*Article*

# Mentoring as a Way to Change a Culture of Academic Bullying and Mobbing in the Humanities

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**Abstract**

In 2009, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* defined 'academic mobbing' as 'a form of bullying in which members of a department gang up to isolate or humiliate a colleague'. In their call for a special issue on mobbing for *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*, editors Stephen Petrina and E. Wayne Ross explain that

> if rumors are circulating about the target's supposed misdeeds, if the target is excluded from meetings or not named to committees, or if people are saying the target needs to be punished formally 'to be taught a lesson', it's likely that mobbing is under way.

This article addresses academic mobbing at colleges and universities in the United States (US), surveying current literature on the topic and discussing three instances of mobbing in the humanities at a regional state university in the US. The article also proposes an innovative mentoring programme as a long-term solution to this problem of bullying.

Specifically, this article presents a mentoring model designed by a doctoral humanities student who has herself been mobbed; this model proposes mentoring at the graduate level to counteract and, it is hoped, eventually eliminate a culture of mobbing in the humanities at the doctoral student's current university and other schools. The graduate mentoring programme presented in this article

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seeks to change a culture of mobbing into one of cooperation and support, by helping the next generation of academics live up to the true creative, collaborative potential of the humanities.

**Keywords**

Academic bullying, academic mobbing, mentoring, graduate education, humanities

## Introduction

At first glance, mentoring and academic bullying might not seem to be related topics. This article argues that these topics are, in fact, closely connected and that mentoring provides a powerful weapon against the academic bullying that is far too prevalent in higher education in the United States (US). Our article first defines academic bullying and the related phenomenon of academic mobbing. Next, we provide a brief overview of our own and others' experiences of academic bullying and mobbing. Finally, our article offers a mentoring framework through which individuals and programmes can counter academic bullying and mobbing while the potential victims and perpetrators are still in graduate school and being socialized as future professionals in the humanities.

## Defining Academic Bullying and Mobbing

Scholars and researchers who study academic bullying and mobbing acknowledge that definition is a primary concern when addressing these subjects. Mathematics professor Wajngurt (2014) cites higher education specialist Elizabeth Farrington's definition of 'campus bullying' as 'behavior at colleges and universities that tends "to threaten, to intimidate, to humiliate or to isolate members of the working university environment [and] that undermines reputation or job performance"' (Wajngurt, 2014, p. 39). Wajngurt (2014, p. 40) further defines bullying as

> an escalating process in which the person who is bullied is in an inferior position. Bullying in the workplace is an act of aggression, and it is associated with high stress levels and lack of collegiality. The bullying employer demeans, humiliates, and intimidates employees as individuals.

Wajngurt and Farrington's definitions highlight features that many of us would associate with bullying—the intimidation, humiliation, isolation, aggression—and Haswell (2014) adds general 'misuse of power' that defines 'middle-school bullies all the way up to nations' (n.p.). Haswell's point is well taken by anyone who survived middle school. The same bullies who, as children, made life miserable for their fellow students continue, as adults, to make life miserable for their co-workers.

Academic mobbing is similar to bullying but, as its name implies, identifies bullying by a group rather than an individual. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2009) defines 'academic mobbing' as 'a form of bullying in which members of a department gang up to isolate or humiliate a colleague'. In their call for a special issue on mobbing for *Workplace: Journal for Academic Labor*, editors Petrina and Ross (2012) explain that

> if rumors are circulating about the target's supposed misdeeds, if the target is excluded from meetings or not named to committees, or if people are saying the target needs to be punished formally 'to be taught a lesson', it's likely that mobbing is under way. (n.p.)

As with bullying, the mob's weapons are isolation and harassment, their goal to intimidate the target into either submitting to whatever demands the mob has imposed or leaving the campus entirely.

These definitions of academic mobbing and bullying are, for the most part, effective, relying on their audience's personal knowledge for an immediate recognition of the problem. Anyone who has been bullied (or participated in bullying) carries visceral memories that fill gaps present in the definitions researchers construct of academic bullying and mobbing. Unfortunately, as Everett (2014) suggests, these gut-based definitions cannot sufficiently capture the nature or consequences of bullying and mobbing. Everett (2014) observes that unlike harassment, which can refer for validity to laws that specify 'protected categories', bullying 'is more subtle'; it is 'much harder to establish a pattern of bullying and can require that an employee document repeated offenses, which can take years' (n.p.). And yet, as Everett adds, bullying 'is pervasive in academia' and 'can undermine careers'. Given bullying's profoundly negative impact on those who devote their lives to academia, we want to go further than abstract definition and offer examples of bullying from the literature and our own experiences.

