



To: Teaching and Research Faculty

From: Austin O. Agho, Ph.D., Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

Re: Guidelines for protecting scholars and researchers from attacks on social media, message boards, and other online forums

Date: July 1, 2022

Introduction

Old Dominion University (ODU) is committed to protecting academic freedom and supporting scholars and researchers as they teach and investigate difficult or controversial topics. Members of the University community must be allowed to rigorously pursue their research and scholarship without fear, coercion, or intimidation. To proactively address efforts to defame, attack, or misrepresent the scholarly work of our academic community, we need guidelines. Otherwise, the professional and personal lives of targeted faculty may be disrupted and student learning undermined.

This document outlines the actions to be taken at ODU to manage and respond to coordinated efforts that undermine the academic freedom of scholars and researchers. Faculty across the country have recently been the targets of such social media tactics as posting online messages to misrepresent the work of the faculty member, posting of threatening comments on third-party websites, and sending threatening emails to faculty, staff, and students with the intent of instilling fear. Trolling, defined as a “form of baiting online which involves sending abusive and hurtful comments across all social media platforms” is also a tactic used to intimidate scholars and researchers. Consequently, this document spells out the multilayered and organized approach ODU’s faculty, Department Chairs, Academic Deans, Office of Academic Affairs, Office of University Communications, Police Department, Office of Information Technology Services, and Threat Education Assessment and Management will follow to respond to attacks on scholars and researchers. Our approach borrows from documents developed by the University of Massachusetts Amherst, University of Minnesota, and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
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Faculty member

- Call ODU Police at 757-683-4000 or dial 9-1-1 if you or others close to you are in immediate physical danger.
- Call ODU Police at 757-683-4000 to report the incident.
- Inform the Department Chair of the attack as soon as possible. Research faculty should inform their Center Director.
- Document evidence of the attack (e.g., emails, postings, calls, online messages) and submit it to the Department Chair, College Dean, and ODU Police Department so that they can activate campus resources to identify the source of the harassment. Research faculty should include the Center Director in all communications.
- Provide your Department Chair with a list of co-authors and collaborators who are also at risk of being targeted.
- Assist Chair and Dean/Center Director in preparing a statement about your position and/or scholarship.
- Assist ODU Police with the investigation of the attack.
- Work with ITS to minimize your exposure on social media.
- Temporarily suspend your social media accounts and mute the harasser on your social media platforms.
- Do not respond to harassing messages.
- Cooperate with the Office of University Counsel in responding to mandated public record requests under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

Department Chair

- Reassure the faculty member of the University's commitment to academic freedom and public safety.
- Forward the information received from the faculty member to the appropriate Dean and provide regular updates to the Dean.
- Forward all media inquiries to the Office of University Communications. Do not answer media questions yourself unless advised to do so by the Office of University Communications.
- Discuss the situation in a confidential matter with the affected faculty and assess the level of concern for faculty personal safety. In certain situations, it may be necessary to alert other departmental faculty as well, always guaranteeing confidentiality.
- Assist the ODU Police Department and Threat Assessment Team with their investigation.
- Encourage faculty and staff to document and retain messages they receive.
- If the Department Chair is the target of the attack, the Dean will assume the role ascribed to the chair in the document.

Academic Dean and Center Director

- Reassure the faculty member of the University's commitment to academic freedom and public safety.
- Forward information from the faculty member to the Threat Assessment Team for evaluation.
- Notify the Office of Academic Affairs, ITS, and the Office of University Communications about the situation.
- Work in collaboration with the Office of Academic Affairs and Office of Research to propose a plan to protect the affected faculty member.
- If the harassment is motivated by the race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or LGBTQ+ identity of the faculty member, the Office of Institutional Equity and Diversity must be notified.
- Work with the faculty member and Department Chair to prepare a statement for the University Public Relations Officer to respond to the situation. If the issue is student-related, work with the Department Chair to help students switch classes, if necessary.
- Work with the chair to alter the affected faculty member's teaching schedules, as necessary, based on feedback from the ODU Police Department or Threat Assessment Team.
- Provide instructions to front desk staff (e.g., Dean's Office and Department staff) on how to respond to and direct incoming phone calls.
- Provide regular updates to the affected faculty member.
- As the situation progresses and/or is resolved, work with the Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs and Strategic Initiatives to assess the potential immediate and long-term impacts of the attacks on the faculty member's productivity, progress toward tenure and promotion, and the selection of external reviewers during the tenure and promotion process.
- Forward all media inquiries to the Office of University Communications. Do not answer media questions yourself unless advised to do so by the Office of University Communications.

