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No Due Process: Workplace Mobbing of Administrators in Academe[1]

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Abstract

In the context of severe budget cuts to post-secondary institutions around the world, particularly in Canada and the United States, we are seeing more toxic leadership at the most senior ranks of universities and colleges. Rather than undertaking transparent analysis of business lines and initiating significant restructuring that is in keeping with good practice, a hit-and-miss approach with no due process is increasingly being chosen, resulting in willy-nilly terminations of administrators with or without cause. Examples include accusations of poor performance without actual performance evaluations according to institutional policies, disregard for documented progressive discipline procedures, and "weaponization" of 360 results by using them as performance evaluations and complaint and disciplinary tools. This paper discusses two important examples in the public domain, as well as others for which the identities of the victims are anonymized for their protection and dignity. The paper concludes by arguing that, at this troubling time in academe, there is an urgent need for sound leadership, associated training and due process, to avoid putting post-secondary institutions further at risk of public relations disasters, not to mention the risk to peoples' lives and livelihoods.

***Keywords**: Workplace Mobbing; Toxic Leadership; Higher Education; Whistleblowing; Due Process; Organizational Justice*

Introduction

As the literature shows, mobbing is endemic in post-secondary institutions (Westhues 2004 and 2005; Séguin 2016; Harper, 2013, revised 2016). Significant budget cuts are exacerbating the problem and the trend is likely to continue. This paper draws on that literature as well as recent case studies to conclude on the implications for scholarly work on workplace mobbing as well as on policymaking and social change. The first case study illustrates the tragic case of the late Dr.

[1] This paper reflects my own opinions and does not represent those of McGill University.

Antoinette "Bonnie" Candia-Bailey who has become the face of the End Workplace Abuse campaign in the United States. Candia-Bailey tragically took her own life in early 2024 after raising concerns about how she was being treated in the workplace. The second case is that of Dr. Pamela Haruchiyo Sugiman, the former Dean of Arts at Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU), whose case went public in Canada in the summer of 2024. While this case is less well known and there has been no mention of bullying or mobbing in the materials published, the suddenness of the termination and innuendo by the employer about financial mismanagement by the Dean, raise questions regarding due process. Likewise, the public support for Sugiman casted doubt on institutional human resource practices and resulted in public relations issues for the university.

To serve as a contrast, the paper includes a vignette regarding Lisa LaFlamme, former national news anchor of CTV News in Canada, who was suddenly terminated, making international headlines. While there is some evidence of a mobbing or group aggression process in Ms LaFlamme's case, the vignette is put forward to serve as an example of how media expertise can restore efforts to damage a mobbing target's reputation and hold perpetrators of mobbing accountable. Last but not least, the paper features a compilation of information drawn from anonymous informants and stock knowledge from the academic and not-for-profit sectors, protecting the identities and dignity of those who have been affected by workplace mobbing. The patterns that these and other more publicly-known targets have faced, as a result of unethical and malicious human resources practices, are specifically laid out. At this troubling time, there is an urgent need for sound institutional leadership, associated training and commitment to due process to avoid putting human lives and livelihoods further at risk. Mobbing researchers, collaborating with emerging social movements focused on workplace abuse, can help drive social impact.

Two cases and a vignette

Workplace mobbing refers to sustained systematic harassment, undermining, and ostracization of an employee by colleagues or superiors (Leymann, 1996). Extensive research has documented damaging consequences, including psychological distress, physical illness, reputational harm, derailed careers, and, in the most severe cases, suicide (Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 1999; Zapf & Einarsen, 2001). Despite its prevalence, most instances of workplace mobbing remain unreported in public discourse, and workplace mobbing is not a phenomenon recognized in organizational policies. Common dynamics of workplace mobbing include retaliatory treatment of individuals who challenge authority on financial, strategic, or human resources concerns; non-compliance with established evaluation procedures; reliance on unsubstantiated or anonymous complaints that often remain uninvestigated; the misuse of 360-degree evaluation feedback mechanisms as disciplinary tools (Friedman, n.d.); and termination decisions delivered without prior warning, a practice that runs contrary to best human resource practices (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011).

