

Teaching Online and Cyberbullying: Exploring Cyberbullying Policies
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Abstract. Cyberbullying is a phenomenon increasingly affecting students and faculty in K-12 through higher education systems. Cyberbullying in higher education negatively affects institutions and their respective stakeholders. The consequences range from faculty turnover to student suicide. Research related cyberbullying in higher education in online learning is emerging. Common understandings of cyberbullying vary by state, institution, and classroom level. Furthermore, many states, including Florida, defer conduct policies and their enforcement to the individual institution. In this article, a review of publicly available Florida university policies regarding cyberbullying in higher education were explored by a Florida professor and a higher education administrator. Utilizing document analysis, this study analyzed policies from the 12 state universities to document the institutional definitions of cyberbullying and the recommended reporting practices for faculty. Further, following the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework, this study examined policies and procedures to determine if they supported the construct of teacher presence. It was determined that there are multiple definitions of cyberbullying and that policies were publicly available but most lacked support for faculty to report related incidences. Most policies were implied and not explicitly related to cyberbullying. Finally, there was little to no evidence in the analyzed documents that would support teaching presence.

Keywords: cyberbullying; higher education policy; online teaching

The repercussions of cyberbullying in higher education shocked the United States population in 2010 when Tyler Clementi committed suicide after being secretly filmed by a roommate during a sexual encounter with another man at Rutgers University (Parker, 2012; Pilkington, 2010). Dharun Ravi, Clementi's roommate, had not only filmed Clementi's encounters but streamed the live video feed to other students at Rutgers University. After Clementi's death, Ravi was charged with and pled guilty to 15 counts of invasion of privacy (Cherelus, 2016). However, the convictions were overturned in 2016 by an appeals court (McGeehan, 2016).

Clementi's suicide began a public discussion about both cyberbullying and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues in higher education, specifically questioning the university's support for cyberbullied and LGBT students (Cherelus, 2016; Hubbard, 2013).

In the spring of 2017, Nick Lutz, a student at the University of Central Florida (UCF), was suspended after grading and subsequently tweeting his ex-girlfriend's apology letter following the dissolution of the relationship (Langly, 2017; Roll, 2017). The tweet of the graded message reportedly received over 121,000 re-tweets (Coleman, 2017). UCF sanctioned the student for disruptive and harmful

behavior. The charges were later revoked but the national attention that this incident brought about disrupted the learning environment and the lives of the people involved.

These cases illustrate only a small portion of contemporary reports regarding cyberbullying within higher education. Consistent across such cases are the immeasurable, detrimental, and even tragic consequences that may occur as a result of cyberbullying. Moreover, the policy and legal intricacies underlying cyberbullying consequence reports portray the challenges that higher education has encountered in responding to and resolving cyberbullying incidents. As an example, perceptions and definitions of cyberbullying vary, leading to confusion, disruptions, and even the minimization of the actions that can harm social and emotional wellbeing. Thus, higher education institutions need to implement a more comprehensive and standardized definition of and reporting strategies related to cyberbullying. As current professors and administrators, we have sought to investigate our own state and institutional policies and the ease of access to them.

Cyberbullying has a strong presence in the classroom. In 2017, Marshall Polston, a student at Rollins College in Florida, was accused of sending threatening emails to an adjunct world religions/humanities professor after receiving a failing grade on an essay (Russon, 2017a). Polston and the world religions professor, Areej Zufari, both reported acts of threats and retribution. According to Zufari, Polston disrupted face to face class sessions by contradicting and monopolizing class time. Outside of class, Polston reportedly sent emails to professor Zufari accusing her of being "anti-Christian" and threatening to expose her bias to the student's "friends in the national media." Zufari submitted a report of the harassment incident to school administrators and filed for protection against stalking with Orange County. These charges were later dropped based on video evidence. Even though these charges were debunked and unfounded, there was evidenced of incivility that impacted the learning environment. This case serves as just one illustration of the possible ways in which bullying can extend beyond student-to-student or campus relationships and transcend into teaching environments and onto faculty members.

