

Social Media Support and Resources for Penn State Faculty

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Office of Faculty Affairs



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Introduction	2
Roles, Actions & Resources - Overview	3
Individual Faculty Member	3
Academic Unit Administration	5
Academic Administration: Chancellor/Dean	6
Campus/College Strategic Communications Directors	7
Central Administration	7
Resources	9
Resources	9
Central Administration	9
Appendix A: Managing Harassment	11
Appendix B: Faculty Safety & Support Checklist for Academic Administrators	12
Resources and Referrals	13

Introduction

Social media is increasingly integral to University daily operations, pedagogical and research activities, and general means of engagement with internal and external communities. It is a resource that enables Penn State faculty to more fully participate and lead in a global society. Yet, as a university, we recognize that this critical arena may sometimes present challenges to the well-being and perhaps even safety of our faculty members. With this in mind, we have worked to identify and develop resources of support and guidance for how best to manage concerns often related to the use of social media. This document is a reproduction of a “Faculty Support Safety Guidance” document developed by the University of Iowa, a best practice resource, that has been modified for use at Penn State by the Office of Faculty Affairs.¹

The document is designed to assist the Penn State community in responding to situations in which faculty members are targeted by individuals or groups outside of the University based on the content of the faculty member’s scholarship, teaching, opinions, clinical care, and/or service. It addresses potential concerns in such situations and informs the colleges and campuses about resources available to assist individual faculty members, academic unit executive officers, and other administrators.

The foundation for this document is the University’s unwavering support for academic freedom and freedom of expression. Academic freedom for faculty members in teaching and research is essential to the University’s educational mission. As described in policy, the University protects academic freedom, even with regard to controversial issues or ideas that may provoke disagreement in the public. Likewise, as citizens, faculty members enjoy strong protection for freedom of speech. Rooted in the Constitution, free expression is necessary for the robust intellectual exchange on which the University’s teaching and research missions depend. Thus, the targeting of scholars for their ideas or views may not only threaten harm to those individuals, but also strikes at the University’s academic core. Through this document and other means, the University seeks to offer resources and support for faculty against the intimidation, harassment or injury that public discourse and the expression of unpopular ideas may generate.

This document is “content neutral,” meaning that it is designed to offer support for faculty members across a wide spectrum of views and areas of research. For example, it may be useful for faculty who come under attack for their conclusions related to social issues, as well as for faculty whose scientific methods are deemed controversial, such as the use of stem cells or animals in research.

This document focuses on threats, intimidation or harassment against faculty members from outside the University. For information about policies and procedures governing harassment committed by Penn State employees, students, and/or third parties interacting with Penn State employees or students on campus, please see Penn State policies [AD85 \(Title IX Sexual Harassment\)](#) and [AD91 \(Discrimination and Harassment and Related Inappropriate Conduct\)](#) for more information and guidance or contact Penn State’s Affirmative Action Office.

Other [Penn State policies may be applicable](#). Individual colleges, campuses and departments may also have protocols in place to address violence or harassment in the workplace.

¹ Permission for the reproduction and revision of Faculty Support Safety Guidance was granted by the University of Iowa.

Roles, Actions and Resources – An Overview

In matters of safety and security, individual faculty members are encouraged to make use of University, college and campus resources to assist them in responding to an immediate situation, as well as to address any concerns that arise in the longer term. Numerous resources are also available to support academic unit executive officers and academic administrators in responding to external attacks against Penn State faculty members when appropriate. Knowing about relevant resources and support in advance of a crisis will help our colleges and campuses respond more effectively when a situation requires immediate action.

As each situation is different, this document offers advice and resources rather than prescribed procedure. This section offers suggestions for individuals at various levels in the University, including:

- Individual Faculty Member
- Academic Unit Administrator (e.g. Department Head, Division Head, School Director, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, Chief Academic Officer)
- College or Campus Strategic Communications Director
- Unit Executive (Dean, Chancellor)

Individual Faculty Member

Ensure your safety. Identify your primary concerns and seek out assistance. The following suggestions may be of use in your personal safety planning.