Antoinette "Bonnie" Candia-Bailey

The tragic suicide of Antoinette (aka Bonnie) Candia-Bailey in early 2024 brought renewed attention to the issue of workplace abuse, including bullying and mobbing in academic contexts. Mobbing, or group aggression, as Kenneth Westhues, Ève Séguin, Janice Harper and others have so compellingly demonstrated, is endemic within universities. Candia-Bailey was an African-American senior university administrator who has since become the face of the End Workplace Abuse campaign in the United States. She formally accused her supervisor, the president of her university, of bullying her and not accommodating her disability. After her death, the Board of Curators commissioned an independent report, available on the university website, albeit heavily redacted (LewisRice, 2024). The President was cleared of all allegations.

Candia-Bailey was appointed as Vice-President for Student Affairs at Lincoln University, her alma mater and historically a Black university, on May 1, 2023. On January 8, 2024, she died by suicide just a few days after being fired, purportedly for her poor performance. She was 49 years old. According to media coverage, concerns about her performance by the white president who hired her came as a complete surprise and, according to publicly available documentation (Lawrence, 2024), no performance improvement plan had been put in place. Based on Candia-Bailey's own accounting of her eight-month tenure at Lincoln – captured in letters, emails and text messages reviewed by the British newspaper, The Guardian – "the trouble began with a disastrous performance evaluation that Candia-Bailey received in mid-November." Candia-Bailey, "who had considered her work to be at least satisfactory, was not only blindsided by the poor review but also by the source: the man, the president of the university, who had expressed such enthusiasm when he hired her just six months earlier. The 11/15/23 evaluation meeting was the first time I heard many of the concerns," she wrote to President Moseley. "When I respectfully challenged you, you agreed to 'strike a concern'. I couldn't even finish the meeting because you didn't hear me. I left in tears." (Ibid.) In emails she sent before her death, she accused President John Moseley of bullying and harassing her, which she said had caused her mental harm. She also accused Moseley of breaching confidentiality regarding her mental health status, and making jokes about her situation with her peers. Candia-Bailey filed a formal complaint with human resources in November 2023 but was rebuked for purportedly not addressing her poor performance. Candia-Bailey wrote to the board of governors about her situation, but her concerns were dismissed. A month and a half later, on 3 January, Candia-Bailey was fired for "insubordination" because she [supposedly] "mishandled student housing matters and mismanaged her staff", according to her formal termination letter (Lawrence, 2024). She was in her job for a short eight months.

After Candia-Bailey's tragic suicide on January 8th, 2024, there was a formal independent investigation, with President John Moseley placed on administrative leave while this work was undertaken (LewisRice, 2022). No wrongdoing was found and there was and is still a hue and cry from students, faculty and the movement End Workplace Abuse, who have all rejected the report's conclusions. The report by the law firm LewisRice, published on the Lincoln University website, is deficient in not defining bullying, and the process around the case raises questions about university

leadership concerning the ability to give and receive feedback, the use of performance improvement plans and progressive discipline if and when there are concerns, as well as the protection of whistleblowers. Candia-Bailey's case also raises questions about stereotypes of Black women being labeled as angry, aggressive, or difficult to work with, as does the ouster of Claudine Gay from Harvard, and the untimely deaths of of Orinthia T Montague, president of Volunteer State Community College, and JoAnne A Epps, president of Temple University (Hudson-Ward, 2023), "Black women who were seen as leading lights in the academic community" (Lawrence, 2024). Today, Dr. Candia-Bailey is remembered as the face of the End Workplace Abuse campaign headquartered in the United States, which has sub-campaigns at the state level. Incidences of Black women committing suicide are particularly rare, which may be an indication of the severe pain Candia-Bailey was experiencing. In both relative and absolute numbers, it has been found that white men are the overwhelming targets of workplace abuse, resulting in higher rates of suicide among men, compared to women (Conway et. al., 2022). However, systematically unpacking the health impacts and demographics of workplace abuse, including mobbing, is only beginning, and further work is necessary to tease out the gender and racial dimensions (Rincon-Hoyos et. al., 2025). The overall challenge is that unconscious bias is, by definition, unconscious, and systemic oppressions related to gender, race and age are systems in which we are all embedded.