The Polston/Zufari case is congruent with increasing research evidence that indicates that cyberbullying has influenced not only students and higher education faculty (Baldasare et al., 2012; Vance, 2010; Walker et al., 2011). As the prevalence of mobile devices and the frequency of online interactions evolve, detrimental online interactions continue to grow (Weber Shandwick Collective, 2018). Because the worldwide pandemic has prompted more higher education courses to move online, cyberbullying may become more of a problem. Therefore, the following investigation provides information about how institutions of higher education in Florida define cyberbullying and documents the policies related to cyberbullying found in higher education environments.

Statement of the Problem and Purpose

Cyberbullying impacts students and faculty participating in online courses (Vance, 2010). In online courses, cyberbullying includes harassment and bullying through

online discussions. When these discussions are negative and personal, they may obstruct student participation within an online classroom (Clark et al., 2012; Stover, 2006). Additionally, disruptive dialogue among the students affects students' ability to interact with course content and other students effectively within an online learning community. According to Garrison et al. (1999), disruptions within online courses may interrupt students during the higher-order thinking processes to address aggressive behavior. Further, Garrison asserted that instructors of online courses should facilitate and guide any dialogue within an online course to promote higher-order thinking, partially by using the tools made available to them by their institution. These tools would include the policies that govern student behavior.

However, there are few state, federal, or institutional policies that address cyberbullying in higher education (Washington, 2015). In place of state or federal laws, Washington further recommends that institutions develop policies and procedures as well as professional development training for faculty to address cyberbullying on campuses. Even though cyberbullying policies may exist at institutions of higher education, they may be difficult for faculty and students to find. Barr and Lugas (2011) concluded that when they found cyberbullying policies, many were improperly housed within campus technology-oriented policies where many faculty and students might not look. The confusion surrounding the existence of an institution's policies and procedures regarding cyberbullying has been identified as a barrier for part-time faculty in reporting and addressing the phenomenon (Minor et al., 2013).

In response, we, as professors and administrators in Florida, engaged in this qualitative study to examine how leaders of public institutions of higher education in the state of Florida define cyberbullying and encourage reporting of cyberbullying incidents. In Florida, leaders of each public university have maintained independent policies to regulate student behavior. There has been no comprehensive study reviewing or cataloging these policies related to cyberbullying across institutions within the state of Florida. Researchers have expressed the need for future studies to examine if institutions of higher education have crafted policies addressing cyberbullying (Washington, 2015; Watts et al., 2017).

The purpose of this study was to use document analysis to analyze the policies at 12 Florida public universities containing the definition of cyberbullying and the recommended reporting practices for faculty. By framing the results of the analysis through the Community of Inquiry (COI) theoretical framework (Garrison et al., 1999), this study seeks to provide value to faculty seeking to strengthen their online teaching presence through providing clear guidelines established by each Florida institution. It also provides value to administrators at institutions within the United States who are reviewing their policies addressing online abuse and cyberbullying by identifying common definitions currently used within public institutions.

Rationale for the Study

While there is a wealth of cross-discipline research on cyberbullying explicitly about the K-12 education system, the studies related to higher education are few. Furthermore, as of 2018, comparisons of policies regarding cyberbullying in online courses at public institutions of higher learning in the state of Florida do not exist. The present study will catalog and analyze the policies from institutions of higher learning in Florida that pertain to cyberbullying, harassment, and disruptions within an online course, providing higher education with an accurate cyberbullying policy resource derived from one state's public institutions.

Identifying common definitions and student conduct reporting strategies among public Florida universities on the topic of cyberbullying can provide instructors, administrators, and instructional designers with cohesive resources to mitigate aggressive behavior in online courses. The current analysis may serve as a resource to improve faculty development in online teaching, the quality of online courses, and the learning experiences for students in public institutions of higher learning not only in Florida but in other states as well.

Faculty members are uniquely positioned to detect cyberbullying through direct class observations or through student disclosure. Therefore, faculty members are an essential part of helping to determine what instances of cyberbullying are occurring and providing information to administrators so that policies can be put in place to deter the offenses. Our analysis will provide knowledge to faculty members as they seek to obtain current policies and modify or redefine existing policies.

