# Silenced Voices: Institutional Responses to Bullying of Deans in Canadian and Australian Universities

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## Abstract

In this paper, we share testimonies from interviews with 29 faculty deans from universities across Canada and Australia who have been targeted by bullies, and we examine how their institutions responded. Often silenced, we expose the consequences of institutional (in)actions on the identity and well-being of these leaders and document the impact of inadequate policies and procedures that deans are trusted to protect and support them. These stories combine to create a collective force calling for institutional courage to address incivility and bullying, as well as to challenge the culture that enables and reinforces it. We conclude with recommendations that institutions can implement to proactively protect and support deans to mitigate bullying in higher education.

*Keywords:* Bullying, institutional betrayal, well-being, higher education, deans

## Introduction

Those outside the academy may believe that bullying, harassment, and mobbing are not part of the culture of an intellectual institution such as the university. However, research shows higher education is rife with bullying (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2020; Keashly & Neuman, 2010; Sims, 2019; Tight, 2023). One study of American higher education administrators representing 175 four-year colleges and universities revealed that "62% of higher education administrators had experienced or witnessed workplace bullying in the 18 months prior to the study" (Hollis, 2015, p. 1).

We contend that deans are at risk as targets of bullying because their role, in many ways, puts them in the "line of fire" between faculty and administration (Bosetti & Heffernan, 2021; Mandzuk, 2023). There are also some unique requirements of the role of deans that can impede the reporting of their experience of bullying. For example, deans may be hesitant to report incidents of bullying for fear of being viewed by senior administration as weak or incompetent, as they are bound by confidentiality agreements in dealing with human resource matters, and they may be asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) once a dispute is settled. NDAs are legal contracts between an individual and the university that outline confidential material, knowledge, or information that the institution wishes to restrict access to and prevent disclosure of proprietary information. A recent Canadian report into workplace misconduct and allegations against the former president of a university (Rubin et al., 2023) found that 13 of 29 NDAs signed in a 10-year period were signed in the context of complaints regarding respect in the workplace (e.g., related to bullying or harassment) or human rights violations. In December 2022, the province of Ontario passed legislation banning universities in the province from using NDAs in cases of faculty/student sexual mis-

conduct, with the provinces of Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and British Columbia following this example. In February 2023, the English Parliament voted through an amendment to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill that requires UK universities and their constituent colleges that receive public funding to stop using NDAs to cover up sexual misconduct, harassment, and bullying (Green, 2025). Morrison and Weatherhead (2025) explained, "This policy aims to protect victims from being silenced and to promote a culture of accountability in higher education institutions" (para. 3).

Grassroots social movements in the UK and Canada, such as the *Speak Out Revolution* and *Can't Buy My Silence,* provide platforms for victims to share their stories and harness global insights on workplace harassment and bullying to "cancel the culture of silence on harassment and bullying in our workplaces" to create truly inclusive workplaces for all (Speak Out Revolution, n.d., About Us section).

The aim of this paper is to contribute to this movement of stopping the silence of bullying by sharing accounts of bullying experienced by faculty deans and to advocate for changes in Human Resources (HR) policies and processes, and call for institutional support for these leaders. We draw attention to the institutional policies and procedures designed to address workplace bullying and expose how they are ineffective when the targets are middle managers, such as department heads and faculty deans.

In this paper, we bring together research investigating emotional labor and its toll on 15 faculty deans from eight Australian universities (Bosetti & Heffernan, 2021; Heffernan & Bosetti, 2020, 2021a, 2021b) and 14 faculty deans from 14 Canadian universities. While not designed as a comparative study, there are some noted contextual differences that impact the organizational culture and role of faculty deans in each country. Australian universities are further along in the adoption of corporate-oriented managerial structures and processes in their governance, which effectively reduces the role of various stakeholder groups in decision-making. Canada has maintained collegial self-governance, providing more space for faculty, staff, and students to participate in governance; however, this is changing with the adoption of market-based practices to address chronic government underfunding, resulting in increased faculty union militancy in resistance to these changes.

Faculty deans in both contexts are primarily responsible for the functioning of the faculty (strategic planning, operational planning, human resource, and academic management) and considered "senior officers" (management) of the university, and therefore outside the faculty association (collective bargaining/enterprise agreements) during their term (Boyko & Jones, 2010). Canadian deans are predominantly academics recruited from within the university sector. The appointment is on the basis of a vote by the selection committee, comprised of elected and appointed representatives from the faculty and university community, and ratified by the Board of Governors. Australian faculty deans are appointed by a senior executive committee (rather than elected by colleagues) and may be non-academics recruited from outside of the university sector. They can be appointed as "executive deans," who are managers with explicit responsibility and associated performance-based fixed-term contracts for their organizational unit in line with overall institutional strategy (De Boer et al., 2010). Despite these cultural differences, our research revealed similar themes with regard to workplace incivility, bullying, and the range of institutional (in)actions that impact the professional and private lives of a faculty dean.