Pamela Haruchiyo Sugiman

Likewise, the sudden dismissal of a Japanese-Canadian Dean of Arts at Toronto Metropolitan University is another example of a senior administrator being shown the door without warning, which, if good human resource practices are adhered to, should not normally happen (Boone, 2022; Douglas, 2022). Patricia Haruchiyo Sugiman was serving her second term as Dean of Arts at Toronto Metropolitan University or TMU (formerly Ryerson University). Had there been significant negative issues related to her leadership, presumably she would not have been renewed after completing her first term from 2016-21. Prior to her position as Dean, she was Chair of the Department of Sociology at TMU from 2012-2016. After the tragic and untimely death of her only child, a 27-year-old daughter, she took a bereavement leave in November, 2023, followed by a mid-term administrative leave, and was set to return to work on August 14, 2024 to finish her remaining two and half years as Dean (Cousée, Makar and Zhang, 2024). On her scheduled "catch-up meeting" with her boss, the Provost of the university, on July 31st, she was immediately terminated without warning and ordered to go back to her position as a Professor of Sociology. Sugiman was completely blindsided, "I was shocked," she said. "It was very hostile, the whole thing. I don't understand that." (Friesen, 2024). Terminations related to performance should never come as a surprise if proper human resource practices are being followed, such as progressive discipline procedures and instituting performance improvement plans based on prior, mutually-signed off-on performance objectives.

An open letter titled "What happened to Pam?" received 337 signatures from members of the TMU community following Sugiman's sudden dismissal. Her case was reported in the student newspaper on August 22, 2024, and later covered in the Globe and Mail on September 18, 2024

(Friesen, 2024). Senior administrators spread innuendo suggesting that she had not effectively managed her budget. Following the Globe and Mail coverage, Michael Forbes, spokesman for the university, said the following in an email:

> No university would take the step of removing a dean without very serious deliberation... While I cannot speak to HR specifics, the decision was made for a number of reasons. For all deans, as with all academic administrators at any university, there are obligations to manage within the budget.

If there had been concerns about how Sugiman managed her budget prior to her leave of absence, why was this not raised with her both verbally and in writing upon her return, with an insistence that she meet a target over a set period of time? Perhaps this was done but it has not been reported in the media. To make matters worse, online anonymous trolls commenting on the Globe and Mail article implied she had only been hired because of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI/DEI) initiatives and was therefore incompetent. Pam Sugiman was not only a distinguished scholar but, as previously stated, had been renewed as a Dean for a second term without concerns. The remarks of the university spokesperson, which imply that Sugiman did not manage within her budget, cast doubt on the process resulting in the Dean's termination. Sugiman hired a lawyer and I assume the matter is settled but the case is yet another example of questionable practices emerging within post-secondary institutions that smack of possible workplace mobbing or at least questionable HR practices. Unlike Candia-Bailey, Sugiman had a substantive faculty position to fall back on, which may have softened the blow as she still has a scholarly career. Nevertheless it still raises serious questions about the soundness of institutional leadership and related human resources practices.

