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Harm-Free Instructional Spaces

CUPE 3287 Survey Report

In recent months, our local has responded to an increasing number of incidents involving abusive behaviour by students directed at instructors. Some of these incidents have been extremely disturbing in nature.

As part of our response to this situation, our local developed a survey instrument intended to gather information about the extent and character of abusive conduct directed against our members, which was released in mid-February, 2024. The survey was designed and implemented chiefly by Vice-President Jeffrey Klassen, who deserves special thanks for taking on this task.

Thank you also to the 77 sessional faculty (about 24% of our actively teaching membership) who responded to the survey. It is noteworthy, that the University of Saskatchewan Faculty Association conducted a similar survey in early 2024 and obtained very similar results.

CUPE 3287 intends to use the information gathered in the survey to compel the University to develop revised policies and procedures regarding how this sort of abusive conduct can be reported by those affected, regarding consequences for students who engage in abusive conduct, and to implement measures to help ensure that our instructional spaces remain harm-free.

Overall Summary

Our survey garnered 77 responses and revealed that out of our 77 respondents, **at least 35 (45.45%) reported encountering abusive behavior from students**. In 24 instances the abuse occurred within the last two years, and in 8 instances, the abusive behavior is still ongoing. Nine respondents witnessed another instructor being subject to abuse from a student.

Those who have faced abuse most commonly encountered this behavior in teaching evaluations, in email, and in the physical classroom.

The most common type of abuse involved the degradation and/or questioning of an instructor's expertise, followed by defamatory claims and insults and attacks on personal characteristics. In only two cases was the abusive behavior addressed through a formal complaint via the Discrimination and Harassment Policy or the Non-Academic Misconduct Policy. **In at least 93.75% of cases, no formal complaint was filed.**

Approximately 35% of respondents perceive an increase in harmful behaviors initiated by students within instructional spaces over the last two years. Comments from our members on the survey highlighted the acute need for better communication and leadership from the university administration in order to address this rise in harmful behaviours.

A statistical summary begins on the following page.

Statistical Summary by Question

1. During your time working at the U of S, have you encountered abusive behaviour from current or former students? (77 respondents)

Yes – 45.45% (35)

No – 54.55% (42)

2. Forums in which this abuse occurred (32 respondents)

In the physical classroom (face-to-face) – 43.75% (14)

In a virtual meeting (Zoom, WebEx, etc.) – 18.75% (6)

E-mail – 50.00% (16)

Social media – 18.75% (6)

Comments in teaching evaluations – 62.50% (20)

RateMyProfessor.com – 37.50% (12)

Other (please specify) – 25.00% (8)

Other (summary):

- In physical meetings, in office hours (4)
- To other students who report such statements (1)
- Other (uncategorizable) (4)

3. Please select all descriptors that apply to the abuse you faced (32 respondents)

Defamatory claims – 53.13% (17)

Degradation, questioning of your expertise – 84.38% (27)

Targeting a group you belong to (i.e., speech that is sexist, racist, homophobic, etc.) – 21.88% (7)

Inappropriately sexual language or behaviour – 15.63% (5)

Insults and attacks on other personal characteristics – 53.13% (17)

Threats to your personal safety – 15.63% (5)

Other (please specify) – 15.63% (5)

Other (summary):

- Use of profanity (2), emotional manipulation (1)
- Other (uncategorizable) (2)

4. When did the abuse occur? (32 respondents)

More than two years ago – 50.00% (16)

Within the last two years – 50.00% (16)

It is still ongoing – 25% (8)

5. Did you file a discrimination/harassment complaint or open a Non-Academic Misconduct file in regards to the abuse? (32 respondents)

Yes – 6.25% (2)

No – 93.75% (30)

6. Have you witnessed abuse against another instructor? (41 respondents)

Yes – 21.95% (9)

No – 78.04% (32)

7. Regardless of whether you have personally experienced abuse, do you perceive an increase in harmful behaviours initiated by students within instructional spaces over the past two years? (66 respondents)

Yes – 34.85% (23)

No – 65.15% (43)

The survey also included the following open-ended questions:

- With regard to your own personal experience or that of others you have witnessed, do you have any suggestions on how to improve the situation on campus regarding verbal abuse and other harmful behaviours?
- Is there any other relevant information you would like to share with us?

Responses to these questions yielded recurring suggestions:

- Clearer communication from the employer to help students understand what constitutes unacceptable behavior. Suggested methods included a visible solidarity campaign and a standard section on student conduct in syllabus templates.
- Better leadership from tenured faculty, departments heads, and deans as there is a perception that such individuals tend to side with students.
- Recognition of the unique vulnerability of sessional lecturers, whose qualifications are often questioned or attacked, emphasizing that they are equally qualified despite their contract status.
- Calls for a tougher approach, such as immediate expulsion, to address abusive student behavior.
- Criticism of the Student Learning Experience Questionnaire (SLEQ) as biased and problematic, with a demand for more transparency to prevent anonymous abusive comments.
- A need for increased resources to help students manage and resolve conflicts and stress.
- A perception that today's students harbor faulty notions of entitlement, believing they have the power to challenge their instructors if they are simply dissatisfied with the materials or assessments.