We begin by describing the positionality of this research and outlining the sense of responsibility we bear as the "holders" of these narratives. We discuss various forms of bullying and draw upon the experiences of faulty deans to illustrate how this occurs in practice. We then examine the context of the university that gives rise to a culture of bullying and the vulnerable role of deans. We conclude with a call for institutional courage to address the toxic culture that gives rise to bullying and incivility, and to support leaders in dealing with conflict at work. Based on our interviews with deans, we share their recommendations for action.

## Stewardship of the Narratives

This research is motivated by a sense of justice, to provide a listening ear to those who have been bullied (Ahmed, 2021; Can't Buy My Silence, n.d.; Speak Out Revolution, n.d.), with a promise that collectively, these stories can serve as evidence of the need for institutional courage to change policy and processes to better serve victims of wrongdoing, rather than protecting institutional reputation and preventing possible lawsuits. We use the concept of *institutional betrayal* (Smith & Freyd, 2014) as a framework for conceptualizing the harm experienced by faculty leaders as targets of workplace incivility, bullying, and mobbing and their reliance on workplace policy and procedure to support and protect them in the

exercise of their responsibilities.

Storytelling is a process of meaning-making (Maclean et al., 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and can be a form of healing. It is an opportunity for victims to share their truths of what happened and the injustices or harm done, to feel heard, and to have others serve as benevolent witnesses to their trauma. For the participants, telling their stories involves risk, vulnerability, courage, and trust. Their willingness to share is motivated by the hope that other leaders will see themselves in these testimonies and feel comforted that they are not alone. Sharing these stories is a step towards halting the reproduction of harm, providing evidence of the urgent need for institutions to address the problem of toxic workplace culture and to create policies and processes that support and protect the people experiencing harm, not just protecting the institution from lawsuits and reputational damage.

## Academic Culture

Academic culture is hardwired to acts of incivility, where academic discourse is characterized as "ceremonial combat" or "programmed contentiousness" that valorizes critical dialogue and intellectual sparring as a form of argumentation in the pursuit of truth, with participants protected by academic freedom. Academics are socialized to engage in critical analysis and argumentation, and this is an accepted part of the culture (Bosetti, 2015; Bosetti et al., 2008; Tight, 2023; Young, 2017). There has been considerable research examining the demoralization of academic staff under the neoliberal regime of market reform, performance measurement, and corporate managerial practices of university administration and management. As researchers, we acknowledge that this neoliberal reform agenda has some unwelcome effects on academic identity and work, the role and expectations of leaders, and a disruption in the traditional culture, norms, and values of academic work and life (Hodgins & Mannix-McNamara, 2021; Smyth, 2017; Sutton, 2017).

Academic work is becoming increasingly restrictive and controlled, underpinned by market-driven values and pressures, which has created an audit culture of close supervision, with academic work subject to performance metrics based on teaching and research output that provoke profound anxiety, precarity, a sense of personal unworthiness and general distrust in the university (Ball, 2016; Berg et al., 2016; Reiger et al., 2015). For faculty deans, this neoliberal-managerial reform agenda involves "a dialectical form of power relations that is both harsh and supportive, public and personal, technocratic and emotional, that is both the hard disciplines of measurement and visibility and the softer entreaties of mentoring, coaching, self-management and self-improvement" (Ball, 2016, p. 1050).

Deans are particularly vulnerable as mid-level managers because they occupy this liminal space in the stratified administration hierarchy, where they mediate between administration and faculty (Mandzuk, 2023). Deans are expected to navigate deep-seated academic norms and values and embrace the key canons of academe while reconciling the neoliberal reform agenda of efficiency, rationalization, and restructuring. This reform agenda has disruptive effects on organizational culture, with increased informal dissent, visible labor conflict, and organized forms of resistance by faculty, staff, and students at the level of the workplace (Savage & Ross, 2024). Recent studies have found deans are regularly the target of bottom-up bullying by academics who understand how to work around workplace policies and regulations, as well as top-down bullying when they are whistleblowers or rock the institutional boat (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2020; Sims, 2019; Tight, 2023; Westhues, 2006).

In this context, the nature of leadership and managerial work has become more demanding, changing the nature of interpersonal workplace relationships between management, faculty, and staff. As managers, deans are increasingly vulnerable to being targets of workplace bullying from faculty who perceive them to be the main cause of their stress. Their work as managers can involve navigating a labyrinth of faculty resistance, institutional barriers, and overcoming procedural hurdles in moving the faculty to meet performance measures and institutional goals.