- If you believe your physical safety is at risk, immediately notify the police force in your home jurisdiction or call 911. For safety concerns on campus, contact [University Police](#) or your local campus security office.
- Notify your academic unit administrator and, if necessary, your college or campus administration, including the unit's [Human Resources Strategic Partner \("HRSP"\)](#), of the situation. See the "Faculty Safety and Support Checklist" (Appendix B) for ways in which your academic unit might be able to support you. You do not need to manage this experience on your own.
- Consult directly or work with your academic unit administrator and HRSP to contact the Penn State [Behavioral Threat Management Team \(BTMT\)](#). The BTMT is dedicated to the early identification, assessment, and management of incidents and behaviors that threaten the safety and well-being of the university community. BTMT staff members are trained to assess these kinds of situations and assist with coordinated responses, as needed. For example, the BTMT can coordinate with the Penn State [University Police and Public Safety](#), provide tips about classroom safety and other on-campus safety resources.
- Consult with the Office of Strategic Communications. Visit <https://strategiccommunications.psu.edu> or reach out by email at socialmediaoffice@psu.edu. For more urgent matters, email mediarelations@psu.edu.
- Consult the [University Police and Public Safety website](#) for more information regarding on-campus safety, and local community police departments regarding off-campus safety.
- If you believe the individuals targeting you know where you live (which is not difficult to find online) and you are concerned about safety in your home, create a safety plan for home and work.

Penn State University Police and Public Safety can assist you in assessing risk and planning accordingly.

- If you are experiencing gender-based harassment and/or harassment that is sexual in nature, consult [Penn State's Office of Sexual Misconduct Reporting and Response](#) (OSMRR) or the [Office of Equal Opportunity and Access](#) (OEOA) to ensure that you are fully aware of your rights and resources.
- Do not delete any messages, but you may want to disengage from reading all emails in your inbox, listening to all voice messages, etc. Preserved messages may be of use in identifying the harassers and pressing any relevant charges. Create a log to document and archive all threatening emails, tweets, Facebook posts, and phone messages. Consider asking a friend to monitor social and other media on your behalf and to keep you apprised of any developments or threats.
- Save screenshots of harassing or threatening social media posts to preserve as evidence in case the author deletes the original post.
- Be cautious about responding to threatening emails, tweets, blog comments, etc. In most cases, it will be in your best interest not to respond. Although responding may seem like the right thing to do, it may only provide harassers with additional material and serve to prolong social media harassment. The University's Office of Social Media can help you determine whether and how to respond. If you choose not to respond, you may also want to encourage your friends and colleagues to do the same. [Review "Managing Harassment" \(Appendix A\)](#).
- Protect your cyber-identity (e.g., cell phone, network access, social media).
 - Penn State Office of Information Security can be of assistance. See [Penn State Office of Information Security](#) for guidance.
- Consult with your academic unit administrator and your unit executive (dean/chancellor) for assistance in responding to the situation. For example, you may want to consider preparing a concise message to articulate your position in your own words and distribute to colleagues as a form of reputation management. Should you get media requests related to the incident, the Office of Strategic Communications can be of assistance in deciding whether/how to respond.
- Reach out to friends and develop a support system. [SupportLinc](#), the University's employee assistance program, offers free short-term counseling and other resources to Penn State employees and their families.
- Know that you are not alone as an academic who has experienced this type of harassment. Several scholars have written about the coordinated and systemic patterns of attack against scholars and faculty members. Connect with others who have gone through similar situations to decrease your isolation and learn from their experience. For more information, contact the Office of Faculty Affairs at vpfa@psu.edu.
- Consult with your academic unit administrator if you feel this attack has affected your progress toward tenure, promotion or reappointment.

Academic Unit Administrator

- Contact the faculty member as soon as you become aware of threatening or intimidating behavior against them. Meet with them to offer support in the initial days of the incident and review the “Faculty Safety and Support Checklist” (Appendix B) to ensure the faculty member is aware of campus resources.
- Before all else, work with the faculty member to address their on-campus and off-campus safety and security concerns. Be aware that the identity of the faculty member may influence their individualized needs (e.g., parental status, faculty rank, minoritized identity). Refer the faculty member to appropriate campus resources or, with the faculty member’s consent, reach out to such resources as appropriate to address whatever issues the faculty member identifies.
- It is possible that social media and phone intimidation and harassment will be received by multiple offices. Inform the unit administrative staff on a need-to-know basis. Ensure that unit staff members whose responsibilities may include answering harassing phone calls are supported and informed about strategies for being on the front line (e.g., a script or template response, instructions for preserving phone messages to aid future investigations). The college’s or campus’ communications director can help with messaging.
- Stay in communication with the dean’s/chancellor’s office to ensure a coordinated response. Share details of the situation on a need-to-know basis and be mindful that all email communication may be subject to request via subpoena or other legal process.
- Consider the well-being of the rest of the unit faculty, staff, and students (e.g., co-authors, graduate assistants, front-line staff). Consult with the threatened faculty member about what and how to share information with the department. If possible, bring people together to discuss the situation, the department’s actions, and available support resources.
- Facilitate the physical movement of assigned classrooms and/or workspace if feasible, and if the affected faculty member requests it.
- Facilitate the removal of the faculty member’s direct contact information from department or college webpages and the University directory, in collaboration with human resources and the college/campus communications office, if the affected faculty member requests it.
- If the attacks are identity-based (e.g., harassment based on gender, race, sexual identity, country of origin), consult with the Office of Equal Opportunity and Access to counsel the faculty member about their options and explore additional support and resources for the faculty member and others in the unit who share their identity (e.g., students, colleagues, staff).
- After addressing the faculty member’s safety and security concerns, keep in mind the potential effect of this event on their academic career. For example, if their scholarship was attacked, discuss how or whether it will affect their future research trajectory. Connecting the faculty member with other scholars who have experienced similar attacks may be useful to contextualize the events within their broader career goals and experiences.