## Academic Bullying and Mobbing: Examples from the Literature and Personal Anecdote

The literature on academic bullying and mobbing is growing. *Workplace*'s special issue on academic mobbing is just one example of this research and includes several first-hand accounts of mobbing. For example, Denny (2014) relates his own 'cautionary tale' of mobbing 'as a gay man, a writing center director, and a pre-tenure faculty member'; Denny's story highlights the ways that mobbing normalizes itself as 'everyday' institutional behaviour rather than the destructive force that it is, so much so that Denny had 'never named what was happening to [him] as harassment' (p. 2).

In addition to publishing Denny's account of academic mobbing, the special issue of *Workplace* presents the stories of other victims, who relate their own cautionary tales of mobbing and bullying. Thus, Gorlewski, Gorlewski and Porfilio (2014) describe the mobbing of a 'non-white (and foreign-born)

instructor' (p. 13) who, within one year, went from successful, celebrated member of her department to professional outcast (p. 15). Johnson (2014) relates his own narrative of mobbing, which culminated in the stroke that this successful but tormented member of a School of Social Work experienced in the summer of 2012.

In addition, Morrison Kenney (2014) relates the story of 'Gertraud' whose experiences of workplace mobbing in the 1970s confirm not only the devastating effects of mobbing but the target's ability to 'recover' and be 'transformed' through the 'creative exercise of human agency' (p. 43). Rounding out *Workplace*'s special issue is an account (Peña, Martin, López & Moheno, 2014) of graduate students who are used as 'proxy mobbing targets' (p. 19) in political battles among their professors.

The *Workplace* issue is only the latest in a growing body of research that examines or, perhaps more accurately, exposes academic bullying and mobbing. Keashly and Neuman (2013) identify Carroll Brodsky, Heinz Leymann and Andrea Adams as pioneers in the 1970s and 1980s of research into workplace bullying and mobbing broadly defined (i.e., not confined to academic workplaces). Lester (2013) notes, however, that while workplace bullying has been studied for several decades, 'little is known about workplace bullying in higher education' (p. vii). This lack of research and scholarship has changed in recent years, with Lester's (2013) edited collection on academic bullying as well as Twale and De Luca's (2008) *Faculty Incivility*, Khoo's (2010) 'Academic Mobbing', and Hollis' (2012) *Bully in the Ivory Tower*. The journal *Workplace*'s special issue and texts by Lester, Twale and De Luca, Khoo and Hollis signal that academic bullying and mobbing are garnering increased attention. This slight but noticeable upswing in scholarly attention does not mean that no research was conducted on academic bullying and mobbing prior to the last half-decade. Notable researchers preceding more recently published peers include Nelson and Lambert (2001), Westhues (2004, 2005, 2006) and Halbur (2005).

As a whole, the literature on academic bullying and mobbing indicates that although this subject has been on researchers' radar for about two decades, the topic has gained momentum in recent years. One reason for this interest may be that, as Hollis (2012) explains, each story we read of academic bullying 'brings vivid memories of many episodes of bullying before it was labeled as a cancer in the workplace' (p. ix). In other words, academics are responding to studies of workplace bullying because the tales they tell are familiar to almost anyone who has worked in a college or university. For our own part, we, the three authors of this article, can all relate to the stories of academic bullying found in the literature. We too have experienced bullying, in our case, at the US university where the three of us worked together, two while serving as faculty members and the third while pursuing her doctoral degree.

In this article, we do not intend to present many details of our experiences of bullying. Accounts of academic bullying and mobbing are critically important in raising awareness of this problem; however, we are concerned that describing these disturbing events could overshadow the primary goal of our article, which is to present solutions. Suffice to say that we represent the spectrum of academic

bullying in the humanities. One of us is a tenured full professor and senior member of her department, who began to be mobbed by co-workers over 20 years ago, when she first arrived at our university as a tenure-track assistant professor. Despite this professor's two decades of success in teaching, scholarship and service, the mobbing she has endured has irretrievably shaped her career, to the point that countless hours and years of productivity have been lost fighting bullies.

Another author of this article also began at our university as a tenure-track assistant professor in the humanities, and her mobbing also began while she was in a vulnerable, pre-tenure role. Her mobbing story differs from that of her tenured colleague in that she left the university while still an assistant professor, preferring a new job over the one she had held. However, this former faculty member is learning that while she has effectively removed herself from the physical site of bullying, she will suffer the professional and personal effects of bullying for years to come.