## Emotional Toll/Costs of Bullying and Betrayal

There is a considerable emotional toll for deans to call out wrongful behavior, manage performance expectations, and shift institutional culture. Faculty resistance can be manifested in grievances, forms of bullying, and tactics to obstruct decisions and change. As leaders, deans are expected to model appropriate behavior and set the tone for collegial behavior, be relatively immune to situational pressures, be

able to conform to emotional display rules expected of their role, and portray the most prudent emotion for the situation (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2020; Hochschild, 1983). Putting their trust in the institutional process and expecting support from senior executives, deans experience a sense of betrayal when the institution settles with perpetrators to avoid litigation and institutional reputational damage, when they find themselves the target of an investigation, and when they are silenced from discussing any details of the case.

The impact of being the target of bullying and incivility, the protracted investigative process (sometimes taking 18 months), and the lack of institutional support can have a profound and lingering impact on the emotional and physical health and well-being of the victim. It can produce a whole range of post-traumatic symptomatology, including depression and anxiety, PTSD, substance abuse, burnout, suicidal ideation, and sleep disorders (Chochinov, 2023; Einarsen & Nielsen, 2015; Finlay, 2023; Smidt et al., 2023; Smith & Freyd, 2014; Taylor, 2006). Emotions show up in the body in various forms as a constant reminder of responsibility, shame, and failure in how the individual responds to workplace bullying, and can leave a psychic wound and internal scar. Reflecting on his term as dean at a Canadian university, Sumara (2021) explained,

> I realize now that my primary shame was not the public shaming [of receiving a failing grade from faculty for his performance as dean] but, instead, the shame I felt at having compromised my values and principles. I thought I could override the normative processes with counter normative sensibilities, but that proved not to be the case. My willingness to enact processes and practice that were outlined in my contract and mandated by the university subverted my best intentions (p. 150).

Targets of workplace bullying may find themselves trapped in states of severe mental and physical distress. Chochinov (2023) explained the impact of trauma and depression on the psyche:

> [It] tells you you're not good enough. It whispers in your ear that you are flawed, that you are letting everyone down" (para. 3). The nature of trauma—whether physical, emotional or spiritual—has the capacity to shatter your sense of being in control (para. 6) … feeling fragile and impotent in the wake of trauma (para. 9).

Australian dean, Josie reflected on her experience engaging in performance reviews of academic staff:

> [the experience] lives in your skin. It doesn't matter whether the interaction was good or bad, the impact is really cellular. Carrying around this emotional weight has made me fat. It's the fricking tax of this work. It feels like this kind of emotional energy sitting in your guts.

## Methodology

### Responsibility of Researchers

There is an ethical responsibility for us as researchers in collecting and holding these stories. Stories of bullying are almost always testimony to a traumatic experience, and to speak of it is to make it present (Ahmed, 2021; Finlay, 2023). Emotions make the story hard to tell; to bring coherence to the experience, to be exposed, fragile, and vulnerable, and recounting them can be retraumatizing to those who experienced them. As researchers, we have a weighty responsibility and moral obligation to bring forward these stories in a manner that protects the identity of the victim, yet exposes the injustices of what they endured and the institutional betrayal they have experienced.

We adopted a phenomenological approach, located within the paradigm of interpretivism and constructivism, for this study as we sought to understand the lived experiences of workplace bullying and the internal meaning participants ascribed to the phenomena. We use pseudonyms and choose to share fragments of their stories to weave together a collective testimony of bullying and institutional betrayal. From this tapestry, we illuminate the impact of institutional (in)action in responding to and supporting leaders to effectively execute their role mandate in their workplaces.

## Sample

We used semi-structured audio-recorded interviews to explore how participants experienced and understood the emotional labor and workplace bullying involved in their work. We captured the insights and experiences of 14 deans from universities across Canada and 15 from Australia who have been the target of bullying during their tenure. The participants are from a variety of disciplines, including the social sciences, business, law, and education. There were 19 women and 10 men, all full professors with varying years of experience as deans. Of the Australian deans, eight were in the first two years of their term and new to their role; five had completed at least 4 years as dean, and two had completed two terms and were transitioning into retirement. The Canadian deans included two deans who were in the second year of their term and new to their role; six had completed at least 3 years as dean, three were completing their second term as dean and transitioning to retirement, and three were completing their first term.

## Recruitment

After receiving Behavioral Research Ethics approval to begin data collection, we engaged in the re-cruitment of participants by drawing upon our academic network to identify deans and extended written invitations through email to participate in the study. It is important to note that one of the researchers had been a dean at universities in Australia and Canada, which may have eased access to the network of deans. In the letter of invitation, deans were invited to participate in a study of the emotional labor involved in being a leader in higher education and discuss the challenges they face, the support they re-ceive, and the advice they would give to future leaders. This research was conducted in two phases. The first was a study of the experiences of Australian faculty deans (2018-2019), where key themes of work-place incivility and bullying emerged. The second phase built upon the Australian study to examine the experiences of Canadian deans (2020-2021). While there were similar themes in both data sets, Canadian deans were more likely to share experiences of feeling unsupported by senior executives in dealing with faculty resistance to change and workplace bullying. These feelings may in part be attributed to collegial governance where academic staff expect the dean to engage in democratic decision-making, consultation over important decisions, "and fighting the department's corner with senior managers and through uni-versity structures" (Bryman, 2007, p. 3). The professionalization of academic management in Australian universities positions faculty deans as part of the senior management team so that they focus more on operational activities and management of people with the support of professional business managers and "business partners" such as organizational change consultants and human resource teams.

