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Resources and Support for Academics Targeted by Online Harassment

Introduction

The University of California is committed to upholding and preserving principles of academic freedom. These principles reflect the University's fundamental mission, which is to discover knowledge and to disseminate it to its students and to society at large. The principles of academic freedom protect freedom of inquiry and research, freedom of teaching, and freedom of expression and publication. [APM - 010](#)

Academic freedom is a foundational value of UC Santa Cruz, co-existing with free speech rights protected under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

As we see with growing frequency, faculty and other scholars across the ideological spectrum are being targeted for their expressions, inquiries, research, and teaching in various social media platforms. These virtual attacks can result in harm to individual health and safety, careers, and livelihoods. They can also include hateful language that inflicts further harm on others, including family members, colleagues, students, mentees, and members of shared affinity spaces. UC Santa Cruz decries such attacks and takes any threat of harm seriously. It is also vital that our campus community be aware of steps to take when such circumstances occur.

This resource is intended to provide support and guidance to those affected, those helping them navigate confrontational or malicious social media posts, and others on campus who may be indirectly or directly impacted.

What to do if you are, or someone you know is, targeted

Safety first

- If you are concerned about your physical safety, [contact the UCSC Police Department](#) and/or your local law enforcement for immediate assistance and for safety planning in your workplace and home, respectively.
- If you believe the attackers know where you live (which can be found online with enough digging) and you are concerned about safety in your home, create a safety plan for home and work. The UCSC Police Department can assist you in assessing risk and planning accordingly.
- If you are experiencing harassment that is gender-based and/or sexual in nature, consult the [Equal Employment Opportunity office](#).

- If you have been a target of a bias-motivated incident or harassment that is gender-based or sexual in nature on campus or while participating in a university-sponsored activity, you may report the incident by emailing equity@ucsc.edu or using the [online reporting form](#).
- If you want to remove your personal information from the Internet, consider using [DeleteMe](#), which can be purchased via the [COR Faculty Allowance program \(CFA\)](#).
- These situations are stressful. Personal support services are available through Faculty/ Staff Support Services. For general information about the [Employee Assistance Program](#), you can contact ComPsych toll-free at 1-844-209-0464, or the UCSC Benefits Office at (831) 459-2013.
- Reach out to your department chair about your concerns so they can help you and help provide resources.
- Reach out to the appropriate Human Resource office - notify either your Staff HR divisional or departmental [dedicated team member](#) or assistant dean or contact the [Academic Personnel Office](#) directly.
- If you have any questions or need a consultation to help advise you and your colleagues about resources available, reach out to Scott Hernandez-Jason at shj@ucsc.edu.

Collect and preserve evidence

- Do not delete any messages.
- Preserve social media posts by taking screenshots that show the message, the sender/poster, the online location and the date and time. They may be of use in identifying harassers and pressing relevant charges.

Protect yourself online

- Reach out to [Information Technology Services](#) (ITS) to request your name be removed from the Campus Directory, and if necessary, change your UCSC email address.
- Be cautious about the information shared on your social media platforms. Avoid disclosing sensitive details like your home address, phone number, or personal email in public posts or profiles.
- [Use strong, unique passwords](#) for each online account and enable two-factor authentication whenever possible. Regularly update passwords and avoid using easily guessable information, such as birth dates or pet names.
- Regularly review and adjust privacy settings on social media accounts to control who can access your personal information and posts. Limit the visibility of personal details to trusted connections only.
- Beware of unsolicited requests for personal information or attempts to extract sensitive data through phishing emails, messages, or suspicious websites. Verify the legitimacy of requests before sharing any details.
- [Use eduroam](#) for secure wireless access on campus and [the campus virtual private network \(VPN\)](#) with public wireless.
- Learn more about how to [stay secure online](#).

Public records

- Emails, texts and other writings may be “public records” subject to a California Public Records Act request.
- The California Public Records Act (CPRA) broadly defines a “public record” to include any “writing” that “relates to the conduct of the public’s business” and which is “prepared, owned, used, or retained” by a state agency, including the University of California. “Writing” means any communication in any format: email, voicemail, notes, etc. These faculty records/communications are required to be collected and disclosed in response to a public records request. There are very few exemptions to such a disclosure request (see the [Faculty FAQ for Public Records Requests](#) for some examples).

