

Anti-doxxing and anti-harassment: the role of institutions, colleagues, and advocates in supporting at-risk scholars

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What this document is and who it's for

Targeted online harassment is an endemic problem in academia today. This harassment sometimes takes the form of doxxing, the practice of publishing someone's private information without their consent. This kind of harassment is politically and ideologically motivated, most often from the organized far-right. The most vulnerable people in academia are also those who are most at risk of harassment and doxxing. This includes academic practitioners who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), queer, female, or doing work related to race, racism, gender, anti-oppression, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), and related research areas. It includes people who are in their early career, without tenure or other institutional power and protection, and particularly includes people who are in more than one of these categories.

The goal of harassment is to isolate, frighten, and demoralize the target, so institutions, colleagues, and advocates can play a critical role in obstructing harassers' efforts by assuring the target of continued support and providing community resources. Institutions and leaders can also support at-risk people by making anti-harassment training a priority for staff.

People targeted by online harassment and doxxing face a lot of risks. In addition to the actual harassment itself, targeted people often experience a number of the following scenarios:

- Can prompt person to leave their position because the experience was so traumatizing;
- Disciplinary action from the institution directed at the targeted person;
- Targeted person not retained on tenure track/fired;

- No institutional support;
- Targeted person disengaging from public dialogue, social media;
- Colleagues who have no idea what is going on and can't provide support because of it;
- Targeted person is told to respond by working harder, eg "publish and be as good a scholar as you can be" and "don't focus on it, it will go away";
- Targeted person can be seen as a troublemaker/source of the problem/ reflecting poorly on the institution.

Supporting someone targeted by online harassment or at risk of becoming targeted

For faculty, librarians, staff, and other allies & advocates

One of the main goals of a harassment or doxxing attack is to isolate an individual, because as a single person against this group of attackers has very little power, energy, and can be easily overwhelmed by the situation. Therefore, one of the best things colleagues can do is to fully support someone who is at risk or experiencing these attacks. The most effective forms of support are institutional, so colleagues should work together to make the institution and its leadership aware of the problem and lobby them to take steps to offer support.

Steps for advocates

- Make an assessment of what your institution offers for support:
 - Does your institution have policies for responding to a campaign of targeted harassment?
 - Does your IT Dept/campus safety/union/admin have an action plan for quick response if it's asked for help in an emergency?
 - What are your communications/public relations departments' policies for speaking publicly about incidents like these?
 - How about the administrators/leaders of your unit?
 - What kind of therapeutic resources are available for staff, students, and/or faculty? Does your university's mental health center have a victim advocacy team or other specialized resources who can help in an emergency?
 - If not, does your university mental health center have a list of mental health professionals they can provide a referral for the targeted individual?
 - If available, are these services provided at no cost by your institution? Are there low cost options provided?
- Make a list of targets for instituting new/updated policy and other resources:
 - Who has the power to make these things happen?
 - Make a list of your specific asks/demands for how the institution can improve its response (review this document in its entirety to create a list of these demands)
- Offer a workshop, or series of workshops, on proactive actions to support targeted people:
 - [LFP preventative guidelines offer a list of potential workshop actions](#)
- Prepare to have these conversations with admin, IT, HR, etc by [reviewing talking points](#)

Creating more supportive institutional policies

- Getting started
 - Make sure to consider implications for: PR, HR, IT, security, the person's department, the institution as a whole.

- Also, consider the need to involve the institution's board of trustees or legal department in policy changes.
- After you've identified your institution's policies, pinpoint one (or more) you'd like to see changed, and organize.
- Make it part of the policies that all information should be located in an easy accessible location. Not being able to have a clear path to information adds to the frustration and stress of the targeted individual.
- Good policies should address
 - All the resources targeted individuals will need to continue in their position at the institution
 - How the institution will publicly support a targeted person
If the institution has a fund to provide financial relief that would be clearly stated and if not then where to look for assistance.
- Support statements
 - A public statement of support of a targeted individual is a powerful tool. Often, large institutions decline to make such statements on behalf of the institution. However, bodies of faculty, departments, and/or other professional membership organizations can make statements of support in the absence of institutional leadership. For example, see the [resolution passed by the Cornell University Library Academic Assembly \(of Librarians\)](#) in support of one of their members.

