


THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION


Chronicle Careers<http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2008/10/2008101501c.htm>**HEADS UP****Avoiding Academe's Ax Murderers****Too many academics have perfected the art of pouncing ruthlessly on a politically wounded colleague****By GARY A. OLSON**

Many years ago when I directed a doctoral program in my discipline, I invited a celebrated scholar to hold a daylong "master class" for a select number of senior graduate students. He lectured for a few hours and then opened the session to questions. "Dr. Famous," one student asked, "what do we need to know to survive our first year as assistant professors?"




A notorious *enfant terrible*, our mischievous guest stunned everyone with his reply: "Remember that every department has at least one ax murderer, but you won't know in advance who it is so you'd better be on your guard."

While our guest was clearly playing to his audience for a laugh, he was also articulating what has become a lamentable fact of faculty life: Many academics regularly engage in a kind of "gotcha" politics.

The propensity to pounce ruthlessly on a politically wounded colleague is rapidly becoming a favorite spectator sport in academe. I am continually astonished by the gusto with which some faculty members will leap to attack a colleague at the slightest hint of an allegation of misconduct, even when the accused is a close friend. Or by how vigorously some department chairs will initiate proceedings against a faculty member when informal discussions might have resolved the issue in question.

Over the years, I have served on or presided over inquiry panels convened to determine whether a complaint against a professor had merit. Invariably there would be a point in the proceedings — usually early on and before all the evidence had been considered — when some faculty member would pronounce indignantly that the accused was clearly guilty and that we should recommend the maximum penalty available. "He most certainly made an offensive remark in class; he should be suspended for at least a semester." Or, "She undoubtedly falsified her research results; she should be stripped of all future institutional support." Or, "This is clearly plagiarism; he should be fired immediately."

Although such pronouncements were always made solemnly, I could not help but detect a certain underlying glee — the kind you might find when a parent catches a child misbehaving.



When guilt is assigned before all the evidence and perspectives are heard, when the verdict is swift but premature, and when the recommended penalty is the most draconian available, we have entered the

zone of gotcha politics. That zone has no room for judicious deliberation, reasoned debate, or compassion — which makes it especially out of place in an institution that has historically prided itself on championing reason, deliberation, and justice.

Undoubtedly, predatory behavior in the academic world is a convenient means of crippling or eliminating rivals. Why not accelerate your opponents' demise by advocating strenuously against them if the opportunity presents itself?

A business dean told me that one of his faculty members had become convinced that a popular associate professor regularly altered his teaching evaluations by slipping into the department late at night after students had returned their evaluation forms and removing any negative ones. The incensed colleague mounted a vigorous campaign against the associate professor, whose reputation was ruined in the process. Everyone in the college believed he was guilty. As it turned out, an extensive investigation proved conclusively that the professor was innocent; no tampering had occurred whatsoever.

The same people who are quick to ascribe guilt are often the first to violate confidentiality and fuel the engine of gossip and innuendo, which can, in effect, render irrelevant any official finding in the case. An individual may be exonerated in the end but found guilty in the popular imagination.

A favorite gambit of those who engage in such vicious politics is to enlist a student — preferably a graduate student — to do their dirty work. They will urge the student to file a complaint against a rival or spread malicious gossip. In fact, it is not uncommon to discover after some scrutiny that a student's letter of complaint against a professor was actually penned by another professor.

Gotcha politics are particularly brutal when they involve anonymity. A number of my fellow deans across the country tell me they are continually shocked by the viciousness with which some faculty members attack their chairs in end-of-year written evaluation surveys. Some evaluations contain abusive diatribes and preposterous allegations, all based on the flimsiest of evidence (or just on gossip).

University administrators regularly receive anonymous letters purporting to reveal some grievous act by a faculty member: This one has plagiarized; that one is sleeping with students; another is misusing grant money. Rarely does the anonymous revelation provide specific facts and details, much less do so in a coolly objective tone. More often it takes the form of a rant with little specificity.

The ever-increasing influence of blogs has exacerbated the problem. Blogs foster a culture of anonymity and unchecked expression without accountability. Bloggers can write whatever they want, regardless of the damage to others, and they can do so fully protected by the cloak of secrecy. In some universities, blogs dedicated to unseating the institution's president have proved quite effective. In response, some university presidents have instituted their own blogs and have made them easily accessible from the institution's Web site.

The kind of predatory politics I am describing thrive on righteous indignation and, as such, are self-serving: If you are in a position to renounce some perceived indiscretion or act of wrongdoing, then you can feel — at least to yourself — morally superior. No need to consider possible extenuating circumstances or alternate interpretations of the facts. After all, you have the high ground.

Perhaps the most extreme form of gotcha politics is the phenomenon recently dubbed "mobbing," in which a group of people collectively set out to damage or destroy a colleague's reputation. *The Chronicle* has [reported fairly extensively](#) on this trend and has detailed several cases in which professors and administrators have fallen prey to mob action.

We all have the right — indeed, the obligation — to point out potential misconduct when we become aware of it. Improper behavior needs to be identified and halted. But dealing with that behavior does not require ad hominem attack, abusive language, unsubstantiated allegations, or wolf-pack savagery.

It's not criticism that is in question; it's the tone and style of it.

Obviously, there is no way to legislate against gotcha politics or to prevent it by fiat. The only way to put an end to such incivility is for each of us to resolve not to be a party to such unprofessional behavior. It is in your own best interest to do so. After all, you never know when you might become the ax murderer's next target.

Gary A. Olson is dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Illinois State University and can be contacted at golson@ilstu.edu. To read his previous columns, go to http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/columns/heads_up.

Copyright © 2009 by [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)

[Subscribe](#) | [About The Chronicle](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Terms of use](#) | [Privacy policy](#) | [Help](#)