The Online Bully in Higher Education

With the predictable growth of online college enrollment now rippling across America has

come a less predictable phenomenon known as "online bullying" of fellow students—and even

faculty—by some student "classmates." These students use the academic forum to intimidate or

harass those online colleagues and instructors with differing opinions, beliefs, values, or cultures

via the online classroom, often in highly provocative ways. Though perhaps not yet as pervasive

or problematic as campus "keggers," online bullying has become a growing problem at many

institutions of higher learning across the country.

Students in the 21st century are banking on educational institutions to provide online degrees

so they can improve their class status while earning a living. Economic conditions are forcing

younger students into the workplace and older students to retrain for jobs that are more readily

available. For many of these students, online education is the most convenient option. In their

2005 report, "*Growing by Degrees: Online Education in the United States,*" Allen and Seaman

(2005) indicate that the "online enrollment growth rate is over ten times that projected by the

National Center for Education Statistics for the general postsecondary student population" (p. 3).

In an effort to cater to the popularity of online education, institutions of higher learning are

including online programs in their curriculums. The Allen and Seaman (2005) study found that

among all schools offering face-to-face master's degree programs, "44% also offer Master's

programs online, and among all schools offering face-to-face Business degree programs, 43%

also offer online Business programs" (p. 1).

On the plus side, this rapid increase of online programs has spawned an equally rapid increase in the diversity of online students. Higher education institutions can now attract student populations extending far beyond their city, county or state borders. Among that diverse population, however, are those students who bring their objectionable behavior into the online forum.

Traditionally, the term "bully" is associated with someone who exhibits negative aggressive behavior toward another individual. Tattum and Tattum (1992) proposed the following definition: "Bullying is the willful, conscious desire to hurt another and put him/her under stress" (p. 3). Using Tattum and Tattum's (1992) definition as a foundation, we can extend the meaning to define the term "online bully" as a socially aggressive student who makes posts to the Discussion Forum or Cyber Café that are designed to intimidate or personally offend another student and/or the instructor.

In March and April of 2006 a confidential Web survey was e-mailed to randomly selected higher education instructors across the country who were employed by community colleges, public and private four-year colleges and universities. No consideration was given to the subject taught or whether the instructor was associated with an institution that was completely online or part of a ground school that offered online courses.

Survey results indicate that the online bully exists without prejudice toward institution, instructor professional degree level, or time teaching. Some 24.4% of the respondents taught at a university, 16.7% at a private higher education institution, and 59% at a community college. A small percentage of the respondents, 2.6%, hold a bachelor's degree, 43.6% a master's degree and 53.8% a doctoral degree. The time respondents had been teaching online courses varied, but

the majority had more than a year of experience in this area, with 33.3% having more than 5 years of online teaching experience.

About 45% of the surveyed instructors reported frequent or relatively frequent encounters with online bullies who posted personal, racial, or political opinions that were designed to incite a negative reaction in other students or the instructor. Almost a third of the respondents reported that they have had students purposely post lewd or vulgar responses to either Discussion Forum or Cyber Café locations. While some 34.6% of instructors surveyed experienced students posting responses designed to humiliate other students, most respondents (86.1%) reported that their institutions do not have policy manuals that define the term "online bully" or outline appropriate action to be taken when students post offensive or unacceptable messages.

The online bully can often disrupt the learning process before an instructor can confront the unwanted attack. Once a bully makes a post, it is possible—indeed probable—that more than one student will read it before the instructor does. Unlike in a ground school, the instructor does not have the advantage of witnessing the student's body language or anticipating the direction of the conversation so as to interrupt the offender before another student has been victimized. This knowledge serves to empower online bullies, thus making their actions even more disturbing than those of their ground school counterparts. With over 40% of institutions offering fully online degree programs, it is imperative that instructors and administrators be prepared to adequately address this student population.

What can be done to work with this student population without disrupting online classrooms? The answer is two-fold: instructor strategy and administrative policy.

Survey results showed that online instructors employ an array of methods to curtail and in

some cases to thwart online bullies. Some of the comments taken from the survey that instructors were willing to share are as follows:

- "The offending student was reminded of the policy on 'flaming' and was penalized in the grade using the school's professional development form."

- "I e-mailed the student directly and confronted her with what she had said and the reason it was inappropriate."

- "[I] informed students of which posts were offensive, explained why they were offensive and why they would be deleted from the message board, and deleted the offensive posts."

- "[I] redirected the students back to the discussion question. Once I deleted the post. I also would e-mail the student and explain the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct."

- "I sent the student a private e-mail warning him that his behavior was objectionable and would not be tolerated."

- "I reminded the student about our online code of ethics. When this did not work I deleted the posting from the classroom." [1]

In most cases these tactical strategies were effective; however, instructors frequently receive little administrative guidance when dealing with this online student population. A lack of policy that specifically outlines the expected behavior of online students can serve to empower online bullies by offering them the subliminal idea that the rules and regulations of a ground classroom do not apply to them. The online environment removes students from the instructor's recriminating eye or admonishing tone of voice. Online bullies can use this lack of direct supervision as an opportunity to express their aggression.

As the number of online students increases, the numbers of online bullies are increasing as well; therefore, it is important for both instructors and administrators in the long term that a solid

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[1] The Web survey has been published on my personal Web site at: www.rreigle.net

online organizational culture be developed. In the meantime, while instructors continue to take whatever action they deem appropriate, administrative policy must define the term online bully, identify the behavioral issues associated with this student, and outline a course of action suitable for dealing with students in online classrooms.

References

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