Contemporary Research on Cyberbullying

The three cases (e.g., Clementi, Lutz, and Poston) previously described herein are reports that both researchers and the media have examined regarding cyberbullying within higher education (Coleman, 2017; McCormick, 2010; Quintana, 2017; Roll, 2017; Russon, 2017b). However, everyone has not always agreed about the frequency of cyberbullying in higher education. Olweus (2012) labelled the phenomenon as overrated, citing low incident rates (4.5%) in his 5-year meta-analysis. However, Hinduja and Patchin (2012) argued the topic remained relevant as their 10 years of research on adolescents and K-12 students demonstrated that 1 in 4 youth experienced cyberbullying.

While Olweus's (1995, 2012) and Hinduja and Patchin's (2015) cyberbullying studies focused on adolescent and K-12 groups, other authors examining cyberbullying have revealed that the phenomena influence adult learners and faculty within higher education (Baldasare et al., 2012; Campbell et al., 2020; Vance, 2010; Walker et al., 2011). For example, according to Vance (2010), students (12%) and faculty (35%) have reported being bullied within an online course. Berne et al. (2013) reported that 11% of students at a large university indicated they personally experienced cyberbullying. These data demonstrate that cyberbullying impacts learners and instructors within higher education.

Though increasing evidence has indicated that cyberbullying has affected students and faculty within higher education, evidence reflects some administrators do not perceive cyberbullying to be an issue in *their* institutions. Luker (2015) reported that 44.5% of administrators surveyed believed that cyberbullying was a rare occurrence at their home institution compared to their peer institutions but that only 13% of the institutions sampled reported not having a cyberbullying incident in the past 12 months. There may be a disconnect between administrative perceptions about cyberbullying and the reality of cyberbully occurrences within institutions.

In addition to a perceptual disconnect about the occurrence of cyberbullying, faculty and administrators may be unprepared to manage cyberbullying incidents that may arise from coursework, as may have been the case in the 2017 Rollins College incident (Russon, 2017a, 2017b). Palloff and Pratt (2011) proposed focusing on maintaining authority through the syllabus by indicating specific expectations for classroom conduct and referring the student to any existing online harassment policies maintained by the institution. Likewise, researchers have studied community building within online courses and proposed discussion management techniques to keep students on task rather than managing harassment (Palloff & Pratt, 2003, 2011). However, these discussion management techniques do not address cyberbullying occurrences in students' online courses.

While information regarding best practices is available to faculty teaching in the online environment, evidence addressing how to approach instances of cyberbullying within online courses is negligible. In the attempt to overcome this limitation, we curated and analyzed the policies of 12 public universities in Florida pertaining to cyberbullying, harassment, and disruptions within online courses. The present study sought to provide instructors with an accurate cyberbullying policy resource.

Issues Defining Cyberbullying

Adding to the difficulty of identifying and managing cyberbullying in online courses, researchers have not standardized the definition of cyberbullying. Many researchers have defined cyberbullying as an individual using information and communications technology to promote deliberate and hurtful behavior with the intent to do harm (Berne et al., 2013; Haber & Haber, 2007; Walker et al., 2011). Furthermore, the examination of cyberbullying policies reveals a similar finding: comparisons of policies regarding cyberbullying in online courses at public institutions of higher learning in the state of Florida do not exist; moreover, there is no comprehensive review of higher education cyberbullying policies across the United States. However, there has been a review of bullying and cyberbullying policies in K-12 school in the state of Louisiana (Stickl Haugen et al., 2019).

The cyberbullying definition given by the legislature in Florida illustrates the breadth and vagueness of the term's interpretation:

“Cyberbullying” means bullying through the use of technology or any electronic communication, which includes, but is not limited to, any transfer of signs, signals, writing, images, sounds, data, or intelligence of any nature transmitted in whole or in part by a wire, radio, electromagnetic system, photoelectronic system, or photo optical system, including, but not limited to, electronic mail, Internet communications, instant messages, or facsimile communications. (Jeffrey Johnson Stand Up for All Students Act, Fla. Stat. § 1006.147, 2018)

In 2010, Vance proposed that age influenced the definition of cyberbullying. He argued that adults who experienced aggressive behavior online were cyberharassed rather than cyberbullied. In addition, some researchers have included spam email and broad cyberattacks (e.g., scamming or phishing), within their definitions of cyberbullying (Zorkadis et al., 2005). However, other researchers consider phishing and spam as separate types of cyberattacks from cyberbullying (Hamby et al., 2018; Wright, 2018). The discord of definitions and their diverse nuances reiterate the need for clearly stipulating and delineating the term cyberbullying so that its instances and effects can be better understood and prevention strategies more effectively developed.