- Discuss issues of academic freedom in regular forums (e.g., faculty meetings, student seminars), including attention to ways that external forces may attempt to silence scholars through social media attacks and the resources available to respond when or if attacks occur.
- If you become the target of the harassment, consult with the dean's/chancellor's office and refer to the strategies recommended for faculty members (above) to ensure your own safety.

Unit Executive

- While our first instinct may be to respond and defend with a rebuttal online, it's important to understand that engaging in a dialogue on social media can sometimes make matters worse. Each situation should be evaluated on its own. Consult with the campus/college communicator and the Office of Strategic Communications before responding.
- If a response is warranted, the leadership message should defend academic freedom, the importance of faculty safety, and the development of learning environments in which difficult issues are discussed and dissected. Work with the campus/college communicator and/or Office of Strategic Communications to develop a message that emphasizes [University values](#), draws on best-practice examples from other campuses, and addresses potential concerns of multiple constituents (e.g., faculty, alumni, legislators, donors, students).
- Consider developing and/or publicizing academic protocols for dealing with internal threats and harassment (e.g., from students, patients). Provide training opportunities and resources for academic faculty and staff. For more information, see Penn State [AD91 \(Discrimination and Harassment and Related Inappropriate Conduct\)](#).
- If the issue is growing and is likely to have an impact on your unit's or the University's broader reputation or is likely to generate media attention, contact the Office of Strategic Communications at mediarelations@psu.edu to discuss the matter and communications strategy to mitigate its impact.
- If a crisis emerges, consult with the targeted faculty member to share how you would like to publicly handle the crisis and discuss any concerns they might have. Involve the faculty member's academic unit administrator in crisis management conversations to ensure that efforts are coordinated.
- Support the academic unit administrator in working with the targeted faculty member by offering assistance and resources. See the Faculty Support Checklist (Appendix B) to ensure that the targeted faculty member's immediate and longer-term needs are addressed.
- Inform the dean's/chancellor's office staff on a need-to-know basis. It is likely that social media and phone harassment will be directed at multiple offices. Informing all relevant individuals in the dean's office will strengthen the college's ability to engage in a coordinated response. Ensure that dean's/chancellor's office staff members whose responsibilities may include answering harassing phone calls are supported and informed about strategies for being on the front line (e.g., a script or template response, instructions for preserving phone messages to aid future investigations).
- Consider informing other offices/staff members who may field phone calls, including Development, Alumni Relations, Admissions, Career Services, etc., so they can respond with the appropriate messages.

- Depending on the nature of the attacks, be aware that students, staff, and faculty who share the identity and/or research area under attack (e.g., LGBTQ students, if the faculty member's sexual identity is under attack; students of color, if the faculty member's racial/ethnic identity is the focus; international students, if the faculty member's country of origin is the focus) may also be experiencing trauma because of this incident. Consult with the Office of Equal Opportunity and Access, Office of the Vice Provost for Educational Equity, the Penn State University Employee Assistance Program, the Multicultural Resource Center, the Paul Robeson Cultural Center, the Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity, the Gender Equity Center, and/or Counseling and Psychological Services as appropriate to arrange for support services for students and staff in the college/campus.

Communications Director

- Inform the dean/chancellor if you become aware that a faculty member's name has shown up in a social media post that may contain a threat or intimidating/harassing content. Keep the dean/chancellor informed of ongoing mentions throughout the crisis management process.
- In close consultation with the Office of Strategic Communications, provide support for the faculty member being targeted, including tips on if and how they should respond, managing their professional and personal reputation, and reviewing Managing Harassment (Appendix A). Discuss all media inquiries with the Office of Strategic Communications.
- Work with the dean's/chancellor's office and other campus spokespeople to coordinate information sharing on a need-to-know basis and to coordinate a consistent message (e.g., phone scripts for frontline staff answering aggressive callers).
- Consult with academic faculty, staff, and administrators about the potential impact of speaking with the media. Have staff and administrators, and encourage faculty to, refer media inquiries to the college/campus communications office or the University's Office of Strategic Communications.
- Provide assistance to the unit executive with crafting a leadership message that defends academic freedom, emphasizes University values, and addresses potential concerns of multiple constituents (e.g., faculty, alumni, legislators, donors, students).