Illustrative Vignette: Lisa LaFlamme

The case of Canadian journalist Lisa LaFlamme provides a salient example of the ways in which high-profile employment terminations can draw public attention to possible mobbing-related dynamics. At the age of 58 and after a successful 35-year career and national visibility as Anchor of CTV News, LaFlamme was informed on June 28th, 2022 by Bell Media that her contract would not be renewed. LaFlamme's dismissal was widely criticized as a glaring example of poor corporate senior leadership and a very badly-executed termination resulting in a public relations crisis (Douglas, 2022).She later released a video stating she had been "blindsided" by the decision, which quickly went viral and was viewed four million times (Cecco, 2022). LaFlamme's case sparked allegations of sexism and ageism, particularly linked to her superior's comment on LaFlamme letting her hair go grey during the COVID-19 pandemic (Grant, 2022). The controversy intensified when reports surfaced of disparaging remarks from Bell Media VP Michael Melling who was responsible for LaFlamme's termination with the full knowledge and consent of his superiors. Melling was later reassigned and subsequently left the company. The case gained further traction when corporations such as Dove and Wendy's launched campaigns addressing ageism in the workplace (CBC News, 2022). While atypical in its high visibility and relatively favorable outcome for the target - likely due to her media skills - the case highlights common mobbing patterns:

unexpected dismissal, innuendo tied to personal characteristics, and failures in organizational accountability. Others pointed to LaFlamme's expensive employment contract as a factor (Lilley, 2022).

According to coverage in the Globe and Mail (Doolittle, 2022) "Mr. Melling and Ms. LaFlamme clashed over stories, network priorities and resources – most visibly when it came to coverage of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee and the war in Ukraine." In other words, LaFlamme talked back. "Mr. Melling did not respond well to pushback from Ms. LaFlamme and [senior producer] Ms. Hwang" according to one source (Ibid). Finally, according to the National Post, a conservative Canadian national newspaper,"After speaking to more than a dozen sources who have or continue to work at the organization, including those who have, until recently, worked with LaFlamme, this looks like a clash of egos combined with a company hellbent on cost-cutting" (Lilley, 2022). What is perhaps most troubling in the media coverage about LaFlamme's ouster is the innuendo about her and her senior producer Rosa Hwang creating a "toxic work environment". These allegations are unsubstantiated and do not appear to have been investigated independently. Accusing the target of being toxic or a bully are typically common workplace mobbing tactics. "I don't find her toxic, she's demanding, but she was the lead anchor for a national newscast," reported Lilley (2022) based on comments from a longtime associate of LaFlamme. Again, what this case calls into question are issues of double standards and attempts to destroy a person's professional reputation without due process. LaFlamme has bounced back and maintained a dignified silence.

Other cases

There are many other cases in the media about terminations that appear to be motivated by bullying and in response to whistleblowing, and resulting in mobbing or group aggression that renders the target a persona non grata in a particular institution or even in a broader scholarly community. These cases often result in costly settlements, lawsuits, destroyed careers and - at worse - suicides of targets. We all know of workplace abuse cases, including the most serious examples of mobbing, not reported in the media, but from various milieux. The most notorious field is perhaps nursing, with academe coming in a close second (Bernardes et. al. 2021; Irlbacher and Marcellus, 2025; Leymann and Gustafsson, 2014). The not-for-profit sector is also known for workplace abuse as documented by many (Fernsler, 2021; Garry, 2019). Common patterns include punishment for speaking truth to power regarding an important financial or human resources concern or strategic matter despite (on paper) whistleblower protection; no adherence to an organization's documented policies and procedures regarding performance objectives and evaluations; anonymous complaints that are never discussed or investigated despite policies requiring it according to principles of natural justice; weaponization of 360 results, where feedback can sometimes be sabotaged by a disgruntled colleague (Friedman, no date). Furthermore, 360 evaluations are designed for self-development and not as disciplinary nor complaint mechanisms, and being "blindsided" with a termination should not happen if good human resource practices are being followed. The above are just a few examples that speak to the impact of weak organizational leadership that engages in unethical and malicious behaviour, rather than properly managing performance by keeping lines of

communication open to give and receive feedback in an ethical, fair and transparent manner, that does not investigate complaints according to principles of natural justice, and does not follow progressive discipline policies. These failures in leadership can and often do wreak havoc on employees resulting in abuse such as bullying, harassment, and, the most damaging of all, workplace mobbing where a target becomes ostracized and permanently damaged in their life and career.