Legal Issues

Like the definition of cyberbullying, legislation and policies on cyberbullying and cyberharassment vary across the United States. Each state maintains its laws about bullying and online bullying behavior for individuals under the age of 18. However, many states do not regulate the harassment of adults, including college-aged students (18 years and older). Public institutions are not legally bound to protect adult-aged students from certain types of online harassment from individuals not associated with the school. Yet, some state legislatures have delegated the responsibility of regulating student misconduct to the state college and university systems (Horowitz & Bollinger, 2014).

Florida regulates cyberbullying in the K-12 system but not in the state college or university system (Fla. Stat. § 1006.147, 2018). Instead, Florida’s legislature delegated the creation of policy to regulate student conduct to the state colleges and universities (Fla. Stat. § 1006.50, 2018; Fla. Stat. § 1006.62, 2018). While this delegation of power allows each state institution to address conduct as necessary, there are inconsistencies across institutions.

Additionally, federal requirements for Title VII and Title IX have mandated that institutions of higher learning regulate certain types of student behavior; access to federal funding can be denied or stopped for non-compliance. As such, school leaders have adopted technology-use policies, which restrict offensive, annoying, or harassing communications originating from campus-based resources, such as wireless networks or university managed computers (Barr & Lugas, 2011).

Community of Inquiry (COI)

The Community of Inquiry (COI) theoretical framework has been selected as a conceptual framework for this study. According to Garrison et al. (1999), the COI refers to the educational experience within an online course as the culmination of the interaction between the social, cognitive, and teaching presences. Garrison et al. concluded that the social and cognitive aspects of the learning process could not be separated from one another, and the researchers established the social and cognitive presences. The third element called the teaching presence includes the design, organization, discourse, and instruction of cognitive and social elements to foster positive and meaningful learning outcomes. Teaching presence is highly predictive of student success.

The primary mode of inquiry for this investigation was framed through the teaching presence. As described through the framework, the instructor builds the course, creates guidelines for the course using all tools available (including the institutional, state, and federal policies), and facilitates interactions between participants. The interdependent social, teaching, and cognitive presences are connected to generate the educational experience through the COI. Educators consider all aspects of the online learning environment when establishing a positive teaching presence. Cyberbullying acts as a disruptor, deriving from the social presence and working to separate each element simultaneously, and creates chaos within the learning environment. Therefore, consideration should be given to creating a positive environment by establishing policies, procedures, and processes.

Methods

The following qualitative study sought to analyze and compare available policies and codes of conduct from each of the 12 Florida public universities regarding cyberbullying. According to Bowen (2009), documents as a data source represent text and images that have been produced without intervention of the researcher. Documents are typically produced and exist as "social facts" in that they are created and shared for social consumption (Atkinson & Coffey, 2011). These text artifacts may include public records, personal documents, or other types of physical evidence (Atkinson & Coffey, 2011; Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Documents were systematically collected, and definitions of cyberbullying were curated from publicly available documents on the websites of public universities within the state of Florida. In doing so, we approached each document as a "social fact" that is created for social consumption and, in line with the purpose of this study, intended for social good. Social facts can include the values and norms that govern social control and are commonly considered rules.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do Florida state public universities address cyberbullying in policies and codes of conduct?

RQ2. In what ways do policies or codes of conduct at Florida state public universities provide instructors guidelines for responding to cyberbullying incidents?

RQ3. Do policies and codes of conduct evidence the Community of Inquiry's concept of teaching presence?

Setting and Population

The study was conducted in the context of Florida's public university system. The State University System of Florida is under the jurisdiction of the Florida Board of Governors (2016a, 2016b), with each university governed by a local Board of Trustees. There are 12 public universities in the State University System. In 2016, 352,116 students enrolled in state universities. Eleven percent of students enrolled in the state university system exclusively took distance courses. The *2015-16 System Accountability Report* (FLBOG, 2017h) reported that there were 13,634 full-time and 3,185 part-time faculty employed by the state university system. Furthermore, FLBOG (2017h) reported that 14% of all course sections were offered through distance learning.