Finally, one of the authors of this article is a doctoral student in the humanities. Although she now has only her dissertation to complete to earn her PhD, her journey to this point has not been easy. In addition to the usual woes suffered by humanities graduate students (poverty, overwork and fear of a tight job market), she has also faced academic bullying by professors who have sought to harm her both on her own account and also as a proxy for her faculty mentors.

The literature on academic bullying and mobbing indicates that our experiences of this phenomenon are not unusual. In addition, the literature reveals that bullying is certainly not unique to the university at which the three of us worked and studied together. More research is needed, but our suspicion is that academic bullying and mobbing are endemic to colleges and universities across the US. Still, we do not wish to recount our experiences of bullying so much as to move beyond them or, as Morrison Kenney (2014) states, to 'transform' them through the 'creative exercise of human agency' (p. 43). For us, this transformational agency is mentoring, and the remainder of this article describes a model for mentoring graduate students that will, we hope, forge a new path of cooperation and support for current and future professionals in the humanities.

## Connection–Cultivation–Integration (CCI): Countering Academic Bullying and Mobbing through Graduate Student Mentoring

Bullying has many insidious effects, among them lost productivity, reduced morale and extreme stress that can lead to psychological and physical illness. These effects create dysfunctional departments in which professors can barely do their jobs, graduate students struggle to finish their degrees and both professors and graduate students become disheartened and discouraged with the academic career they have chosen. In response to the problem of academic bullying, we offer a mentoring model for graduate students in the humanities that, we believe, can intervene early enough in the socialization of future academics to counter successfully the devastating effects of bullying.

Specifically, this article presents a three-step mentoring model designed by one of the authors (Metzger) as part of her dissertation research. Called *connection–cultivation–integration (CCI)*, the model can make students aware of academic bullying and ensure these students have their own distinctive sense of judgement and strength to withstand the bullying they may face in graduate school and their future career.

The literature and our own experiences demonstrate that bullying is part of the culture of the humanities. As humanities professionals, we find this ironic since, as Nussbaum (1997) explains, education in the humanities is ideally transformative, going beyond mere rote learning, control and hierarchy to help students develop as professionals and become citizens of the world. Like us, Nussbaum (1997) acknowledges that humanities departments have not lived up to their ideals when she states, 'We are now trying to build an academy that will overcome defects of vision and receptivity that marred the humanities departments of earlier eras, an academy in which no group will be invisible' (p. 163). Nussbaum calls for education to give voice to marginalized figures, including, we would add, those bullied within the academy.

Building on Nussbaum's (1997) work, we propose a mentoring programme for humanities graduate students that moves beyond teaching students to be passive learners but assists them in becoming active members of the profession. Mentoring should work towards this goal, with students undergoing intellectual *and* social transformation so that they learn to navigate the complex political structures of higher education. Simply put, if we want the next generation of humanities specialists to flourish professionally, they must be mentored as self-sufficient individuals able to stand on their own. Only in this way will these young academics be able to resist the temptation to bully and know how to manage a bully if they are themselves targeted.

In this mentoring model, we draw from not only Nussbaum (1997) but also Mayo (2003), who claims that the only way to change a system is to mentor students within it, pushing them towards a successful career in addition to a fulfilling intellectual life. If the humanities are to be transformed, they must be transformed from the inside out, with students made aware of educational structures and how humanities departments should operate (i.e., without the menace of academic bullying or mobbing). The best way to transform the academy is to help students recognize and change institutional problems such as academic bullying. This goal in mind, we outline our model for graduate student mentoring in Figure 1.

***Connection.*** As Figure 1 indicates, CCI is a three-phase model, each phase involving the elements of *stage*, *purpose*, *interaction* and *subject*. Mentoring starts in the connection phase, when a student makes initial contact with a potential mentor. The connection phase begins when the student meets or interacts with the mentor in various educational, professional or social contact zones. These zones could be classes the student takes with the potential mentor, workshops that the mentor gives and the student attends, department committees on which both mentor and student serve or department-sponsored social gatherings

**CONNECTION**
- **Stage:** An introductory stage of mentoring
- **Purpose:** Meeting students/mentees in class or professional/social contact zones
- **Interaction:** Minimal interactions and time between parties
- **Subject:** Questions/answers on a broad variety of topics

**CULTIVATION**
- **Stage:** A developed stage of mentoring
- **Purpose:** Meeting students/mentees on a regular basis
- **Interaction:** Moderate interactions and time between parties
- **Subject:** Questions/answers on specific topics of interest

**INTEGRATION**
- **Stage:** A collaborative stage of mentoring
- **Purpose:** Meeting students/mentees regularly
- **Interaction:** Frequent interactions and time between parties
- **Subject:** Questions/answers on highly specialized areas of interest for both parties

