

College Professors as Potential Victims of Stalking: Awareness and Prevention: National Implications

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ABSTRACT

The stalking of professors by students can create considerable difficulty for both faculty and administration. Particular attributes of college and university environments contribute to potential stalking behaviors, especially among poorly adjusted students. Recommendations are made regarding materials with evidentiary value that should be collected if a professor believes she or he is being stalked. Behaviors that college instructors should avoid during student-instructor interactions are provided. Institutional policies regarding intimate relationships between faculty and students are also presented by the authors.

Introduction

Stalking has become a relatively common and clearly defined societal problem. By 2001, every state in America had laws specific to stalking (Sinwelski & Vinton, 2001). Cases typically receiving most media attention involve fans who target famous entertainment figures. Other situations seen as newsworthy involve former lovers who refuse to allow past partners to extricate themselves from the romantic relationship. Investigations typically address the personal experience of the victim, prevalence of stalking, cyberstalking, and confirmation that both genders are well represented in the stalking population (Brownstein, 2000; Finn, 2004; Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2002; Ravensberg & Miller, 2003; “Stalking,” 2002; Wilcox, Jordan, & Pritchard, 2007). Colleges and universities are encouraged to have policies prohibiting and controlling stalking behavior (Romeo, 2001). Yet meta-analysis of available research by Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) indicated that collegiate stalking is a seldom-studied phenomenon. We will explore this phenomenon, with particular emphasis on professors stalked by students.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to provide recommendations regarding materials with evidentiary value that should be collected if a professor believes she or he is being stalked. Institutional policies regarding intimate relationships between faculty and students is presented by the authors.

Stalking Behaviors on College Campuses

Perhaps no venue has greater potential for stalking-related behaviors than college campuses. Working, living, and interacting in a relatively cloistered, confining physical space provides the substrate for relationships to develop – both healthy ones and those less healthy. Stalking is not limited to student-student interactions, but also includes student-instructor relationships. Last year, for example, the University of Wisconsin in Madison dismissed three professors convicted of stalking behavior (Fischer, 2006). Baron (2003) reports other difficulties with faculty who acted inappropriately toward students, e.g., “the threatened punch, the shouting match, the overturned table” (p. C3). Sexual advances are commonly at the center of inappropriate behavior by such professors.

Stalking Frequencies Are Underestimated

As with other crimes against persons, campus stalking frequencies have undoubtedly been underestimated. Early stalking indicators are likely to be missed, misinterpreted, or seen as relatively normal behavior in the college or university setting, thus rarely becoming part of records. In the majority of clinical and forensic investigations, some type of threat is involved. Though in general, physical violence is reported in 32% of stalking cases and sexual violence in 12% (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007), early stalking indicators in close communities such as college campuses might be subtler. Officials who do become aware of such behaviors might discount them unless they involve actual threats, physical injury, or destruction of property. If administrators go so far as to admonish the potential perpetrator, her or his stalking behaviors are unlikely to decrease (“Campuses Both Hinder,” 2005). According to Wood and Wood (2002), many stalkers enjoy any negative attention they receive.

Cases Involving Students Who Stalk Faculty Often Go Unreported

Cases involving students who stalk educators are less likely to be reported to college administration, law enforcement entities, or the media than when the roles are reversed. Given the age difference between most students and instructors, instructors might believe the student’s problematic behaviors are based on a temporary “crush” that will end with the semester. Some educators might find the adoration flattering, even if they have no interest in developing a relationship with the student. Additionally, the victim might be reluctant to call attention to the stalker, who could retaliate with claims that the innocent educator has made overt advances toward her or him (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007).

Psychological and Social Aspects of the College Environment

What the faculty member perceives as a harmless crush might instead be an obsessive fixation on the part of the student. The psychological and social aspects of the college environment contribute. Many incoming freshmen and sophomores have limited experience living without resident parental guidance. They view the move to college as a liberating event. As self-proclaimed adults, students may now view previously unattainable and inappropriate relationships with older individuals as attractive possibilities. Poor decision-making and inappropriate boundaries sometimes result. Students with inadequate experience in forming healthy relationships have particular potential for stalking behaviors. Spitzberg and Cupach (2003) report that these individuals often demonstrate inappropriate aggression, adding to the frightening picture of the stalking scenario (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003).

