



Online/Internet Abuse: Support and Resources for UWL Faculty/Instructors & Staff

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- Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs
- Vice Chancellor for Diversity & Inclusion
- Executive Director Integrated Marketing and Communication

Introduction

Online media forums are integral to university daily operations, pedagogical and research activities, and general means of engagement with internal and external communities. It is a resource that enables faculty and staff to more fully participate and lead in a global society. Yet, as a university, we recognize that this critical arena may sometimes present challenges to the well-being and perhaps even safety of our faculty and staff members. With this in mind, we have worked to identify and develop resources of support and guidance for how best to manage concerns often related to social media and other online forums.

The document is designed to assist the UWL community in responding to situations in which instructional staff (hereafter referred to as faculty) or staff are targeted by individuals or groups outside of the university based on the content of the faculty or staff member's university-related work (e.g., instruction, programming, scholarship, clinical care, and/or service). Often, online abuse centers on an identity status of the individual under attack.

The foundation for this document is the university's unwavering support for academic freedom and freedom of expression. The UWL chancellor's website promotes civil discourse and supports free speech for students, staff and faculty <https://www.uwlax.edu/chancellor/civil-discourse-and-free-speech/>. This document is "content neutral," meaning that it is designed to offer support to individuals across a wide spectrum of views and areas of instruction, programming, scholarship and service. For example, it may be useful for individuals who come under attack for their teaching and scholarship related to social issues, as well as for those whose scientific methods are deemed controversial (such as the use of stem cells or animals in research).

This document focuses *primarily* on abuse, threats, intimidation or harassment toward faculty and staff from **outside** the university based on their role at the university. For information about policies and procedures governing harassment committed by UWL employees or students, please contact the Office of Student Life, Human Resources, and/or if related to a protected class, the Affirmative Action Office.

This document is an adaptation of a "Faculty Support Safety Guidance" document developed by the University of Iowa, that has been modified for use at Penn State by the Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs. UWL has adapted the vast majority of wording and process from these two sources.

Roles, Actions and Resources – An Overview

In matters of safety and security, individuals are encouraged to make use of campus resources to assist them in responding to an immediate situation, as well as to address any concerns that arise in the longer term. Knowing about relevant resources and support in advance of a crisis will help our campus respond more effectively if/when a situation requires immediate action.

Each situation is different, and we only offer advice and resources, not prescribed procedure. This section offers suggestions for individuals at various levels in the University, including:

- Individual employees
- Administrators (chairs/supervisors/deans/directors)
- University level responses
- Campus communications director

Any unit or UWL employee can contact UWL's communication team (UComm) regarding their online presence and internal or external responses to materials and posts.

Individual Employee

PRIMARY: Ensure your safety. Identify your primary concerns and seek assistance. The following suggestions may help your personal safety planning.

- If you believe your physical safety is at risk, immediately notify police
 - Off campus – call 911 or police
 - On campus – contact University Police 608.789.9000
- Notify at least one of the following (who should notify the others)
 - Your department chair or supervisor
 - Your dean or director
 - Human Resources
- Discuss ways that your academic unit might be able to support you. You do not need to manage this experience on your own.
- If the attacks are identity-based (e.g., harassment based on gender, race, sexual identity, country of origin), the faculty/staff member is encouraged to consult with the Affirmative Action Office regarding options and exploring additional support and resources. Additionally, the Division of Diversity and Inclusion can serve as an immediate resource in attacks on identities that may not be directly supported by Affirmative Action policies.
- If the situation involves a current UWL student, consult directly or work with your chair, dean, or HR to contact the UWL CARE Team (Office of Student Life). The CARE Team is dedicated to the early identification, assessment, and management of incidents and behaviors that threaten the safety and well-being of the university community.

SECONDARY: Pursue options to abate the situation and establish support.

- If experiencing gender-based harassment and/or harassment that is sexual in nature, consult with the Title IX Coordinator and/or the Affirmative Action Office.
- Consult with the University's Communication team (UComm) regarding the monitoring of social media and potential responses.