**Figure 1.** A Model for Mentoring: Connection–Cultivation–Integration (CCI)

**Source:** Angela Metzger.

that both mentor and student attend. Regardless of the exact nature, these contact zones are where the connection is first made between mentor and mentee and the process of guidance begins. It is difficult to quantify or describe qualitatively the reasons that attract students to a possible mentor or the reasons that a mentor is willing to take on a new mentee. As humanists, our experience has shown us that the most likely reasons stem from the mentor and mentee's shared intellectual interests and a shared temperament regarding ways to approach and study these interests. In the connection phase, the professor and student have known one another for a limited time, and as such their conversations may cover a wide variety of topics as each party gets to know the other. In terms of mentoring, these initial meetings are the times when the mentor first models appropriate professional behaviours for the mentee. Ideally, this modelling will guide the student away from negative actions such as bullying and, in place of these destructive behaviours, establish a rapport that supports cooperative learning and positive interactions with professors and peers.

***Cultivation.*** Mentoring as well as graduate education involves not just intellectual training but socialization or acculturation into a community and its shared practices. For example, graduate students who witness or hear about academic bullying are at risk of taking up this negative behaviour if they perceive or are taught that this behaviour is accepted or, worse, rewarded. To ensure that graduate students learn to interact with peers in positive ways, the next phase of CCI, cultivation, is crucial. Cultivation involves a higher dependence on the mentor by the student. Interactions are more frequent than in the connection phase and can cover anything from discussions of coursework and advice about selecting an area of specialization to advice about negotiating department politics or preparing for an

academic job search. Knowing each other much better than in the connection phase, mentor and mentee focus on topics specific to the mentee and his or her development as a professional in the humanities. Given the personal nature of the topics discussed, the cultivation phase cannot begin until the student has established trust with the mentor. Trust allows the mentor, as a practicing professional, to 'cultivate' professional behaviours in the mentee and lead the student in positive directions, including away from the temptation to view bullying as normal or to engage in bullying. In the CCI model, mentors guide students in their intellectual pursuits as well as towards social practices beneficial to their future and the community as a whole.

***Integration.*** The final phase of CCI, integration, occurs when the mentor engages with the mentee not so much as a graduate student but as an emerging peer newly 'integrated' into a community of scholars. In this phase, both parties collaborate on highly specialized disciplinary projects such as the student's dissertation. The integration phase begins after the mentor and mentee have been working together for a significant amount of time, anywhere from several months to at least a year. In modelling a collaborative or peer relationship for the mentee, the mentor shows the emerging humanist what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour not only intellectually (e.g., preparing a dissertation) but also professionally, directing the mentee away from divisive practices such as bullying and toward interactions based in respect. Professor and student may also explicitly address academic bullying and mobbing. For example, the mentor and mentee may discuss bullying and, if needed, plan ways to combat bullying or mobbing if it is occurring to the graduate student or a peer. Although still a mentee in need of guidance, the graduate student ideally interacts as a colleague with the mentor, who treats the mentee's ideas and opinions with the respect that should be afforded an equal in rank. In cases of bullying or mobbing, the mentee and mentor may, as a team, discuss ways to contest the bullying and protect themselves or others from this abuse. Also discussed may be positive ways to counter bullying, for instance, by creating supportive professional networks whose collegiality, mutual respect and goodwill can undermine the poisonous environments that bullying generates. The culmination of the three-step CCI model, the integration phase is capped by the student's recognition of their worth as a colleague in a field of equals, not a member of a dystopian playground of bullies and victims, mobs and targets.

## Mentoring for Change: Practical Advice, Desired Results

The focus of this article is model building: specifically, to present a model for graduate student mentoring in the humanities that can, in theory, counter the devastating effects of bullying in American colleges and universities. In offering the CCI model, the article represents a first step in changing a culture in which bullying and mobbing are accepted and, in certain cases, rewarded. Further research, in which the model is put into practice, is needed to determine whether the model is, in fact, effective. Laying the groundwork for this future research,

we offer the following practical advice for implementing this model and describe the effects that might result from use of the model.

To begin, the CCI model would be most effective if it were implemented both from the 'grassroots' level (i.e., faculty and graduate students working independently with the model) and from the 'top down' (i.e., deans, provosts, and other high-level administrators supporting faculty and students' efforts to change the culture). In our case, we have worked within our small circle of humanities faculty and doctoral students to effect change at the grassroots level. To some extent, our efforts have been successful, for example, in protecting graduate students from academic bullying and mobbing. However, we have also experienced firsthand the limits of grassroots efforts, and, thus, we recommend implementing the CCI model with as much administrative support as possible.

