

transforming graduate education

musings about change for higher education

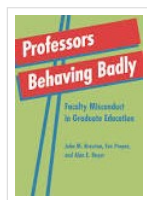
Academic bullying and graduate education

Posted on [November 9, 2015](#)

A recent study by Gentry and Whitely (2014) entitled "Bullying in Graduate School: Its Nature and Effects" concluded that although graduate students did experience 'aggressive and exclusionary' behaviors associated with traditional definition of bullying they tended to reject the use of "bullying" to describe their experiences. (see The Qualitative Report 2014 Volume 19, Article 71, 1-18 <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/gentry71.pdf>). The behaviors were experienced were as more "covert and indirect" rather than typical images of playground bullying. These behaviors could also be described under the umbrella of micro aggressions, incivilities, and acts based upon unconscious bias. To emphasize the importance of understanding these behaviors, how they manifest themselves in graduate school, and the significant impact that they can have on graduate students, I have written about and will continue to use the terminology of "academic bullying".

Academic bullying manifests itself in many different ways and can include intimidation, humiliation, belittlement, embarrassment and undermining one's authority. Academic bullying also includes behaviors or comments that indicate disregard of one's concerns, ignoring contributions, minimize one's efforts in the eyes of colleagues, and other means of exclusion or withholding information. Expectations of unreasonable workload, limiting earned vacation and prohibiting graduate student's own agency for professional choices and personal decision could also be inappropriate. As is well known, comments or behaviors that are sexist, racist, homophobic, xenophobic and more are unacceptable and can fall under the umbrella of academic bullying and should not be tolerated. Academic bullying occurs throughout the academic or professional space; in the classroom, in meetings, at conferences, in the laboratory setting, in face-to-face interactions, and of course through email and social media.

Essentially, the behaviors and actions described above would be considered unprofessional and could be considered as "misconduct". In their book entitled *Professors Behaving Badly: Faculty Misconduct in Graduate Education*, the authors (Braxton, Proper & Bayer, 2011) provide some more specific examples based upon their study including the following (more discussion in a later blog post):



- Publishing an article without a graduate student among the authors who made significant contributions to the study.
- Prohibiting graduate students from expressions differing viewpoints.
- Requiring additional hours of work per week regularly beyond that of the assistantship and on nights, weekends and vacation times.

While it is important to understand what constitutes academic bullying, it is just as important to understand the context for graduate education and what would not be considered as academic bullying. Graduate school should be challenging and is sometimes difficult and frustrating. Graduate school should not be demoralizing although students might occasionally question their ability to perform. Graduate students need to understand the conditions for graduate study set by the Graduate School and the department or faculty. Obviously there are policies and procedures that need to be followed. Academic freedom is valued and respected for graduate students and faculty. Freedom of

speech is a right but must be exercised in an atmosphere of respect for others. Disagreements are likely and emotions will be expressed but must be civil. To read about the VT Graduate School's description of the graduate environment, link [here](#).

Communication and clarity are key to success in graduate school. The next blog will focus on [expectations for graduate study](#) and ways in which we can move the conversation about graduate school from surviving to thriving.

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2 THOUGHTS ON "ACADEMIC BULLYING AND GRADUATE EDUCATION"

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