Data Collection and Analysis

Policy documents that could reference cyberbullying were gathered from each of the Florida public universities. Documents gathered included, but were not limited to, student codes of conduct, faculty handbooks, and university policy and regulation documents. These documents provided the researchers with the official language and stance that each public university in the state of Florida uses when providing guidance on understanding, recognizing, and handling cyberbullying.

First the definitions of cyberbullying were classified by evidence: (a) explicit definitions, (b) implied definitions, (c) redirection, and (d) broad harassment - no definition.

Explicit definitions used the term cyberbullying, and a definition was provided. Implied definitions did not include the term cyberbullying but indicated actions associated with cyberbullying (e.g., sending email, posting or sending messages through the Learning Management System, and posts in virtual discussions). Redirection references policies that were an antecedent to the current policy. Finally, broad harassment represents guidelines without reference to technology means.

Results

Official university documents describing aspects of cyberbullying were collected and analyzed for evidence of cyberbullying policies, definitions, and approaches. The results are presented below.

Policy Definition Types

Each institution defined cyberbullying within its policies. Four themes were identified in describing how institutions define cyberbullying: (a) explicit definitions, (b) implied definitions, (c) redirection, and (d) broad harassment – no definition.

Explicit definitions of cyberbullying emerged as a classification category from the document analysis. For example, the Faculty Handbook and Sexual Harassment Policy from the University of North Florida contained explicit cyberbullying definitions. Though explicit definitions only appeared in two documents, the term was included within policies; however, the precise definition included the term cyberbullying as part of the definition of harassment. As such, cyberbullying is not viewed as being different from other types of harassing or aggressive behavior. Instead, it is a child or subdimension of the harassment category.

The implied definition was the most prominent classification. Instead of explicitly using the term cyberbullying, the authors of the policies relied on contextual modifiers such as “email” or “electronic communication” to add a digital scope to the definition of harassment. Included within the implied definition are references to cyberstalking, which many of the institutions defined as the repeated harassment of an individual through a digital medium (e.g., social media or email).

Redirection is the second most prominent classification to emerge in the analysis of the documents. The redirection category describes policies that rely on other policies to define the scope and merit of harassing behavior. In these policies, rather than redefining the terms, the authors refer to existing policies that have behaviors defined. As such, the redirected policy acts as a modifier to the original behavioral definition. For example, the Acceptable Use of Technology Resources policy from Florida Atlantic University (FAU) states:

Laws and regulations: All users are responsible for adhering to all applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations and all University regulations and policies, specifically including without limitation the University’s sexual harassment regulations and policies, those pertaining to the privacy of student records (FERPA), and the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA).

In this case, the Acceptable Use of Technology Resources policy is expected to augment all FAU regulations and policies by adding technology resources to their existing definitions. Redirection also supported the concept of teaching presence by connecting seemingly unrelated policies. Where policies may have been weak on their own, the connection forged between each policy by redirection has the

opportunity to strengthen the instructor's use of these resources in setting expectations for behavior in their online course.

Broad harassment – no definition is a category to describe policies that define harassment and aggressive behaviors, but make no reference to an electronic medium, use no contextual modifiers, and do not implement redirections to other policies. In using broad harassment – no definition, the policy makers use encompassing phrases such as "of any kind." While policies that do fall into this category do not redirect, other policies may redirect to the broad harassment policy. Through this process, the broad harassment policy's applicability is augmented to include the redirected policy's scope.

All 12 public universities in the state of Florida maintained policies that contained a definition of harassment that encompassed cyberbullying behavior. Only one institution, University of North Florida, explicitly named cyberbullying as harassing behavior. The other 11 institutions used a combination of implicit, redirection, or broad harassment language to capture cyberbullying as prohibited behavior (see Table 1). The number of mentions by type ranged from 2-7 times.

