



What Is Cyberbullying?

BY DARBY DICKERSON

On November 26, 2008, a federal jury in Los Angeles convicted Lori Drew, a mother from Missouri, on three misdemeanor charges of computer fraud. Drew had created a phony MySpace account in which she pretended to be "Josh," a 16-year-old boy. She created Josh to trick her 13-year-old neighbor Megan Meier. Drew was upset that Meier allegedly spread gossip about her daughter at school. According to Drew, she wanted Meier to fall in love with Josh, and then publicly humiliate Meier with the romantic exchanges. But Meier committed suicide after Josh's messages turned from loving to cruel. Citing unnamed legal experts, *The New York Times* proclaimed that this was "the country's first cyberbullying verdict." But was it?

Many educators sense that cyberbullying is an increasing problem on our college campuses; recent surveys seem to corroborate our instincts. For example, a 2007 Massachusetts study found that eight percent of college students had been cyberbullied via instant messaging. In addition, U.S. and U.K. surveys from 2004 and 1999, respectively, found that between six and 9.7 percent of student-respondents had been bullied at college.

When educators identify a problem—particularly one that can physically or emotionally harm our students—we seek solutions. These solutions often include drafting policies, updating conduct codes, and creating educational programs. We have started to use the term cyberbullying with ease and frequency. But what does it mean? As we consider how to address a growing problem within our student bodies, we must first articulate what conduct the term cyberbullying does—and does not—encompass.

Although 22 states have enacted cyberbully legislation—primarily focused on the K–12 context—no uniform legal definition has emerged. In 2008, draft federal legislation sparked



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by Meier's suicide stated that an individual commits cyberbullying if he or she "transmits in interstate or foreign commerce any communication, with the intent to coerce, intimidate, harass, or cause substantial emotional distress to a person, using electronic means to support severe, repeated, and hostile behavior."

Scholarly definitions of cyberbullying are varied, including:

- "Using the Internet to harass or intimidate someone else."

- "When the Internet, cell phones, or other devices are used to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person."

- "Using modern technologies to embarrass, humiliate, threaten, or intimidate an individual in an attempt to gain power and control over them."

Absent a generally accepted definition—and in light of the different goals and purposes of higher-education versus K–12—the following steps can help educators define cyberbullying in the college context:

- **Deconstruct the term cyberbullying.** Identify and define the specific types of conduct to be addressed as cyberbullying. Conduct such as "cyberstalking," "cyberthreats," "cyberhazing," and "cyberharassment" based on protected characteristics such as race, gender, and ethnicity might be strong candidates for inclusion. On the other hand, while an individual might be prohibited from stealing another's identity, transmitting false information, or spoofing another's e-mail account, a college might not choose to label these misdeeds as cyberbullying. On a related point, public institutions must remember not to run afoul of free speech and related constitutional concerns.

- **Consider the type of harm to be prevented.** Some definitions of cyberbullying seek to redress harms ranging from threats of physical violence and harassment based on legally protected characteristics, to intimidation, isolation, or embarrassment. In a college environment, it may not be feasible or prudent to address conduct that is merely rude or results in hurt feelings. Drawing on the proposed federal legislation, colleges might choose to address only severe, abusive, or hostile conduct. Officials must also decide whether cyberbullying can be a one-time event. Although a policy choice, the trend is to label conduct as cyberbullying only when it is repeated.

- **Consider intent.** Cyberbullying is a strong term. In some jurisdictions, it is a crime. A college student labeled as a cyberbully may face problems with employment and