

# CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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## Negative Interactions with Faculty: Graduate Student Experiences

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Over the past few years, there has been increasing interest in the study of the mistreatment of individuals in the workplace. This type of mistreatment, while difficult to define, includes behaviors such as belittling employees publicly, yelling or shouting, and simply ignoring the individual. These behaviors have consequences that are well documented and wide-ranging and include headaches (Bassman, 1992), memory loss (Einarsen, 1999), and even post-traumatic stress disorder (Leymann, 1996). Workplace mistreatment has also been found to have negative effects on worker productivity (Bassman, 1992; Quigley, 1999), and employee turnover (Leymann, 1990).

In addition to workplace settings, some psychological mistreatment research has been conducted in educational settings. For instance, researchers have found evidence of medical student abuse (e.g., Baldwin, Daugherty, & Eckenfels, 1990; Silver & Glicker, 1990), as well as law student mistreatment (e.g., Elkins, 1985). It has been suggested that this abuse has various negative effects on students, including decreased levels of self-esteem (Silver, 1982), and increased levels of stress (Silver & Glicker, 1990).

While there has been some attention paid to the mistreatment experienced by medical and law students at the hands of faculty, prior to the current study little research has looked into the phenomenon of graduate student abuse. Our preliminary examination of graduate students at Wayne State University begins to fill this research gap by exploring the nature and effects of negative interactions by faculty toward graduate students.

### Method

Students from various academic departments around the university were asked to respond to questions regarding negative incidents with faculty, as well as questions relating to their methods of coping, their possible intentions regarding turnover, and their general health.

### Participants

Participants were graduate students enrolled at Wayne State

University. One hundred thirty-eight of the 163 students contacted agreed to participate, yielding a response rate of 82%.

### Measures

Researchers used four different measures, described below, to get a picture of the graduate student experience.

**Negative Incidents Measure.** This measure was developed for the study using items from a review article on emotional abuse by Keashly (1998), as well as items from focus groups conducted with graduate students prior to this study (see [Table 1](http://www.campus-adr.org/CMHER/ReportArticles/Edition1_3/jktable1.html) ([http://www.campus-adr.org/CMHER/ReportArticles/Edition1\\_3/jktable1.html](http://www.campus-adr.org/CMHER/ReportArticles/Edition1_3/jktable1.html)) for specific items). Five subscales were developed using items from this list reflecting different forms of mistreatment: **neglect, hostile direct, hostile indirect, sexual harassment, and racial harassment.**

**Coping with Harassment Scale.** Students were asked how they coped with negative interactions with faculty (see examples of specific items on [Table 2](http://www.campus-adr.org/CMHER/ReportArticles/Edition1_3/jktable2.html) ([http://www.campus-adr.org/CMHER/ReportArticles/Edition1\\_3/jktable2.html](http://www.campus-adr.org/CMHER/ReportArticles/Edition1_3/jktable2.html))).

**Intention to Turnover Scale.** Students were asked three questions regarding their intentions to turnover. The questions were based on an Intention to Turnover scale reported in Camman, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1979).

**General Health Questionnaire.** Students were asked to answer 12 questions regarding their general health on a scale developed by Goldberg (1978).

### Procedure

30-minute telephone interviews were conducted by graduate students for a graduate seminar on survey research methods using the Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) lab at Wayne State University.

## Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to take a preliminary look into the nature and effects of negative interactions with faculty toward graduate students. While graduate students reported predominantly positive experiences, it was found that negative incidents do occur between faculty and graduate students, and that the incidents include a range of different kinds of negative behavior.

### **Nature and Effects of Mistreatment**

[Table 1](#) provides information on the percentage of students reporting mistreatment by faculty that occurred as frequently as sometimes to often. The graduate student mistreatment items that occurred most frequently were faculty behaviors classified as "neglectful" (see [Table 1](#)). The three most frequently reported items were "gave little or no feedback on your performance on projects or exams," "has not clearly defined the goals for the course despite repeated requests to do so," and "failed to provide guidance to you on your work." While workplace research has found mostly hostile direct behaviors being reported (Baron & Neuman, 1996), graduate student mistreatment was composed of mostly neglectful behaviors. Perhaps this is because direct forms of abuse are not tolerated by institutions of higher education, or because the ambiguity of neglectful behaviors makes these behaviors "safer" for the perpetrators.

### **Coping with Mistreatment**

The results of the study (see [Table 2](#)) showed that coping mechanisms are different based on the type of mistreatment. Talking to friends or family about the mistreatment was the most frequently occurring coping response for both minor and major incidents with faculty, however the coping responses differed for minor and major incidents otherwise. Emotion focused coping, where individuals manage their emotional responses internally rather than doing something about the problem, was used for minor negative incidents most often. This may be because students view minor negative situations as too ambiguous to warrant direct action, or they are unsure of the significance of the event. On the other hand, problem-focused coping, which involves the individual solving the problem directly, was used for major negative incidents.

### **Intention to Leave and General Health**

There was a significant relationship found between mistreatment items and two of the three intention to leave items. Specifically, results of the study showed that the greater the frequency of mistreatment experienced by students, the stronger the intention to leave the program and the university in general. Students' general health was also negatively affected by mistreatment by faculty.

## **Implications**

**T**here are several implications associated with this preliminary study.

First, results show that, while not very frequent, there does indeed exist a phenomenon of graduate student mistreatment.

Second, the mistreatment behaviors being reported by students are primarily of a neglectful nature. These behaviors may be as damaging to students as more overtly hostile behaviors, such as swearing. If faculty were made aware of how damaging their acts of neglect were, perhaps they would engage in them to a lesser extent.

Third, the current study focused on the organization as a whole; in this case, the focus was on graduate students from all disciplines at Wayne State University. However, each department in a university has its own subculture, and some departments may be more abusive than others. Further research may uncover important differences between academic departments in this regard.

Fourth, this study found that student mistreatment was related to intentions to quit school and toward being a student altogether. These findings are significant for school administrators concerned with student retention rates. Perhaps the reduction of negative interactions with faculty will curb student attrition rates.

Finally, this preliminary study found evidence that mistreatment may affect general student health, and that these effects are not trivial. Interestingly, the directly hostile mistreatment items did not correlate significantly with the General Health Questionnaire, but the neglectful mistreatment items did. Thus, neglectful behavior by faculty is both prevalent and damaging to graduate students health.

This preliminary examination of the nature and effects of negative interactions with faculty yielded some interesting findings. However further research on a broader scale is necessary so that interventions can be designed appropriately to improve the situation.

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