For institutional leadership and administration

Doxxing and harassment is a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issue in academia, because the targets are often people of color, women, LGBTQ faculty or staff, targeted for their identities or for conducting public scholarship about issues of race, gender, equity, etc. In order for academic institutions to meet their DEI priorities, protection for these vulnerable people is paramount.

Institutional support statement

The University's public response is critical, and needs to be crafted with care. Tepid university responses can individualize the problem, as the focus is on the one specific incident triggering the public outcry, and further perpetuating harm.

Support does not end with a public statement. The targeted person should also be contacted directly by someone within the institution who has the power to advocate on their behalf.

Direct support to person targeted

- Start by checking in on the targeted person and ask if they're okay. Let them know that support is available and they don't have to go through this experience alone.
 - Assign a support person to be the targeted person's advocate. Allow for targeted individuals to choose someone within the institution they trust.
 - Have a list of support options available, as well as an established workflow so they aren't performing extra labor to initiate the task.
- Potential support options:
- Can the targeted person have their regular work responsibilities reduced or offloaded to another staff person during this time?

- If so, the department head and the targeted individual should discuss how they want to address with their colleagues the reduction of workload for work relationships to not be compromised.
- Does the institution have any type of shared leave program that provides the opportunity for employees to donate some of their leave to individuals that have exhausted or nearly exhausted their leave? Targeted individuals will need time to come to terms with their harassment and reorganize their life around their harassment and will need extra time.
- If there is no shared leave program, are there any other ways the targeted person's available leave can be flexible?
- Is the individual's unit/institution willing to relocate individuals to a new office location?
- Is the unit/institution willing to offer remote work if the targeted individual's position duties can be done from home?
- Are there counseling or other mental health services provided by the employer health insurance?

Create departmental procedures in advance

Having departmental procedures ready to address the steps needed to be taken when harassment begins will move things forward and harassed individuals to be supported at a faster pace.

Departmental procedures should include:

- Guidelines on how to approach informing department staff that one of their colleagues is facing harassment. Questions the guidelines should answer are:
 - How much detail should department staff be given about what the targeted colleague is facing? The details shared should be consulted with the targeted employee and signed off by them before they are informed to the whole department.
 - Consulting with the targeted employee is extremely important as some employees had experiences that were not supportive. For example, this employee that faced doxing had this to say, *"I think the private messages and the advice to not engage or pretend it isn't happening made me feel as though I was not allowed to talk about it. This meant that I did not feel like I could tell my colleagues that I missed this meeting or did not respond to that email because of what was going on. Additionally, I wish that some of my responsibilities were reduced during this time. I was expected to go back to work without acknowledging my experience and how it affected the way I do my work."*
 - However, if the employee being targeted wants to keep the details private, respect that decision and only inform the supervisor.
 - How can department staff support their colleague?
 - If this event triggers other department staff, how will this be addressed? How will those staff members be supported as well?
- Policies about recording and sharing events.
 - If the harassers target the individual in the office space include how such events will be recorded.
 - Decide whether a form will be created?
 - Details that should be recorded are:

- Date of event
 - Method of contact
 - Who the harassers contacted? How?
 - What were the harassers' intended results?
 - Who will this information be passed to in the chain of keeping everyone informed at the institution?
 - Did this event of harassment signal out potential targets?
- Clear procedure of rerouting or changing the office phone number for the targeted individual. Confirm and include:
 - What department handles this? (IT?)
 - Who is the person to contact inside the department?
 - Who will contact the appropriate department/person within the department?
- Department, support divisions, and targeted individuals should assess together whether the target's information from university websites and online platforms should be removed and who should be informed about these changes.
 - Connect with IT on this as this will prevent the extra stress of having to deal with this and will prevent a similar experience that this employee that was targeted experienced, *"I tried to reach out the IT, but my institution was wholly underprepared for this and as a result, I had to make a lot of requests, and figure out who they should be routed to, and explain why I was requesting without feeling like I could fully explain. IT did help with some things, but only select people were made aware and others were not aware of what I was experiencing, so I also received emails from IT folks asking why I was no longer in the directory or why my zoom name no longer had my name or title."*
 - Make sure the targeted individual is part of the decision and is to their benefit.
 - Return targeted individual's information to the university's online platform after the campaign has died down, and not making the target responsible for doing so.
 - Make sure the department procedures include a timeline of when to periodically check in on the targeted individual and the status of their situation.
- Framing institutional responses as preventative, emergency, and after the fact (template drafts?)
- Develop procedures of how the department will educate staff about this regularly, especially administration and stakeholders that can provide extra support.
- Decide if the procedures will be part of the onboarding of new hires.

Control the narrative/Create positive narrative (when possible)

When the institution is involved in protecting the person doxxed, there is often a unique opportunity to not only control the narrative, but to create a positive narrative that will minimize further harm to the individual doxxed. This does require that the institution follow some specific steps.

Before a public statement

Whether or not this situation has made its way to the public sphere, the institution should still be supporting the person affected. There are two main ways this can happen.

- Under no circumstances should jokes about what has happened to the person targeted be made (for example "you made it into the tabloids!"). This is likely to weaken the

argument around how serious, painful, and isolating this experience is, as well as show the doxxed a lack of care.

- If a decision is reached to go to the University newspaper, take care that it is handled ethically by both sides. For the university this means following the wishes of the person doxxed (and this includes potentially not speaking to the press). Be extra vigilant around talking to potential reporters (as this could be someone posing as such to cause further harm). But also make sure the administration and newspaper are on the same side, and try to create the same narrative. This can be reflected in the quotes the paper uses, as well as if the reporting is consistent.

Crafting a public statement

- If the individual wants the institution to issue a public statement or respond to a request for comments, the statement should focus on and be in support of the individual's academic freedom. This should specifically address what has occurred (to the comfort level of the person involved), as well as defend the right of the faculty member to teach about racial inequality, human-made climate change, white privilege, and other topics as legitimate academic subjects, supported by scientific research.
- Additionally the statement should strongly condemn the attack that is ongoing, in as many specifics as the doxxed individual is comfortable with. This could include specifics such as the volume and nature of emails, or other social media attacks the doxxed was subject to, with an emphasis on the most threatening. Stress should be put on 'campuses should have no tolerance for this abusive discourse'.

The university's response to such an attack is *critical*. The faculty and staff members are the lifeblood of a university, and oftentimes when one is attacked the response is either minimal, or lacking. In the interviews we conducted no one felt that these experiences were highlighted as an effort to limit open, informed, dialogue. In not doing so, the university is missing an opportunity to educate the public, and this reinforces public perceptions of universities as bastions of liberal ideology and indoctrination. If these instances are not condemned, the university is failing to use them as opportunities to educate the public about what is happening, which is one of the goals of the attacks. Doing nothing is as much of a choice as doing something, and feeds into the goals of attacking higher education and public education by censoring faculty, and expunging curriculum topics antithetical to the ideology of the attackers.