Table 1

Cyberbullying Definition Frequency and Type

University	Explicit	Implied	Redirection	Broad Harassment: No Definition
Florida Atlantic University		1	3	1
Florida Gulf Coast University		5		1
Florida International University		1	1	4
Florida A&M		3	1	
Florida Polytechnic University		2	3	4
Florida State University		5	1	
New College		2	2	1
University of Central Florida		4	1	2
University of Florida		2	7	3
University of North Florida	2	2		2
University of South Florida		2	2	3
University of West Florida		2	3	2
Grand Total	2	33	23	22

Faculty Guidelines for Reporting Cyberbullying

Next, 33 documents from the 12 public universities were examined to determine the available university-approved faculty guidance for reporting harassing behavior. The definition of harassing behavior included cyberbullying in varying degrees. Overall, only one institution, the University of South Florida, provided a detailed policy on the steps available to faculty for responding to harassing behavior in-class. The Disruption of Academic Process Policy advises the faculty member to ask the student about their behavior. If the student does not respond, the faculty member may remove the student from the class. The faculty member has 48 hours to complete an incident report. The faculty member is empowered to exclude the student from class until the conflict is resolved. Oddly, the policy applies to online settings, but it does not advise faculty on the finer points of how to remove a student from an online course.

Florida International University Faculty Handbook advised faculty how to handle misconduct and did specify appropriate responses to student misconduct, but it was not a policy per se. Like University of South Florida, a formal command is required before removing a student from the class. The Office of Student Conduct would be the agency to remove a student permanently from the class.

Community of Inquiry (COI) and Cyberbullying: Teaching Presence

Finally, the study analyzed policies, codes of conduct, and suggested instructor response approaches to determine the intersection of these policies with the COI's concept of teaching presence. There was limited evidence that the policies supported teaching presence. The policies were generally created to support a safe and nurturing environment, but the connection to faculty practice was inadequate.

Policies and Syllabi

Universities typically have standard statements for faculty to include in their syllabus that help to establish the culture, climate, and setting of the classroom, an integral aspect of the COI teaching presence. These statements set the expectations for communication and conduct. In the review of the documents from each university, no policies or faculty guidance required the inclusion of a cyberstalking statement. However, some universities did maintain policy statements for the syllabi that referenced conduct. Additionally, the Faculty Handbook at Florida International University linked the course syllabi to the conduct policies.

Seven of the universities had standing policies for faculty to include on their syllabi. However, only Florida Atlantic University, Florida International University, and Florida Polytechnic provided suggestions to faculty on placing language about or directing attention towards anti-harassment policies. Each institution addressed the inclusion of such policies differently. For instance, Florida Polytechnic University's administration required that university policies be placed within the syllabus.

Within the Florida Atlantic University's Guidelines for Course Syllabi, the authors suggested instructors include a statement on classroom etiquette policy supplemented by the phrase "if applicable." "If applicable" suggests that the inclusion of an etiquette policy is entirely optional for the instructor. Furthermore, the language found within the Guidelines for Course Syllabi suggested that the inclusion of classroom etiquette policies should be owned by the instructor:

If you have a particular policy relating to student behavior in the class, such as relating to tardiness or on the use of electronic devices in the classroom state so here. Recognizing that the unique relationship between faculty and student and adhering to the principles of academic responsibility, any such policy must be reasonable, non-discriminatory, and not impede the educational mission.

Teaching presence is inclusive of design and organization, discourse, and direct instruction. Policies and procedures upholding the tenets of responsible use of technology can contribute to the design and organization learning environments, a construct linked to teacher presence.

Technology Responsibility

Fourteen policies regarding the use of technology with a relationship to a definition of cyberbullying were found to include statements about using technologies efficiently. The language used within each policy established two parameters for the use of technology resources: (a) using the media effectively and (b) improper use. For example, Florida A&M University's Electronic Connectivity policy contained the following statement on effective use:

In order to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of business and academic processes, it is the responsibility of FAMMail users to timely read notifications sent to them through FAMMail.

Other language addressed the improper use of the technology, such as using the network to break the law, harassing others through email and electronic messaging, and impairing others' ability to effectively use the resources. The combination of effective use of the media and examples of improper user behavior builds the construct of technology responsibility and contributes to teacher presence when faculty address these policies with their class.

Conduct Expectations

Expectations of student and faculty conduct were found within policies and documents from all universities. In total, 47 documents with definitions of cyberbullying included the expectation of conduct. The documents ranged from student codes of conduct to faculty handbooks to anti-harassment policies. Conduct expectations aligned with policies, and documents that exhibited conduct expectations commonly presented language with guidance on proper interpersonal etiquette.