- Consider the following actions if being harassed online:
 - Do not delete any messages, but you may want to disengage from reading all emails in your inbox, listening to all voice messages, etc. Preserved messages may be of use in identifying the harassers and pressing any relevant charges. Create a log to document and archive all threatening emails, tweets, Facebook posts and phone messages. Consider asking a friend to monitor social and other media on your behalf and to keep you apprised of any developments or threats.
 - Save screenshots of harassing or threatening social media posts to preserve as evidence in case the author deletes the original post.
 - Be cautious about responding to threatening emails, tweets, blog comments, etc. In most cases, it will be in your best interest not to respond. Although responding may seem like the right thing to do, it may only provide harassers with additional material and serve to prolong social media harassment. UComm can help you determine whether and how to respond. If you choose not to respond, you may also want to encourage friends and colleagues to do the same. Review “Managing Harassment” (Appendix B).
 - Identify other aspects of your cyber-identity that may need attention (e.g., cell phone, network access, social media).
- Consult with your dean or director for assistance in responding to the situation. Your dean or director should involve the division vice chancellor and UComm if there will be a coordinated or formal response. For example, you may want to consider preparing a concise message to articulate your position in your own words and distribute to colleagues as a form of reputation management. If there is factually inaccurate information, UComm may be able to make factual statements on social media. Should you get news media requests related to the incident, UComm can assist in deciding whether/how to respond.
- Reach out to friends and develop a support system. Use of the Employee Assistance Program through HR.

Administrators – Chairs/Deans or Supervisors/Directors

- Generally speaking, either the chair/dean or supervisor/director should be directly involved and keep each other apprised.
- Contact an employee as soon as you become aware of threatening or intimidating behavior against them. Meet with them to offer support in the initial days of the incident and review the “Employee Safety and Support Checklist” (Appendix A) and ensure that the faculty or staff member is aware of campus resources indicated in this document. One goal of the checklist is to capture as much information as possible during these interactions in order to limit the number of times the faculty/staff member has to retell the story.
- Before all else, work with the faculty/staff member to address their on-campus and off-campus safety and security concerns. University police can also be requested to assist with security needs (e.g., safety escorts or area walk throughs, etc.). Be aware that the identity of the faculty/staff member may influence their individualized needs (e.g., parental status, faculty rank, minoritized identity). Refer the faculty/staff member to appropriate campus resources or, with the individual's consent, reach out to such resources as appropriate to address whatever issues the faculty/staff member identifies.
- It is possible that social media and phone intimidation and harassment will be received by multiple offices. For instance, the departmental ADA and the Chancellor’s Office may field calls or emails. Ensure that unit staff members whose responsibilities may include answering harassing phone calls are supported and informed about strategies for being on the front line (e.g., a script or

template response, instructions for preserving phone messages to aid future investigations). UComm can help with messaging.

- Depending on the scope of the event, UComm may also consider informing other offices/staff members who may field phone calls, including Advancement, Alumni Relations, Admissions, Career Services, Dispatch, HR, etc., so they can respond with the appropriate messages as provided by UComm toward over-inclusion rather than under. Tangential units often bear some brunt of activities about which they are unaware.
- Stay in communication with the provost/chancellor and UComm to ensure a coordinated response. Share details of the situation on a need-to-know basis and be mindful that all email communication may be subject to request via subpoena or other legal process.
- Consider the well-being of the rest of the unit faculty, staff and students (e.g., co-authors, graduate assistants, front-line staff). Consult with the threatened faculty or staff member about what and how to share information with the department. If possible, bring people together to discuss the situation, the department's actions, and available support resources.
- Facilitate the physical movement of assigned classrooms and/or workspaces if feasible, and if the affected faculty or staff member requests it.
- Facilitate the removal of the faculty or staff member's direct contact information from department or college webpages and the university directory, in collaboration with Human Resources and UComm, if the affected faculty or staff member requests it.
- If the attacks are identity-based (e.g., harassment based on gender, race, sexual identity, country of origin), consult with the Affirmative Action Office to counsel the faculty/staff member about their options and explore additional support and resources for the faculty or staff member and others in the unit who share their identity (e.g., students, colleagues, staff).
- The UW System Office of General Counsel can and should be used regarding questions of legal guidelines, process or procedure. Any faculty/staff member can avail themselves of the service; however, we recommend working in collaboration with the dean (or other administrative individual) in order to explore full options.

University-Level Response

- While our first instinct may be to respond and defend with a rebuttal online, it's important to understand that engaging in a dialogue on social media can sometimes make matters worse. Each situation should be evaluated on its own. Senior leadership should consult with UComm.
- If a response is warranted, the leadership message should defend academic freedom, the importance of faculty/staff safety, and the development of learning environments in which difficult issues are discussed and dissected. Work with UComm to develop a message that emphasizes university values and draws on best-practice examples from other campuses, and addresses potential concerns of multiple constituents (e.g., faculty, staff, alumni, legislators, donors, students).
- Consult with the targeted faculty/staff member to share how you would like to publicly handle the crisis and discuss any concerns. Involve the faculty/staff member's unit administrator in crisis management conversations to ensure efforts are coordinated.
- Depending on the scope of the event, consider informing other offices/staff members who may field phone calls, including Advancement, Alumni Relations, Admissions, Career Services, etc., so they can respond with the appropriate messages as provided by UComm. Err toward over-inclusion rather than under. Tangential units often bear some brunt of activities about which they are unaware.