Among their many duties, administrators are responsible for academic affairs and for the efficient management of their campuses. The literature on academic bullying and mobbing highlights the ways that this behaviour hinders a college or university's operations: lost productivity among faculty and students, delayed graduation for students who experience bullying, victims' careers and reputations destroyed and programmes damaged as factions and animosity develop among a programme's members. Given bullying's destructive effect on the institution as a whole, humanities faculty and graduate students would likely find administrators receptive to a model such as CCI, whose primary goal is to counter the bullying that strains campus resources and reduces productivity. As academics, we know that, in keeping with long-standing practices of shared governance, humanities faculty will have to be the ones who transform their disciplines; edicts from the central administration are unlikely to lead to change. Nevertheless, we believe that humanities faculty, graduate students and administrators can be partners in changing the culture of their campuses. As they mentor graduate students, humanities faculty are certainly best equipped to implement the steps of CCI described in the previous section of this article. Still, administrative support (material and institutional) is critical if the CCI model is to succeed.

With respect to results, only a formal study of the CCI model can determine the actual effects of the model's implementation. However, at this stage of model building, we can speculate as to the results of CCI that, in our estimation, are not only possible but desirable. The desired results are best explained by humanities professor Boeck (2014), who contends that 'institutions of higher education should be paragons of merit equality and justice, dedicated to improving society as a whole…and their graduates are supposed to be ethical, humanitarian citizens' (p. 108). Anyone who has experienced academic bullying and mobbing knows that Boeck's image of the academy is idealized. Nevertheless, it is an ideal to which the CCI model aspires.

The literature on academic bullying demonstrates that among US institutions of higher education, Boeck's paragons of justice and ethics are not easy to find. Instead, the culture is frequently one in which faculty compete, often viciously and over extended periods of time, for dominance over fellow faculty and the graduate students entrusted to their care. This article and other texts have already

described the deleterious effects of this culture of bullying. By contrast, CCI emphasizes, at each phase, the modelling and explicit expectation of behaviours based in respect, cooperation and collaboration. The faculty mentor and graduate student commit to the mentee's intellectual development in the humanities as well as to the mentee's emerging membership in a community of scholars.

All too often, graduate students in the humanities are brought into a culture in which bullying and mobbing are the norm. This negative 'mentoring' is probably unintentional. Patterns of bad behaviour build up over years, if not decades, and are then transmitted to graduate students as they observe their professors' everyday actions and then replicate these behaviours, first as students and later as the next generation of humanities professionals. The CCI model seeks to break this cycle. As this article explains, the phases of connection, cultivation and integration are not haphazard but methodical and progressive, each phase building on the previous one and carefully incorporating the elements of stage, purpose, interaction and subject.

Ultimately, as humanities professionals who have experienced academic bullying, we understand that the ideal CCI offers will be difficult to realize. Recent, growing interest among academics in the topic of bullying is encouraging. However, this interest may be too late for current generations of humanities professionals who have either benefitted from academic bullying and mobbing or been driven out of the field. Focusing on graduate students, the CCI model offers interested faculty a method through which they can consciously prepare the next generation to become humanists in the truest sense of the word. Boeck's (2014) reference to 'ethical, humanitarian citizens' (p. 108) expresses her desire that all higher education graduates live these ideals. Nevertheless, as humanities professionals, we cannot help but notice that Boeck's description perfectly captures the desired result of the CCI model. Presently, CCI is an untested model, one that will take years of effort by faculty and supportive administrators to implement. Decades of rigorous study will also be needed to determine if the model is effective. Regardless, we present the CCI model as an initial step in changing a culture of academic bullying and mobbing to one in which humanists not only foster but embody 'ethical, humanitarian citizens'.

## Conclusion

The CCI model is predicated on a simple idea. If graduate students are mentored to understand that they and their peers have value as contributors to the humanities, then bullying and mobbing lose some of their power to infect academic communities. Key to the CCI model is the agency or students' gradual, directed awareness of themselves as actors in the creative enterprise of the humanities, as individuals who can reject toxins such as bullying and mobbing. As humanists, we should focus our energies on mentoring future professionals so that they can stand up for themselves and others and re-craft the academic landscape into one of cooperation and respect. Only by working towards this goal can we help future generations live up to the true creative, collaborative potential of the humanities.

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**Sharon Sieber** is a Professor of Spanish and Comparative Literature at Idaho State University. Her research involves the study of time as a foundation for postmodernism, especially with regard to the study of simultaneous time and different kinds of realism in Latin American and North American twentieth century literature and film. She has been a Fulbright scholar to Colombia, a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) participant in Mexico, and an NEH panelist.