



Resources to Support Colleagues Experiencing Online Harassment

INTRODUCTION

The University of Minnesota is committed to defending and upholding academic freedom and the rights of its faculty, staff, and students. Doing so is more important now than ever before. There has been a dramatic increase in recent years in personal, online harassment that targets scholars and researchers across the country. Typically spawning from social media, message boards, or other online forums, harassment can take a variety of forms. It can range from online posts that misrepresent our work; to vague, threatening comments on third-party websites; to targeted, direct messages sent to faculty and staff by individuals “trolling” for a reaction or wanting to intimidate recipients.

Though this harassing activity has affected a few University of Minnesota community members already—in other words, you are not alone if it happens to you—it can be professionally disruptive and personally challenging when “trolling” attacks occur. These incidents often escalate quickly and can be intense, even if they are brief. Yet experience has shown that a prompt, organized, and calm response can support members of our community who experience this harassment, and can also minimize the public effects on all of us.

ACTION CHECKLIST

1. Assess immediate physical danger

- If there is an immediate physical threat, call 9-1-1.
- If there is no immediate physical threat, yet you believe the actions of the harasser are criminal, contact your campus/local police department. The department will assess any ongoing threats, ensure the safety of the affected person, and initiate appropriate investigative work.
 - Crookston: Call Security Services at 218-281-8530
 - Duluth: Call UMDPD at 218-726-7000
 - Morris: Call UMMPD at 320-589-6000
 - Rochester: Call Rochester PD at 507-328-6800
 - Twin Cities: Call UMPD at 612-624-3550

2. Provide the “Responding to Online Harassment” [postcard](#) and [resources](#) to the affected person

3. Develop a plan to document the harassment

- Work with the affected person to preserve evidence of the harassment—messages, emails, comments, postings, etc.
- Be sensitive to the affected person’s emotions and offer the resources outlined here and those available within your unit, college, or campus.

4. Engage University of Minnesota resources

- Leadership Support (e.g., dean, director, supervisor, group leader)
 - Local leadership should be informed as quickly as possible to assist with support and lead coordination.
- System University Relations (UR)



- UR has experience managing these situations and serves as the facilitator for connecting the affected person with necessary resources.
- UR, in partnership with campus/college/unit communications teams, will help manage communications, notably media relations and internal communications.

5. Additional Resources (contacting of needed resources should be coordinated with UR)

- Provost's Office
 - Given the Provost's systemwide oversight of academic and student affairs, it is important to ensure this office is aware of threatening situations so it can provide support and guidance.
- University Information Security (IS)
 - To minimize the spread of online harassment, alert IS (directly or through your local IT support). The Office of Information Technology can advise on how the affected person may be able to manage his/her public university data, and can provide best practices for managing that data going forward.
- Human Resources (OHR)
 - OHR can align employee-support resources for the affected person, as well as for other faculty or staff who have concerns.
 - Any university employee seeking counseling or consultation can call the Employee Assistance Program at 888-243-5744.
- General Counsel (OGC)
 - OGC can provide affected employees with guidance on their legal rights.
- Student Affairs (OSA)
 - Harassment of faculty, staff, or peers can be unsettling for students. OSA will connect students to appropriate advocacy, support, and counseling resources.

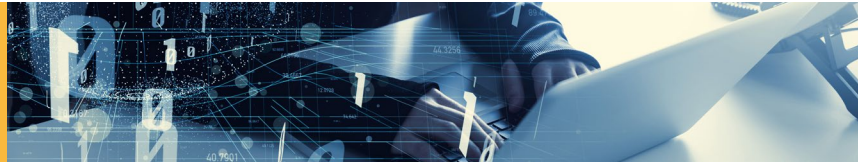
6. Coordinate internal communications

- Speed is important. To keep faculty, staff, and students informed, the affected college, department, unit, or center should contact local leadership as quickly as possible.
- UR and your local communicators are available to help you develop internal messages. It is best practice to include:
 - A statement that reiterates the University's commitment to academic freedom and the rights of faculty, staff, and students.
 - Information about how the affected person and others are being supported.
 - Available resources for anyone with further questions or concerns.
 - Keep in mind that this message will be shared more broadly than its intended audience. Write with the assumption it will eventually reach the public/media.

7. Prepare front-line, external-facing staff

- Equip those who answer calls, respond to emails, or manage social media channels with appropriate information to address harassing messages.
- UR and your communicators can help create these materials.

8. Consider others who may be affected



- Students: Some students may not want to continue attending class. Encourage faculty and staff to listen to student questions and concerns. Consider whether a substitute instructor or a changed classroom location are appropriate (consult with your local classroom management office, as needed). Consider the possibility that students in other classes may be affected.
- Faculty/Staff: Welcome conversations about their concerns, related both to this situation and to the potential that they could become the target of harassment. Connect them with resources as needed.
- Co-Authors/Collaborators: Contact those affiliated with the work of the person targeted and offer support as appropriate.

9. Identify ways to show support

- Colleagues may want to offer their support to the affected person. In consultation with that individual, provide guidance about how to offer support.
- Note: While publicly defending a colleague is a generous and supportive gesture, we recommend against it because it may further fuel the original harassment situation and/or result in others becoming the target of harassment.

CONCLUSION

Even when online harassment ends, its effects can linger. It is important for leadership in units, colleges, and campuses to stay in contact with individuals who have been harassed and to continue to offer support. Things to watch out for include their losing trust in the broader community, their losing focus or motivation, or their reacting to hits to their personal and professional reputations. In extreme cases, ensure the affected person has a forum among colleagues to openly discuss these issues.

This resource was developed by University Relations at the University of Minnesota. Thank you to our colleagues at the University of Illinois who allowed us to adopt much of this content for our use.