- Depending on the nature of the attacks, be aware that students, staff and faculty who share the identity and/or research area under attack (e.g., LGBTQ students, if the faculty/staff member's sexual identity is under attack; students of color, if the faculty/staff member's racial/ethnic identity is the focus; international students, if the faculty/staff member's country of origin is the focus) may also be experiencing trauma because of this incident. Contact related units to make sure they are aware of support and resources.

UComm Communications Director

- Inform the faculty/staff member, chair/supervisor, dean/director, vice chancellor/chancellor if you become aware that an employee's name has shown up in a social media post that may contain a threat or intimidating/harassing content. Keep these individuals informed of ongoing mentions throughout the crisis management process.
 - Inform the faculty/staff member and their chair/supervisor if you become aware of non-threatening but accelerated or potentially explosive content related to their university work. Be ready to inform others if the situation intensifies.
- Ensure that the faculty/staff member being targeted has been provided support/resources from their chair or supervisor.
- Provide support for the faculty/staff member being targeted, including tips on if and how they should respond, managing their professional and personal reputation, and reviewing Managing Harassment (Appendix B).
- Work with the appropriate individuals to coordinate information sharing on a need-to-know basis and to coordinate a consistent message (e.g., phone scripts for frontline staff answering aggressive callers). Consult with Vice Chancellor of Diversity & Inclusion if attacks are related to a protected class or marginalized group identity.
- Make sure that the key individuals associated with the faculty/staff member and their unit know that they can and should refer media inquiries to UComm.
- Provide assistance with crafting a leadership message that defends academic freedom, emphasizes University values, and addresses potential concerns of multiple constituents (e.g., faculty, alumni, legislators, donors, students).

Appendix A: Employee Safety and Support Checklist for Supervisors

This checklist helps *supervisors* address possible concerns and provide resources in the immediate and longer-term aftermath of a crisis in which faculty/staff are targeted for their ideas or views associated with their UWL employment. Supervisors may use this checklist when meeting with the faculty/staff member to gather information and create a safety plan. It may be useful to capture as much information as possible during these interactions to limit the number of times the faculty/staff member has to retell the story. If it is not possible for the supervisor to engage in this type of meeting, please refer the faculty/staff member to the division's vice chancellor for follow-up.

What is the nature of abuse or harassment? When did it begin? How has it changed since it began?

In what environment(s) is abuse or harassment occurring (check all that apply)?

- Email
- Social media/internet forums, etc.
- In the classroom
- In the office
- On-campus stalking
- Voice messages left on campus phones
- At home
- Harassment of family members/children
- Other - Indicate

Is the harasser someone who is known or been identified? If so, please provide that information.

What is the faculty/staff member's greatest concern?

Resource Reminders:

- UComm for guidance on internet presence and potential response(s)
- Division of Diversity & Inclusion for Affirmative Action for identity-based aspects
- Supervisor -> Director/Dean -> Vice Chancellor

Appendix B: Managing Harassment

Responding to online harassment can be challenging, even scary, if the harassment becomes threatening. UWL recommends the following options:

1. **Ignore them.** The goal of social media agitators (commonly referred to as trolls) is to elicit a response. The good news is that even the most persistent trolls typically move on if you ignore them long enough.
2. **Block them.** Several social media platforms allow you to selectively prevent others from following you, seeing your posts, or commenting on your content. Note when you block someone, they are typically notified of the block and may choose to criticize you on their own channels.
3. **Respond.** If someone is sharing misinformation about you or your work, consider sharing a brief response to correct the falsehoods. This will likely result in additional posts from the harassing party, but it does give you a platform to set the record straight. It's highly recommended that you consult with UComm in determining whether to respond and the best avenue for doing so. For instance, responding to Twitter attacks with a reply on Twitter may not be the best strategy.
4. **Record and report.** If you feel at all threatened, contact the Police, and keep a record of the hostile or threatening posts. Take and save screenshots in case you need to file a police report or take legal action.

Materials from the University of Iowa's Managing Harassment resources:

[https://osc.uiowa.edu/managing-harassment.](https://osc.uiowa.edu/managing-harassment)