Stalkers Seek Out “Connection”

Evidence suggests that an individual insecurely attached to her or his parents is likely to be more poorly adjusted. As a consequence, this individual seeks out “connection,” sometimes with others who have a celebrity status of sorts (McCutcheon, Scott, Aruguette, & Parker, 2006). Some professors enjoy celebrity status within the confines of the college community. Their classes are often filled to capacity, with other students on waiting lists. Office hours are consumed by students eager to bask in the reflected glory of popular instructors. Such college educators are typically engaging, non-judgmental, and unlikely to reject students who seek them out for information, conversation, or support. Though well intended, these instructors are perhaps more likely to attract poorly adjusted students. The student might mentally elaborate a friendly interaction and imagine a romantic relationship developing instead.

Poorly Adjusted Rejected Students May Attempt to Retaliate

In some cases, an actual romantic relationship may develop between faculty and student and then end badly when the educator attempts to terminate the relationship. The poorly adjusted rejected student may attempt to retaliate in some way, with stalking behaviors a possible approach. Roughly half of all stalkers have had a previous romantic relationship with the victim (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). More than one quarter of male college professors admit to at least one sexual encounter with a student (Anderson, 1994). Taken together, these two statistics might suggest that at least some students who stalk educators would fall into the rejected former lover category. Although many colleges and universities have no specific regulations prohibiting educator-student relationships, the dearth of formalized behavioral expectations does not preclude lawsuits against such professors and colleges (Wall, 1994). If a college instructor is intimate with a student who eventually becomes her or his stalker, administrators might offer little recourse or assistance in resolving the issue. A risk manager advises, “policies that prohibit relationships between students and professors who have advisory or grading roles are best” (Fogg & Welsh, 2002). Such prohibitions are often difficult to put into place because of objections from faculty.

Professors Should Maintain Evidence If a Student Becomes Too Attentive

A prior intimate relationship is obviously not a prerequisite for the student to develop obsessive interest in a professor (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003). Professors are often aware that certain students are trying to gain their attention and, possibly, their affection. Since innocent “crushes” on a favorite teacher are common at all educational levels, educators may find it difficult to distinguish these from more serious cases, especially in the early stages of

development. The educator must be ever cognizant of the potential for students to develop unhealthy feelings for her or him. If this were to happen, the teacher needs to be able to provide evidence that she or he has done nothing to encourage the stalker-student. Most authorities will view the student as more vulnerable than the educator given the power differential, so self monitoring by teachers is important. To protect themselves, the professor should maintain the following evidence if a student has become too attentive:

1. Email messages sent to the professor by the student.
2. Email messages sent to the student.
3. Dates and times the student visited the office, with a notation of the amount of time the student spent there, and a brief record of what was discussed.
4. Telephone log documenting information similar to that suggested in #3 above.
5. Any gifts from the troubled student in a plastic bag, tagged with date and time, and stored in a safe place.

Preventative behaviors are equally important. To reduce the possibility of perception of impropriety or inappropriate closeness, professors should **avoid**:

1. Conversing with the student in private areas. (Office doors should remain open or ajar at all times.)
2. Having contact with the student outside the educational space or campus.
3. Becoming the student's confidante with regard to personal problems, family issues, and other educators.
4. Touching the student.
5. Sexual banter and other flirtatious behavior with students.
6. Accepting gifts from students.
7. Giving gifts to students.
8. Placing personal information on the Internet.

While many well intentioned educators might argue that appropriate activities such as mentoring students and sharing spirited intellectual conversations in informal venues will suffer, these precautions become necessary when students lack the ability or willingness to maintain appropriate distance from their educators. Imposition of boundaries is the responsibility of the educator. Enjoyable exchange of ideas is safer when the professor engages two or more students in the discussion in an appropriate setting.

Zero Tolerance Can Make the Difference

An administration that prohibits stalking with zero tolerance for such behaviors can make a difference. The American Association of University Professors' policy regarding such involvement between instructor and student states, "Even when both parties may have consented, the development of a sexual relationship renders both the faculty member and the

institution vulnerable to possible later allegations of sexual harassment in light of the significant power that exists between faculty members and students” (Branch, 2001, n.p.). Regulations should clearly convey zero tolerance for both faculty and students so engaged. Many professions such as psychology and counseling have specific ethical guidelines with regard to establishing intimate relationships with clients. Similar guidelines and restrictions on in the education setting should become a part of the faculty manual. “Many schools have set up training classes and complaint committees to monitor and adjudicate verbal as well as physical and *sexual* abuse in and out of the classroom” (Wall, 1994, p. 371). Appropriate student conduct related to interactions with professors, fellow students, and college staff should be delineated and distributed to all students as well.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, stalking has become a relatively widespread phenomenon in society, and education venues may provide particularly fertile ground. Many of the helping roles instructors have embraced in the past may now render them vulnerable to becoming stalking victims and defendants. Educators must become more vigilant about such possibilities, and institutions should re-examine their policies related to student-faculty interaction.

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