Participants selected a pseudonym for confidentiality and engaged in a 60-minute audio-recorded conversation that was transcribed verbatim. While we developed a semi-structured interview guide to set the parameters for the conversation, it was insufficient to contain the stories that spilled out. Each interview became a conversation with a shape of its own.

No identifying information relating to their location, institution, or faculty has been provided. We were mindful of how we used pseudonyms and fragments of interviews to disrupt the possibility of iden-tifying a particular dean. There were no significant patterns in the data to suggest deans from different faculties or university types/affiliations were more/less likely to experience specific types of pressure.

## Approach to Coding

The interview data were coded using Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis method that acknowledges the researchers' active role in knowledge production and eschews any positivistic notions of data interpretation. A key principle we adopted for this coding and our analysis was to remain as faithful as possible to the participants' own account of their experience, attitudes, and opinions, while also taking into consideration the reflexive influence of our own interpretations as researchers. The codes represent our interpretation of patterns of meaning across data sets. The process of theme development evolved through the analytical process. As themes were generated, additional rounds of transcript anal-ysis were conducted, deepening our familiarity with the data and resulting in more refined themes. Themes were not predefined in order to find codes; rather, themes were produced by organizing codes around a central organizing concept that emerged from the data (e.g., emotional labor, mobbing, bullying, incivility, health, and well-being), as described by Braun and Clarke (2019). We use the data to explain and illustrate the range of bullying leaders experienced and how their institutions responded. The data

are reported in a way that builds on current scholarly research to generate a discussion of the unexpected challenges of deans, their experiences of being bullied, and the impact on their identity, sense of efficacy, and mental and emotional well-being.

## Analysis of Findings

In the following section, we use four broad themes to share the lived experience of deans being the target of bullying, their reflection on the effectiveness of institutional policy and process in handling their case, the impact on their health and well-being, and their unfulfilled expectation for institutional support to execute their role mandate to manage and lead their faculty. We use the code AU to indicate the responses of Australian deans and CD to indicate Canadian deans.

### *Bullying, Incivility & Mobbing*

Broadly speaking, bullying, mobbing, and incivility can be categorized as negative workplace behaviors that include a collection of acts such as harassment, abusive supervision, unfair and/or unreasonable management directives, whisper networks, and office grapevine gossip (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2021a). The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (2022) has described bullying as follows:

> Usually seen as acts or verbal comments that could psychologically or "mentally" hurt or isolate a person in the workplace. … [It] usually involves repeated incidents or a pattern of behavior that is intended to intimidate, offend, degrade or humiliate a particular person or group of people (para. 2).

In reflecting on their experience as dean and managing people, the participants agreed that bullying by colleagues is inherent in their role. They explained:

> AU, Mary: People aren't transparent about bullying. They do it in other ways. They start spreading rumors about you and how you behave. Then you hear back from other people that you've done something that you completely have not done or said. It's that network of complicity. I think the sad thing for me is that people at our level will buy into it.

> CD, Meghan: For me, the type of bullying that disrupts me is the passive kind, the underhanded, bullshit, backstabbing, two-faced approach is where the emotional labor is so much harder. This makes you on edge all of the time because it's not just about what you say, it's about knowing how it will be misconstrued.

Mobbing is a form of systematic, collective psychological violence. It involves ganging up on or mobbing a targeted victim and subjecting them to "clandestine and open harassment or *psychic terror* in addition to creating work-related conflict" (Sedivy-Benton et al., 2014, p. 37). Examples include continuous negative remarks or criticism, isolation, spreading gossip, or ridiculing the victim. The intent is to wear the target down emotionally, eroding their self-confidence and sense of agency through forms of psychological harassment such as gossip, ridicule, and bureaucratic hassles (Friedenberg, 2008; Westhues, 2006). Most mobbers see their actions as righteous and a justified response to the perceived incompetence or ineffectiveness of their target. The object is to be obstructionist, to destroy the reputation of the target and expose them as incompetent. Westhues (2006) explained the profound impact of mobbing: "Academic mobbings are as hard to correct as wrongful convictions in courts of law. The damage is done along the way. The target of intense, collective humiliation is usually scarred for life" (p. 18).

Mobbing was a common experience among respondents and occurred on small and large scales.