Central Administration

Office of the Provost

- Establish open communication with the affected faculty member's dean/chancellor and request updates, as needed, on the situation.
- Reach out to the targeted faculty member, reiterating the University's commitment to academic freedom as appropriate, and encouraging the faculty member to consult with their academic unit administrator for support and assistance.
- Provide tools and training for faculty administrators to use when developing immediate- and longer-term response plans.
- In consultation with the Office of the President and Office of Strategic Communications, issue a statement (as appropriate) asserting the importance of academic freedom and committing to the

safety and well-being of the faculty. The statement should emphasize the University's mission and values rather than comment on the faculty member's scholarship.

Office of the President

- Maintain consistent communication with the Office of the Provost and work together, as appropriate, to issue a statement asserting the importance of free speech, academic freedom and the safety of University faculty.

Office of Equal Opportunity and Access

- Provide guidance and consultation to targeted individuals and units regarding issues of discrimination and harassment related to the situation.
- Investigate specific allegations of discrimination and harassment related to the situation and determine appropriate steps to address such actions in collaboration with other units.
- Provide resources and support to individuals and units as needed.
- Establish consistent communication with Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost and consult on issuing a statement of support, as appropriate.

Office of the Vice Provost for Educational Equity

- Provide resources and support to the individual faculty member and department when the attack includes personalized attacks on the faculty member's identity and/or diversity-related scholarship or teaching.
- Coordinate or provide student support services, especially for students whose identities and/or interests are similar to the targeted faculty member.
- Establish consistent communication with Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost and consult on issuing a statement of support, as appropriate.

University Human Resources

- Provide support and assistance to the individual faculty members, academic administration, and the broader unit via collaboration with the Office of Faculty Affairs, Penn State BTMT, the Office of Equal Opportunity and Access, and Employee Assistance Program.

Resources

The following offices are available to assist during crisis management and also to provide longer-term guidance and programs.

[Campus Safety Resources](#)

[Victim Resources](#)

[Employee Assistance Program \(EAP\)](#) — This program is a confidential and consultative employee and family resource as a first line of defense for personal or work-related concerns for yourself or your family. Phone: 888-501-3532.

University Police Victim Services — University Police can provide you with advice and help you to find the programs and services that might be of assistance to you. Visit <https://www.police.psu.edu/victim-services> or call 814-863-1111.

[Human Resources](#) — Your Human Resources representative can assist you with finding resources as well as knowing the laws and University policies about workplace violence.

[Centre Safe \(formerly “Centre County Women's Resource Center”\)](#) — Provides services for people who have experienced domestic and/or sexual violence. Phone: 814-234-5050.

[United States Department of Labor](#) — Guidelines for preventing workplace violence.

Penn State University Central Administration

Office of Strategic Communications
401 James Elliott Building
120 South Burrowes Street
State College, PA 16801
mediarelations@psu.edu

Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost
205 Old Main
University Park, PA 16802
Phone: 814-865-2505
<https://provost.psu.edu/contact/>

Office of General Counsel
The Pennsylvania State University
227 West Beaver Avenue
Suite 507
State College, PA 16801
Email: eus18@psu.edu
Phone: 814-867-4088

Employee Assistance Program (SupportLinc)
888-501-3532
<https://hr.psu.edu/current-employee/health-wellbeing/supportlinc>

Office of Faculty Affairs
205 Old Main
University Park, PA 16802
Phone: 814-863-7494
vpfa@psu.edu

Office of Equal Opportunity and Access
328 Boucke Building
University Park, PA 16802
814-863-0471
<https://equalopportunity.psu.edu/>

Appendix A: Managing Harassment*

According to a [2020 survey by the Pew Research Center](#), 41 percent of adults report being the subject of harassing behavior online, and 66 percent have witnessed harassing behavior directed at others. Responding to online harassment can be challenging, even scary if the harassment becomes threatening. The University's Office of Strategic Communications recommends the following options.

