage and threats in exercise of authority, including impeding another person from exercising shared governance rights.

Targets of such behavior may bring the matter to the faculty member involved either directly or through an intermediary. A formal complaint also may be filed with department heads; and complainants ultimately can file a grievance with the University Committee.

Faculty members who engage in repeated or egregious acts of hostile or intimidating behaviors may be disciplined or dismissed under the new policy.

Ortalo-Magné says that while such intimidating behavior is rare, he predicts that the existence of a policy will make people aware of their behavior so that it will very rarely need to be invoked.

"When you put a police officer on the highway, people drive at the proper speed," he says. "So this will help us deal with the exceptional case and improve the framework so we never have to worry about it."

The policy was approved with questions, but little opposition, by a majority so large that a vote tally was not even taken, Ortalo-Magné says. He says he detected something of a sense of relief among colleagues, "in the sense of plugging a hole."

Historically, provisions to curb faculty behavior have not always been embraced. A speech code that barred comments that explicitly demean gender, race, sexual orientation or handicap, for example, was abolished in 1999 amid controversy over whether it had a chilling effect on academic freedom.

The current anti-bullying policy was discussed in various forums among faculty for more than a year, but no research into the incidence of bullying at UW-Madison was conducted.

Shim says she believes national statistics showing that 20 percent of people working in higher education report being bullied on the job. UW-Madison's [Omsbud Office](#), which is charged with facilitating communication and resolving conflict among campus faculty and staff members, also accepts the statistic as on target, she says.

Other research, like that in the 2012 book "[Bully in the Ivory Tower](#)," put the incidence higher.

The topic of bullying in academia has been popular in press like the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) in recent years, Shim adds. Many other institutions of higher learning already have policies like that just adopted by UW-Madison.

Discrimination laws may protect people who fall into a protected class like age, gender or race from a hostile workplace environment, but incidences of intimidating behavior may not involve someone in a protected class, or not demonstrably so, she points out.

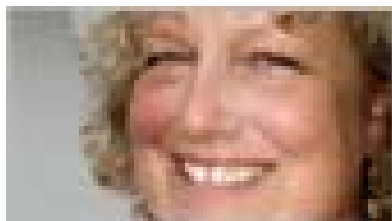
Like Ortalo-Magné, Shim hopes the policy won't need to be employed often.

"This is not to get people in trouble," she says. "When they are told a behavior is not acceptable, people say 'Oh, my gosh, I had no idea.' It's a matter of bringing it to attention. But if we have no idea how to deal with it, who will bring it to attention?"

It's not just academic freedom that is threatened by bullying on campus, says Shim.

"There's a huge economic impact," she says. "When workers are psychologically impaired, their work productivity goes down dramatically."

Pat Schneider



Pat Schneider

Pat Schneider joined The Capital Times in 1989 and has written on a wide variety of topics including neighborhoods, minority communities and the nonprofit sector.



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