> CD, Miriam: There was a whole campaign of horrible, anonymous letters. I was nominated for a top educator award, and my picture appeared in the paper as being up for this award. Letters were circulated to hundreds of people, an anonymous letter from an anonymous email sent to hundreds of people, including the CBC, and all the media to undermine my reputation. In a letter to the Awards Committee they said, "how could you possibly have

this horrible, harassing, incompetent, awful person, win an award?" And the night of the award ceremony, my house was being policed. I was worried that my house would either be fire bombed or, you know, a brick thrown in the window because I actually won the award. I'm likely the only person who ever won an award and actually dreaded the backlash.

CD, Meghan: I had a small group of faculty members that were seeking to derail, undermine, and challenge me in really troubling, public ways. It's very disturbing. It really, really is. I've been in a lot of leadership positions, but I have never experienced what I have in this position. That's very disturbing, because I actually expected better of some of my colleagues, and that, in itself, is kind of a bit soul-destroying, really.

Incivility is a more insidious form of bullying. It is the culmination of a collection of low-intensity negative behaviors that includes being rude, making belittling, humiliating, or degrading comments, creating and/or spreading gossip and rumors, and constantly disregarding or intentionally misinterpreting instructions and requests from administration (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2020, Twale & De Luca, 2008). Here are some examples shared by participants:

AU, Kate: Every week there's something that's thrown at you from the same group of people. You always know who it's going to be. [They display] open disrespect in faculty meetings and create a general feeling that perhaps you don't know what you are doing. Whatever you put out there, they'll come back with an email rejoinder, including everybody that they can possibly CC into the email.

AU, Nick: A high level of incivility is tolerated in the name of academic freedom. … Smart bullies are almost always full professors experienced in creating enough disruption to block decisions, and in effect, wait out until the dean is worn out or leaves.

Another bullying tactic is called DARVO: to deny, attack, and reverse victim and offender. This is the reaction the perpetrator of wrongdoing may display in response to being held accountable for their behavior. The perpetrator or offender may deny the behavior, attack the individual doing the confronting, and reverse the roles of victim and offender such that the perpetrator assumes the role of "falsely accused." The aim is to attack the accuser's credibility and blame the accuser for being the perpetrator of the false accusation (Harsey & Freyd, 2020). The following comments from deans illustrate how DARVO operates:

CD, Sarah: The response of this professor [dept chair], who I discovered was misusing department funds and having an affair with a colleague, was to engage in this manipulative process of deflection, anger, and reversing the oppressor and the victim. She would yell at me; she would lose her shit in meetings. … She and a small army, six or seven senior faculty, who would hold the "star chamber" to plan how to get rid of me. They'd complain behind the scenes, then write to HR saying I am ruining the school, call the anonymous tip line, spread rumors that I was racist, a raging lesbian making passes at faculty, and the provost did nothing. This went on for over 2 years until there was a formal investigation. … Then I was subjected to 4 hours of videotaped interrogation.

CD, Miriam:  A mentally ill graduate student of color in my faculty, who I had never spoken to [who had lodged a complaint about one of her professors] started a campaign of calling me a racial abuser. It started with emails and it went to I think 28 videos on YouTube and 50 on TikTok. In one weekend she sent out 6000 emails, including to all email addresses in my university, calling me a racist … the more ill she became the accusations escalated to accusing of sexually assaulting her. The beauty of the algorithm of TikTok is it had 1,000 viewers.

CD, Peggy: I had three and half months of sick leave. I took it the day I received a letter from

the university lawyer saying that I was not cooperating [with the investigation]. As a senior leader I was failing to cooperate with management's handling of the situation. Suddenly I was the problem. I had a heart episode.

## *Institution-Serving Policies and Procedure*

Anyone who has ever been the target of negative workplace behavior in the academy knows there is seldom any satisfying resolution to the problem. In practice, carefully crafted policies and procedures, vigilant about procedural fairness, serve more to protect institutional reputation and avoid legal action than to protect and support the safety and well-being of faculty and staff (Sims, 2019). When leaders are in the midst of dealing with a grievance or investigation, it takes time to gain perspective and fully comprehend the dynamics of what is actually happening. They are bound by the collective agreement, workplace policy and procedure, and advice from the HR or university legal counsel. They are instructed to trust the process and have faith that the institution is there to protect and support them. The experience of these deans illustrates the problem:

> AU, Kate: I go to HR with this problem, and they've been in the loop all along, and they say: "Unless we've got a signed, sealed, written piece of evidence we can't take it anywhere." My argument is, I can't un-hear what I've heard. I don't care if something's on a piece of paper or not. So, building a case and being able to act is where I'm stuck at the moment. This is something that has been going on for almost a year. But if something goes belly up in the interim, I get my butt kicked. People are not taking responsibility.

> CD, Miriam: The University repeatedly asked me to provide evidence, even though they already had it. They had a team of people who were gathering it. I said, "Look it's traumatizing for me to supply it. … I can't go through 2 years of harassment and find the worst of it to give to you. I've done it three times already. I cannot do it again."