1. **Ignore them.** The goal of social media agitators (commonly referred to as trolls) is to elicit a response. The good news is that even the most persistent trolls typically move on if you ignore them long enough.
2. **Block them.** Several social media platforms allow you to selectively prevent others from following you, seeing your posts, or commenting on your content. Please note that when you block someone, they are typically notified of the block and may choose to criticize you on their own channels.
3. **Respond.** If someone is sharing misinformation about you or your work, consider sharing a brief response to correct the falsehoods. This will likely result in additional posts from the harassing party, but it does give you a platform to set the record straight. It's highly recommended that you consult with the Office of Strategic Communications in determining whether to respond and the best avenue for doing so. For instance, responding to Twitter attacks with a reply on Twitter may not be the best strategy.
4. **Record and report.** If you feel at all threatened, contact the proper authorities and keep a record of the hostile or threatening posts. Take and save screenshots in case you need to file a police report or take legal action.

For more information or questions concerning your experience on social media, please contact:

- Kellen Manning, director, digital and social media content, at kellen@psu.edu, or
- Wyatt DuBois, director, university public relations, at wyatt@psu.edu.

**Managing Harassment*, retrieved from University of Iowa (September 17, 2019) and modified for use by the Office of Faculty Affairs, Penn State University.

Appendix B: Faculty Safety and Support Checklist for Academic Administrators

This checklist helps academic unit administrators and other administrators to address possible concerns and provide resources in the immediate and longer-term aftermath of a crisis in which faculty are targeted for their ideas or views. The academic unit administrator and/or their designee may use this checklist when meeting with the faculty member to gather information and create a safety plan. It may be useful to capture as much information as possible during these interactions in order to limit the number of times the faculty member has to retell the story. If it is not possible for the academic unit head or designee to engage in this type of meeting, please refer the faculty member to the dean/chancellor's office for follow-up.

What is the nature of the harassment? When did it begin? How has it changed since it began?

In what environment(s) is the harassment occurring (check all that apply)?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Email | <input type="checkbox"/> In the classroom |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Social media: | <input type="checkbox"/> In the office |
| <input type="checkbox"/> X (Twitter) | <input type="checkbox"/> At home |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Facebook | <input type="checkbox"/> Voice messages left on campus phones |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Instagram | <input type="checkbox"/> On-campus stalking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> TikTok | <input type="checkbox"/> Via media requests |
| <input type="checkbox"/> LinkedIn | <input type="checkbox"/> Harassment of family members/children |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |

Is the harasser someone who is known or been identified? If so, please provide that information.

What is the faculty member's greatest concern?

Resources and Referrals

Depending on the type and location of the threat, and the identity of the faculty member, offer unit support to implement the following, as directed by the faculty member:

Actions	Resource/s
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Engage with the Behavioral Threat Management Team (BTMT) about on-campus safety resources. The BTMT is available to do an initial assessment over the phone or in person with academic administrators or individual faculty members. 	<p>Behavioral Threat Management Team</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Report harassing social media content to the social media platform. If the content is in violation of the platform’s terms of service, it will be deleted and the author may be disciplined (e.g., suspended, banned) Document and screenshot all offending content before reporting it to the platform so that the content is archived. 	<p>Each platform has various ways to report violations of their terms.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ A representative of University Police and Public Safety serves as a member of the Behavioral Threat Management Team and can also be contacted directly to arrange for safety planning and/or to investigate violent threats. 	<p>University Police and Public Safety</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ If needed and if feasible, arrange for relocation of the faculty member’s classroom(s) and office, including technology (e.g., computer, printer, internet). Remove the new room numbers from public listings (e.g., directory). 	<p>Academic administration</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ If the threats are based on race, ethnicity, country of origin, sex, gender, or other protected categories, consult the Affirmative Action Office 	<p>Office of Equal Opportunity and Access</p>

<p>□ Refer media inquiries to the Office of Strategic Communications. Reporters may call for a comment or interview. Deciding whether to talk with the press is a personal decision for faculty members; however, consulting with media experts can assist in the decision-making process. Media training may be available.</p>	<p>Office of Strategic Communications</p>
<p>□ Provide information about relevant academic policies that address specific concerns expressed by the faculty member.</p>	<p>Office of Faculty Affairs</p>
<p>□ Support faculty members who feel their social identity is a component of the attack (e.g., faculty of color, LGBTQ faculty, country of origin). Provide resources and support for others in the department (e.g., students, staff, faculty) who share the faculty member’s identity and who may also feel threatened.</p>	<p>Educational Equity Office of Equal Opportunity and Access</p>
<p>□ Provide information about available campus resources to address stress management and counseling services.</p>	<p>SupportLinc, Penn State’s employee assistance program</p>