Conclusion and Implications for Scholarship and Practice

The literature on academic mobbing mostly concerns the experience of faculty members/professors (Westhues, 2004 and 2005; Keashly and Neuman, 2010). To be certain, having one's scholarly career destroyed is nearly impossible to recover from. However, the cases of Candia-Bailey and Sugiman show that administrators and leaders within higher education are also vulnerable, and perhaps more so, as some lack the union protections afforded to faculty if they don't have a substantive faculty position. It seems that Candia-Bailey did not have such a substantive faculty position while Sugiman did. In both cases, available information reveals weak or absent due process. Such a lack of adherence to proper human resource protocols has been identified as a central factor in the escalation of mobbing incidents (Keashly and Neuman, 2010).

This paper raises pressing questions for mobbing scholarship. Should "mini-mobbings," which result in partial rather than complete ostracization of a target from the workplace, be more deeply and thoroughly conceptualized within the literature? Candia-Bailey and Sugiman received public support. Were they mobbed because a small group within the institutional leadership led the charge against them? To what extent does fear of retaliation inhibit reporting, and why have unions, despite their broad mandate to protect worker rights, been slow to prioritize mobbing as a systemic concern (Namie & Namie, 2009)? The management of public attention adds a further complication. While media exposure can bring accountability, it often exacerbates harm to the targeted individual, who may lack the visibility or resources to mount a defense. The case of Pamela Sugiman is an example of this where media coverage may have been harmful to her. LaFlamme's case is exceptional precisely because her professional stature and high level of skill with the media enabled her to mobilize widespread public support, a resource unavailable to most targets of workplace mobbing.

Finally, there is a critical need for more robust data on the long-term consequences of workplace mobbing. Empirical work remains limited to outcomes such as psychological trauma, public health impacts, and suicide, leaving an important gap in both scholarship and policy (Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010). Workplace abuse in general, which tends to focus on individual bullying, needs to include group mobbing behaviour as an urgent public health as well as an institutional accountability issue. How much is being spent on settlements and legal counsel, including using public funds? Of course, it is essential to exercise caution when labeling a situation as a workplace mobbing until all the facts are known, since as scholars we cannot give the impression that all human resources challenges are simple or identical. The proper management of performance and

progressive discipline are perfectly acceptable and needed. Having said that, there are many types of workplace abuse, including bullying, harassment and mobbing, which are unacceptable. How much time should we spend debating whether a situation was mobbing as opposed to bullying or harassment? These, some argue, are perhaps surrogate terms (Irlbacher and Marcellus, 2025, 3). But for sure, the current context of budget-cutting is likely to exacerbate all forms of workplace abuse.

The goals are to prevent or at least lessen workplace abuse of all types, to provide restorative justice and healing to those who are targets of abuse, and to hold employers accountable. The End Workplace Abuse campaign and others like it are movements that scholars can and should support or attempt to replicate, though questions remain about whether their main focus on psychological safety is the most effective strategy, and if it is ultimately even possible. Are there other approaches to be considered such as investment in leadership training and regular external human resources audits, particularly of publicly-funded institutions? Recent legislation in Spain makes it possible for whistleblowers reporting misconduct, who could easily become targets of mobbing, to bring in an outside investigator (Massó, 2025). The outcome of this new law should be tracked over time to see if it is effective.

If a campaign similar to End Workplace Abuse were to be organized in Canada at the provincial level, it may be more effective in holding employers accountable for following their own established rules. The Mental Health Commission's consultation on national standards for workplace psychological safety may be a useful starting point (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2025). Likewise, Québec's new Bill 27 holding employers accountable for psychological safety in the workplace is seen by many as a step forward (MNP, 2025). Researchers should also consider how major findings from mobbing studies can best inform praxis, perhaps by drawing inspiration from past campaigns that addressed child abuse and domestic abuse, making both socially unacceptable. The emerging scholarly community on workplace mobbing, reflecting broader social changes, could become a living laboratory for transforming both academia and society at large. It is essential to systematically identify and bridge knowledge and policy gaps with respect to workplace abuse in general and mobbing in particular.

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