Matters pertaining to cases of wrongdoing are dealt with under the dome of confidentiality, often involving HR, faculty unions, external investigations, and sometimes university legal counsel. Rumors and speculation abound during the process, and seldom are the outcomes of an investigation made public. Universities are keen to keep internal problems out of public view, so that behind closed doors draft settlements are negotiated.

> AU, Rex: So basically, what they've done is they've bullshitted the senior management, totally destroyed my career and my reputation. I demanded they put it [complaint] in writing. When they eventually put it in writing, about a year later, it's like absolute bullshit, it's stuff you'd read and then you'd go, "You're kidding, is that actually an allegation of bullying?" But the damage has been done and they've gotten the traction they wanted because they've gone to the top and the people at the top basically bullied me. So, you've got bullying from underneath and bullying from on top, so it's kind of messed up.

> CD Miriam: When the President called, I thought he was going to say, "Oh, I'm so sorry about what's happening. You know, you have all of our support." Instead, he said, "You're causing me a heck of a problem with the Faculty Association and I don't want another article in the [newspaper] about this." I said, "But I am the victim here!"

## Collateral Damage

The dean (target/accused) involved in a faculty grievance or dispute is bound by requirements for confidentiality regarding any matters or people involved in the case. In the context of investigations of wrongdoing (e.g., bullying, sexual harassment), NDAs create a *curtain of secrecy* (Cunningham & Drumwright, 2021). NDAs can be harmful when used to silence the survivors of illegal and unethical behaviors or wrongdoing or to prevent people from publicly discussing their experience and the case (Rubin et al., 2023). They represent a classic example of institutional betrayal, intensifying the victim's

experience of harm when they realize that the organization, which is supposed to protect them, is actually focused on protecting the perpetrator and the reputation of the institution (Smith & Freyd, 2014). NDAs are "judicially enforceable machinery that shields wrongdoers from liability and protects them from public censure" (Finlay, 2023, para. 19). The victim is effectively silenced, and the facts (truth) of the case are left to speculation or never surface in the public realm. The institution is not held to account for its failure to protect targets/victims or to address the toxic workplace culture that allows these behaviors to persist. Here is a participant comment that illustrates this point:

> CD, Miriam: The investigator took 10 months to write a report while I was being abused, almost daily. I went to the provost and I said, "Please hurry up the investigation. The investigator said it would take between 3 and 6 months. She promised me it would be done 5 months ago…." He said, "You have to understand we must remain at arm's length from you. We have a code, we've hired an investigator, we're just waiting [for the report]." And I said, "I don't have my faculty association, I don't have your help, and you're going to remain at arm's length while watching me being brutalized."

Depending on the outcome of the grievance or dispute, and regardless of whether they are found blameworthy, the dean may be directed to "voluntarily" resign from their position, be dismissed without cause, or be shuffled to another "interim" position. The institution may deem the "incident" to have been disruptive, in some cases threatening reputational damage to the university, has contributed to a toxic work culture, and created divisions in the faculty, making it nearly impossible for the dean to continue in their leadership role. Namie (2017) reported that targets of workplace bullying are more likely to lose their job (56%) than perpetrators (36%). Of those numbers, "23% of targets leave their job voluntarily in order to preserve their health or sanity, 12% leave when working conditions are made worse, 8% are terminated by the employer, and 11% are transferred" (Anderson, 2021, p. 2). More than half of the deans in this study have left their positions before the completion of their term. The following comments reflect the tension deans experienced in being part of an investigation:

> CD, Miriam: I was called into the provost office and instructed not to talk about my situation with other deans because I was destroying their morale. It's whistleblowing and gaslighting to the extreme. I am really isolated from support. I was worried the head of security would be fired or disciplined because she was my ally.

> CD, Peggy: I believe they [senior admin] are starting to document my performance in case I come after them. I noticed the tone of communication was very, very careful and legalistic. I became the threat and the problem. They didn't expect me to come back from my [brief] sick leave and when I came back, I think they were shocked.

The lack of transparency in how issues are addressed, the silencing of the accused (target/victim), and little public acknowledgment of what has transpired leave much unresolved—as if the case never existed. The case is swept under the rug, with the inherent root of the problem left to fester, and a toxic culture continues to percolate. The perpetrator(s) remains protected, and in some cases, not held accountable for their wrongdoing. They may feel vindicated in their ability to annihilate the reputation of the accused, which, for an academic, can shatter their core identity and undermine their confidence in their own relevance, competency, and purpose.

For the target or victim, the outcome may be that they collapse, go on medical leave, resign, or take early retirement; others are able to leave for a position elsewhere (Westhues, 2006). Those who stay often adopt a mask of exterior calmness, disengaged, while internally continuing to experience mental distress, their body on high alert to avoid possible interactions with the instigator(s) and reminders of the traumatic experiences they endured. They are the *working wounded* (LaBier, 1986). All suffer some form of trauma from the psychological assault and institutional betrayal, with enduring impact on their mental and physical health.