Deciding whether to respond

- Be cautious about responding to threatening emails, social media posts, blog comments, voicemails, etc. While it may seem like the right thing to do, it may also provide harassers with additional material and prolong social media harassment.
- Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of responding with advisors such as Faculty Equity Advocates, your department chair or dean, or colleagues at other institutions before making a decision.
- Consider consulting with UCSC’s communications staff to assist you in deciding whether and/or how to respond to the situation and media requests that may arise.

Other considerations

- 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 your division’s [Faculty Equity Advocate](#).
- Use the following Checklist to work through all of your options.

Checklist

- What is happening?
- Describe the incident(s).
- When did it start?
- Where is it happening?
 - Emails
 - Social media channels - name the channel
 - Voicemail
 - Classroom

- Office
- Lab
- Home
- Other
- Who is being affected?
- How has it unfolded?
- To the extent possible, try to understand what may be causing or contributing to the harassment.
- Preserve the content through screenshots and save copies of messages.
- Consider seeking personal support -- for yourself/the target and others -- from UCSC's [Employee Assistance Program](#).
- Report incident(s) to law enforcement.
 - [UCSC Police Department](#)
 - Local law enforcement
- Create a plan to keep the target and others affected safe.
- Consult with health professionals for support and guidance (behavioral intervention team).
- Communicate and coordinate with your/the target's:
 - Department chair/director/PI
 - Dean
 - [Campus Provost & Executive Vice Chancellor](#)
 - Others in the department/ORU/lab who may have a need to know, for example, administrative staff who answer the phone.
- Email communications@ucsc.edu to connect with the [University Relations Communications office](#) for guidance on whether, and if so how, to respond.
- Consult with [Information Technology Services](#) (ITS) if you need technology guidance. Learn more about how to [stay secure online](#).
- Consult with the [Information Practices](#) office in the Office of Campus Counsel about potential Public Records issues.
- Consider contacting UCSC's [Equity & Equal Protection](#) office.
- Consult with the [Office of the Ombuds](#) for help navigating any part of the process.

Department Chair

- Contact the faculty member as soon as you learn of the situation. Meet with them as soon as possible, offer support and make sure they are aware of campus resources available to them.

- Is the faculty member in immediate danger? Have they contacted UCSC PD for support? If not, you can offer to help them do so. Keep in mind that individuals may have different levels of comfort and desire to work with law enforcement. Be sure you ask before contacting law enforcement for them.
- Stay in communication with the dean'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 an Open Records request.
- Broader issues to consider:
 - Should the faculty member's workspaces - office, lab, classroom - be temporarily moved or protected?
 - Should their contact information be temporarily removed from department or college websites and the university directory and the information of anyone else at risk.
- Consider the well-being of the department's faculty, staff, and students (e.g., co-authors, graduate assistants, front-line staff). Consult with the targeted 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.

Deans and Assistant Deans

- Contact the department chair to offer support and resources.
- Identify who else in the division/department/dean's office may receive harassing messages, for example, staff who answer the phone.
- Inform those who need to know what to expect and how to respond. Consider whether staff should respond to phone calls and emails (with provided scripts and templates). Provide information on how to keep phone logs and preserve documents.
- Provide information on support and services available to staff who are answering harassing calls and opening emails. They may also be concerned about their own safety.
- Students, staff and faculty who share the demographic identity and/or research area being attacked may also experience trauma due to the incident. Consult with the [Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion \(ODEI\)](#) as well as UCSC's [Counseling & Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#) for students and [Employee Assistance Program](#).

Senior Administrators

- Chancellor and CP/EVC -
 - Establish communication with the faculty member(s)
 - Depending on the number of UCSC community members impacted, may work with UCSC's communications staff to develop a message (or reiterate an existing message) emphasizing university values, the importance of academic freedom to UCSC's mission, the campus's commitment to the threatened academics and addressing potential concerns of multiple constituent sand communities.
- Campus Counsel
 - The Office of Campus Counsel provides legal advice to the university as an institution. Depending on the specific circumstances, may be able to provide advice or guidance.