The student codes of conduct described conduct violations and positive characteristics expected from all students, such as having integrity and thinking critically. For example, the Student Code of Conduct from the University of North Florida states the following:

We value: the pursuit of truth and knowledge carried out in the spirit of intellectual and artistic freedom; ethical conduct; community engagement; diversity; responsibility to the natural environment; and mutual respect and civility.

In many cases, the values to which the university community adhere included contributing to community understanding. Establishing conduct expectations involves not simply stating the rules but explaining the philosophy behind the rules that drive the intellectual community.

Implications for Teaching Practice and Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations for institutions of higher education may support faculty in decreasing cyberbullying in online classes.

1. Define or include examples of cyber-harassment or cyberbullying within conduct policies.
2. Post the policies in prominent places that are easily accessible.
3. Establish procedures to support classroom management.
4. Link policies and regulations to reinforce teaching presence.

Define and Include Examples of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying behavior was identified in conduct policies at all 12 institutions. However, the behavior was included under the parent category of harassment. Terms such as cyber-harassment, cyberstalking, cyberbullying should be classified and defined as harassment. Definitions and scenarios describing the terms would promote shared meaning. In this study, similarities between the definition of harassment and cyberstalking were noted. Similarly, other research has noted a spectrum of behaviors that constitute bullying and incivility in online learning spaces (Campbell et al., 2020).

Similarities in defining distinct behaviors may cause confusion for instructors and students when reporting harassing behaviors. Vance (2010) called for using the term cyber-harassment. While Vance utilized the term cyber-harassment over cyberbullying based on the age of the participants, a better reason to use the term cyber-harassment is that it is a child concept to the parent category of harassment. Furthermore, to improve the culture of the classroom, a component of teacher presence, posting policies regarding conduct in shared online spaces can serve as a reminder of expectations.

Establish Procedures to Support Classroom Management

The current study found that only one out of the 12 institutions of higher education published a policy and procedure to manage students' disruptive conduct. Adopting a process known by students and faculty would support classroom management. Minor et al. (2013) reported that barriers to reporting cyberbullying behavior for faculty included the lack of known authoritative resources and perceived lack of administration support. Finally, documenting policies, processes, and procedures would afford faculty the authority to discipline misbehavior and affirm the support of the administration.

Link Policies and Regulations to Reinforce Teaching Presence

The documents analyzed demonstrated limited support of teacher presence in relationship to cyberbullying. Perhaps this inadequacy related to the purpose of the policies to address cyberbullying at the institution level and not at the class level. As such, the policies were mainly related to the potential culture of the online teaching environment, but there was no written encouragement for faculty to adopt policies and procedures that would promote teaching presence.

The current research study recognized the potential of linking policies together. Therefore, institutions can effectively address cyberbullying and reinforce teaching presence. Faculty could be provided boilerplate templates related to cyberbullying, classroom management, and other related topics to post in the course management system. Faculty could be encouraged to create robust and collaborative learning experiences to discuss community culture and behavioral expectations thereby increasing teacher presence. Furthermore, instructors can include conduct and technology policies within their syllabi that they will discuss with their learners as needed. Institutions that have adopted policies should require instructors to include a statement on classroom conduct expectations including links to the institutional technology and conduct policies.

Future Research and Implications for Practitioners

Additional research is recommended to determine the prevalence of cyberbullying in the online classroom. While this study examined the policies available at the institutional level, it did not consider at what level cyberbullying was occurring at the 12 institutions considered in this study. Further consideration should be given as to how these policies are communicated with learners and the level of cyberbullying people have experienced at an institution. As higher education continues to grow in online spaces, policies should be frequently reviewed to maintain safety and structure within the online classroom. As these policies are adopted, a longitudinal study of incidents of bullying and students' knowledge of policies and procedures could be conducted.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying in higher education continues to grow. The present study included a document analysis of policies, regulations, codes of conduct, and faculty handbooks at 12 state universities in Florida to examine cyberbullying definitions and policies in higher education. As universities continue to educate through online modalities, other states and private institutions should review their policies to promote greater understanding of cyberbullying. Common understanding and knowledge of procedures can contribute to a reduction in disruptive behavior online. Furthermore, it is equally as important for instructors using online modalities to know the content of these policies so they can build better experiences within their online classrooms to increase their teaching presence to ensure student success.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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