Office of Academic Affairs

- The Provost will prepare and distribute a message to the campus community to affirm the University's commitment to academic freedom and support for the research produced by the targeted scholar.
- The Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs and Strategic Initiatives will work with the Dean to strategize on measures to minimize the impact of the attack on the faculty member's career advancement.
- Work with the Department of Human Resources to activate the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) so that the targeted faculty member and those affected can receive counseling and/or other forms of necessary support.
- Collaborate with the Office of Student Engagement and Enrollment Services (SEES) to respond to concerns raised by students.
- Work in consultation with the Office of University Counsel to advise affected faculty of their legal rights.
- Include the Department Chair and Dean in discussions of actions that might affect the faculty member's career.

- In meetings called to discuss critical issues pertaining to the threat, the affected faculty member should be allowed to invite a mentor or an advocate.
- Assist ODU Police Department with investigations related to this situation.

Office of University Communications

- Serve as the point of contact for all media inquiries.
- Meet with the faculty member, Department Chair, and the Dean of the College or Center Director to review and write key facts.
- Collaborate with the faculty member and University leaders to draft statement(s) and develop key messages for target audiences.
- Advise the faculty member, Department Chair and Dean or Center Director on strategies to minimize exposure on social media and de-escalate the tension.
- Assist the Office of Academic Affairs in developing internal and external communication strategies.
- Monitor social media and report findings to the faculty member, Department Chair, Dean/Center Director, Provost, Vice President for Research, ODU Police Department, and Threat Assessment Team, as appropriate.
- Monitor the news and social media landscape, identifying and sharing top issues with University leadership and key stakeholders.

ODU Police Department

- Advise the faculty member, Department Chair, and Dean/Center Director on appropriate precautionary and safety measures.
- Meet with the faculty member, Department Chair, Dean/Center Director to review the investigative process.
- Investigate the complaint and report findings, as appropriate.
- Guide the faculty member through the process of obtaining any legal remedies available.

Information Technology Services

- At the direction of University Police, the Office of Research, or Academic Affairs, temporarily remove personal and contact information on the targeted faculty member and co-authors and collaborators from University-managed websites. Faculty, Department Chair, and Dean will be informed of this preventive action.
- Coach the faculty member, Department Chair, and Dean on strategies to prevent incoming threatening email messages and preserve personal social media evidence.

- At the direction of University Police or University Counsel, assist with the retrieval and preservation of ODU evidence (e.g., ODU emails, comments posted on ODU message boards, threatening email messages posted on ODU social media).

Threat Education Assessment & Management (TEAM)

- Review and assess the level and severity of the threat.
- Notify the faculty member, Department Chair, and Dean or Center Director of the assessment outcomes
- Advise the Provost and the Dean of the College on actions to protect the affected faculty member.

Conclusion

Given the increasing number of individuals using social media, emails, message boards, and other online forums to attack scholars and researchers, the University must be ready to mobilize resources supporting affected faculty. In addition to protecting the faculty member from physical harm, measures taken must consider possible after-effects of the attack (e.g., negative impact on scholarly productivity). The coordinated plan developed and presented in this document is designed to mitigate the impact of the attacks on members of our academic community. The Office of Academic Affairs will take the lead in sharing this document broadly to faculty and during new faculty orientation and onboarding of new department Chairs and Deans. To further the University's efforts to take preemptive actions to prevent possible attacks on faculty scholarship and research, the Center for Faculty Development will work in consultation with Department Chairs and Deans to conduct at least one workshop per academic year on academic freedom, "trolling" attack prevention strategies, and ways to prepare for interviews and interact with the media. Clear and frequent communication between each participating office is crucial to mitigating the impact of these attacks on faculty and the entire University community.