AU, James: I still have anxiety, and I still take beta-blockers just before big meetings, or when I have to speak in front of a lot of people, just in case I experience this big rush of anxiety, anticipating what might happen. … Back when I really wasn't well, I nearly collapsed while giving a talk at a conference in front of a whole lot of professors and everything. It's just this rush, and I couldn't stand up.

## Institutional Betrayal

Institutional betrayal is a useful framework for conceptualizing the harm experienced by faculty leaders as targets of workplace incivility, bullying, and mobbing, and their reliance on workplace policy and procedure to support and protect them in the exercise of their responsibilities. *Institutional betrayal* is defined by Smith and Freyd (2013, 2014) as the harming of those dependent on the institution through its failure to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings committed within the context of the institution, where there is a reasonable expectation of protection.

Institutional betrayal also occurs when the institution responds negatively to reported traumatic events, such as reports of bullying, harassment, and mobbing (Smith & Freyd, 2014). A negative response includes not believing the victim, a prolonged investigation, requiring the victim to sign an NDA, and treating the victim as a complainer, troublemaker, and ineffective leader. The harm is both psychological, leading to emotional and physical distress, and pragmatic in its negative impact on institutional culture, faculty and staff retention, and productivity. Here are some examples shared by participants:

CD, Miriam: I had to get my own lawyer. The university wouldn't support me. The student charged me with racism. I went through five investigations—five unnecessary investigations without the university providing me any support. I was exonerated because I didn't do anything. So, I've spent $50,000 in legal costs, and accomplished nothing.

CD, Sarah: I think the biggest mistake I made in this whole thing was not getting my own lawyer early on. When I did, they were so horrified by what they were seeing that they wrote a letter to the chairman of the board of the university, a one-page letter saying, "What are you doing to protect your dean? That was disloyalty."

CD, Peggy: What I needed is the [university] lawyers, who we got involved at the very beginning because of the nature of what was happening in terms of the arbitration, was for them to say, "Peggy, this is inappropriate, and we'll stop this immediately." I needed them to stop it. And they didn't. That's all I needed.

AU, Rex: The way I have been treated [by senior admin] has been to cause me, what psychologists call adjustment disorder. So, at the moment I'm medicated because my doctor and my psychologist have said that the bullying has had such an impact on me that I really need to do that for my mental health. I'm a middle-aged man, I've never been on medication before. I think it's an indication of the sort of pressure and stress that I've been under in the last 18 months, because of the University management's unwillingness to abide by proper procedure.

In the case of workplace bullying, as a commitment to transparency, consideration needs to be given to the appropriate use of NDAs that silence victims and to examine ways to communicate the results of investigations to the broader academic community, including members of the faculty. Senior leaders need to demonstrate zero tolerance for workplace bullying in their commitment to addressing toxic workplace culture, holding perpetrators accountable, and upholding the institutional cultural qualities of how we are expected to work together. Investigations by unbiased third parties are important in terms of procedural fairness but can contribute to anxiety and frustration due to the confidential and protracted nature of the process. Institutional commitment is needed to address the root causes of bullying by ensuring the investigation goes beyond focusing on individual wrongdoers and seeks to uncover members who form networks of complicity that support unethical behavior, with an ultimate goal to disband these

networks and hold their members to account. This is an important step towards transforming culture to create a healthy, respectful workplace where people can feel safe and flourish.

Institutional commitment also involves providing resources to support survivors of workplace bullying who are likely feeling disenfranchised and isolated, and making provisions to help them transition back into the organization in a meaningful way. The pathway back to resilience for victims is to feel heard, understood, validated, and valued by the organization. They need support systems that provide counseling and mental health services to feel safe and to regain their faith in themselves and the institution.

## Conclusion

It is evident from recent research (Bosetti & Heffernan, 2021; Hollis, 2015; Keashly & Neuman, 2010; Tight, 2023; Twale & De Luca, 2008) and the testimonies of faculty deans in this study that, workplace bullying and incivility are prevalent and arguably endemic to academic culture and leadership in higher education. Institutions have an obligation to create a safe workplace environment and to have clear policies and procedures that explicitly define bullying and outline steps to be taken when incidents occur. The experiences of deans in this study reveal that institutional processes and human resources seldom advocate for the targets/victims of bullying, and middle management (i.e., faculty deans) do not benefit from the support of faculty unions, instead rely on support from senior executive leaders and legal counsel. Given the important role that faculty deans perform as academic leaders and managers, it can be a high financial cost to the institution not to recognize that upward bullying occurs and have mechanisms of support in place to address and mitigate the escalation of this harmful behavior. It can have a significant negative impact on workplace culture and productivity, as well as the health and well-being of those involved as targets, bystanders, and perpetrators.