Involving campus safety/campus police

Involving campus safety or campus police should be done with care. While at some points it may be necessary to involve them, especially in an emergency situation, we know that police can escalate a situation and may cause greater harm to the targeted person. In some cases, police have allied with far right wing groups that have been responsible for targeted harassment. For this reason it is extremely important to complete the following steps:

- Discuss involving campus police with the targeted person:
 - Is this something they want?
 - Make sure they know what the procedures would be

- Eg, campus safety will consult with local police, assess the situation and decide whether to involve regional FBI
 - What can the targeted person expect in terms of how much communication they will have with campus police?
- Establish procedures for campus police:
 - Educate campus police about what harassment and doxxing are, and how they are issues in academia
 - Provide examples of situations that have escalated, discuss their role in keeping academic staff, faculty, and students safe.
 - Since FOIA and other public records requests have been used as a tool for harassment, campus police need to be educated about redacting private information related to these cases, for example redacting the targeted person's information in police reports
 - Provide other trainings for campus police, such as cybersecurity training

Legal support

- Find out if your institution has legal counsel
 - If yes, connect with them and assess whether they have knowledge with helping individuals being doxxed. If they do not encourage them to investigate and become part of the supporting team for employees facing doxing.
 - Encourage them to find out:
 - What can they do to support targeted individuals?
 - What services can they offer targeted individuals?
 - Have there been cases that have gone to court involving doxing?
 - Are there any state laws that can help them support targeted employees?
- If your institution has no legal council, work with HR to find community resources that can help targeted employees with legal support.
 - Consider:
 - What employee benefits can HR support that will help targeted employees with legal issues?
 - Can a support fund be established to support legal fees if the harassment gets to a point where charges need to be filled and dealt with in court?
 - Are there firms that are doing pro bono work that can partner with your institution to provide legal support for your employees?

Things to avoid

- Do not tell the targeted person just to "ignore it all until it goes away".
- Many targets felt their institutions expressed a very haphazard response, and plans seemed to change from one moment to the next.
- Some were asked to defend themselves and the university.
- Some administrators responded so harshly that faculty feared repeated meetings with them; one even feared being fired: "I did not get reprimanded but was made to feel like I was the cause of the problem."
- Many were made to feel that they were harming the university's reputation and consuming inordinate amounts of administrators' time. Universities engaged in victim blaming.

- A number of targeted people did not feel their university cared about their safety nor understood the traumatic impact of what they were experiencing. One woman asked, “Why isn’t the university framing this abuse as abuse? Why are they legitimizing the complaint by taking it seriously?” Some felt the university did not prioritize their safety. One individual was told by an administrator that “now is not the time to talk about safety.”

Further reading

A collection of essays, research, and journalism.

First-person Accounts by Targeted Academics

[Confronting Anti-Asian Racism: A Statement on \(In\)visibility and Online Targeted Harassment](#), R. Esmail (2021), *Up//root*.

[A Statement Concerning My Public Talks This Week](#), K. Taylor, posted on Facebook by Haymarket Books, 2017.

["Are You Willing to Die For This Work?" Public Targeted Online Harassment in Higher Education: SWS \[Sociologists for Women in Society\] Presidential Address](#), A. L. Ferber (2018), *Gender & Society* 32(3).

US-based Far-right

[Data Snapshot: Whom Does Campus Reform Target and What Are the Effects?](#) H. Tiede, et.al., *American Association of University Professors Reports & Publications*. Spring 2021

[Sensationalized Surveillance: Campus Reform and the Targeted Harassment of Faculty](#) S. McCarthy & I. Kamola, *New Political Science*. Nov. 2021

[A Billionaire-Funded Website with Ties to the Far-Right Is Trying to "Cancel" University Professors](#) A. Speri, *The Intercept*. April 2021

Guide: [Faculty First Responders: Understand Right Wing Attacks on Faculty](#), from political scientist Isaac Karmola
Science-denialism

[In the Line of Fire](#) C. O'Grady, *Science*, March 2022

On the networked harassment of scientists, particularly those working on COVID-19 research.

Foreign Affairs

[Under Fire from Hindu Nationalist Groups, U.S.-based Scholars of South Asia Worry About Academic Freedom](#) N. Masih, *The Washington Post*, Oct. 3, 2021

["They Don't Understand the Fear We Have": How China's Long Reach of Repression Undermines Academic Freedom at Australia's Universities](#) *Human Rights Watch*, June 30, 2021

Guide: [Hindutva Harassment Field Manual](#), from the South Asia Scholar Activist Collective



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