We conclude with a call for institutional courage to invest in the mental health and well-being of their middle managers, and review policies and procedures that not only protect the institution from litigation and reputational damage, but also protect and support victims of upwards bullying. The following are recommendations from participants in this study regarding how deans and senior administrators can create systems of support.

### *Legal Counsel for Faculty Deans*

It is vitally important for deans to be well-versed in state/provincial Occupational Health and Safety Acts, Faculty Collective Agreements, or Enterprise Bargaining Agreements. It is important for deans to proactively develop a working relationship with HR and the faculty association. Deans in this study advise other deans to negotiate the right to legal representation on all matters in their contract of employment.

### *Informal Network of Support*

Deans are in a liminal space—no longer colleagues among faculty and yet not fully part of the senior executive leadership team. They are the middle manager. For their own mental health and resilience, it is important for deans to create their own trusted network of support with fellow deans, where under the dome of confidentiality, they have a safe space to laugh, talk about their experiences, feel validated and gain insight into how to navigate the university system. For example:

> CD Meghan: I have developed a network of women deans. From them I have learned "dial before you dig"—we don't have to work alone. There are supports, and so knowing who to reach out to and not being afraid to reach out. When I first became dean, I thought I had to figure it out all by myself. And then I realized that in a particularly difficult situation that actually all of these other offices exist to provide that kind of support. We have policies and procedures that we can draw on to provide that kind of support. And you know, just bringing together the right people to be around that table to help work through particularly difficult situations is really critical to the success that any one of us can have in these roles.

## Formal Network of Support

Senior leaders (i.e., the provost and vice president academic) usually hold scheduled weekly or monthly meetings with deans to check in, report back, and discuss university matters. This is an opportunity to create a platform of support for deans by encouraging them to share their experiences to increase feelings of connectedness and a sense of "being in this together." When senior leaders authentically model being vulnerable and share examples of their own struggles, not only does it contribute to creating a sense of psychological safety and holding space for collaborative problem-solving, but also to their willingness to bear witness and validate the challenges of being a leader (Rock & Verlanck, 2023).

> CD Peggy: What does support look like? I just wanted the President to say, "I believe you. I care about you. I'm so sorry this happened." People don't know how to say it. My support comes from other women deans and my family.

Institutions have a duty of care to provide support for the mental, physical, and psychological well-being of the employees. All universities have established Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) that employ clinical psychologists and provide provisions for employees to access their preferred counselling services. There have been a number of criticisms of EAP programs regarding how the services are used by the organization, and with confidentiality and conflict of interest (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2011; Namie & Namie, 2009). What is important is that deans are encouraged to access a good therapist to process workplace stress and the impact of bullying.

> AU Kate:  I look at [my colleague and fellow dean] and I'm very worried because she's doing this hard work, and I feel like apart from support from a couple of people, she's standing up there in front of everyone taking the heat and leading the charge. I think it's traumatic. I think that it lasts for a long time. I think we all need some counseling after doing this to deal with the post traumatic impact.

## Training and Development for Deans

There is little formal training and development to become a dean.  Most deans rise up through the administrative ranks (e.g., former department chair, associate dean) and learn about their role by doing it, relying on fellow deans for mentorship. Critical to being an effective dean is having highly developed interpersonal skills, the ability to engage in difficult conversations, strategies for conflict management and resolution, and the ability to recognize, avoid, and de-escalate potential upward bullying situations. Institutional commitment to building resilient leadership teams requires established mentoring and coaching programs, leadership development and training opportunities, and genuine care and support for the mental health of leaders.

## Effective Workplace Bullying Policies

It is important that all employees are trained in awareness, policies, and procedures for addressing workplace bullying. There needs to be an institutional commitment to thoroughly implementing policy fairly and consistently, and ideally to support a zero tolerance for workplace bullying. For example, a Canadian dean reflecting on the significance of workplace culture states, "I think I can be a lot clearer about what the code of conduct needs to look like within the School of Education, and together, with others, formulate examples of what it should and shouldn't be." Another Canadian dean shared a newsletter she sent out to faculty during a contentious period of change that outlines expectations for professional conduct. In the letter, she states:

> As we are all aware, there are significant changes to personnel and processes across the university and changes can result in frustration, confusion and anxiety, which is understandable. It is precisely times like these that we need to pay attention to our cultural qualities and how we work together. … As a school, we are dedicated to respectful conversations and collaborations, and I know this goes across all interactions in the university. We have a strong culture in our school and I encourage you to call out any behaviors that do not reflect

the cultural qualities we work within.

Workplace bullying is a complex, multi-caused problem that requires a whole suite of strategies for its prevention and management (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2011). Foremost, it requires institutional commitment to fostering a healthy workplace environment and providing sufficient mentorship, coaching, and support for deans to be effective, confident leaders.

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