



# FACULTY SUPPORT GUIDE



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An electronic version of this document can be found online at:

Virginia Tech  
Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost  
[www.faculty.vt.edu](http://www.faculty.vt.edu)

# INTRODUCTION

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This guide is designed to assist the campus community in responding to situations in which a faculty member believes they are being targeted by individuals or groups external to the university based on the content of the faculty member’s scholarship, teaching, clinical care, and/or service. It is intended to provide information about resources available to assist individual faculty members, department heads, and other administrators.

The foundation for this guide is Virginia Tech’s commitment to upholding freedom of speech and academic freedom as described in the [Virginia Tech Statement on Freedom of Expression and Inquiry](#):

Virginia Tech unequivocally commits to upholding freedom of speech and academic freedom.

Virginia Tech affirms the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, including the right to freedom of speech. The First Amendment requires the university to protect the expression of ideas and opinions, including those that people may find controversial, disagreeable, or offensive. Freedom of speech, like all rights in the Constitution, is not absolute. While most speech is protected by the First Amendment, it does not protect speech or actions that violate the law, such as incitement, defamation, threats, privacy violation, or intellectual property infringement, nor does it protect against unlawful harassment or discrimination. In addition, the First Amendment allows the university to regulate the time, place, and manner of expression. At Virginia Tech, freedom of speech should be exercised in a manner that ensures a learning environment that supports and promotes civil debate and mutual respect across differences.

Academic freedom, free expression, and open inquiry are core principles of higher education. Academic freedom enables scholars to conduct research, teach, speak, and publish within an area of expertise without interference or penalty. Academic freedom is essential to create and disseminate knowledge with the mission of improving the quality of life and the human condition within the Commonwealth of Virginia and throughout the world. Virginia Tech must ensure that all members of the university community can ask questions, listen to others, and learn through exposure to a range of ideas from a diverse community of scholars. Virginia Tech is committed to defending academic freedom and freedom of speech while providing a diverse and inclusive learning and work environment.

The targeting, harassment, and/or intimidation of scholars for their ideas or views not only harms those individuals, but it also strikes at the university’s academic core. Through this guide and other means, the university seeks to provide faculty members with information to help protect them against the intimidation, harassment, and attacks that the expression of unpopular ideas sometimes generates.

This guide was developed largely from a similar offering at the [University of Iowa](#). It is designed to be “content neutral,” meaning that it is structured to offer support for faculty members across the

entire spectrum of views and areas of research. For example, it should be useful for faculty who are targeted or harassed 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 guide focuses on threats and/or harassment to faculty members from sources external to the university. For information about policies and procedures governing harassment committed by Virginia Tech employees, students, and/or patients, please see Virginia Tech's Policy on Harassment, Discrimination, and Sexual Assault ([Policy 1025](#)), Policy on Title IX Sexual Harassment and Responsible Employee Reporting ([Policy 1026](#)), Campus and Workplace Violence Prevention Policy ([Policy 5616](#)), and other [Virginia Tech policies](#). Colleges and departments may also have protocols in place to address violence or harassment in the workplace.

# ROLES, ACTIONS & RESOURCES - OVERVIEW

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As the target of harassment or intimidation, a faculty member's safety and well-being must always come first. Harassment can take many forms, from personal threats to online attacks, and each situation may demand a unique approach to help mitigate the challenges a faculty member may face. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, understanding the resources available to faculty and taking informed, deliberate actions can help them regain a sense of control and security.

In matters of safety and security, faculty are encouraged to make use of campus resources to assist them in assessing and responding to an immediate situation, as well as to address any concerns that arise in the longer term. Numerous campus resources are also available to support administrators in responding to targeting and/or harassment of Virginia Tech faculty members. Knowing about relevant resources and guidance in advance of a crisis will help our campus evaluate and respond more effectively when a situation arises.

The following sections offer suggestions for individuals at various levels in the university, including:

- Individual Faculty Member
- Department Head, Chair, or School Director
- College/Departmental Communications Staff
- College Administration
- University Administration & Governance

If a situation arises on-campus in which a faculty member's personal safety or security is compromised, contact the Virginia Tech Police Department immediately at 540-382-4343. If it is an emergency situation, call 911.

# ROLE: INDIVIDUAL FACULTY MEMBER

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The following guidance is intended to offer practical steps and institutional support to help mitigate the impacts of harassment, protect your reputation, and safeguard your mental and physical health. For faculty who believe they are being targeted, remember you are not alone—your university, colleagues, and professional networks are here to support you.

## POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- Notify your department head, chair, or school director and college administration, including your college [Human Resources Division Director](#), of the targeting or harassment. See the [Quick Reference: Resources and Referral](#) for ways your department may be able to support you. You do not need to manage this experience on your own.
- If you are experiencing gender-based harassment and/or harassment that is sexual in nature, visit [Safe at VT](#), or contact the [Office for Civil Rights Compliance and Prevention Education](#) to ensure that you are fully aware of your rights and resources. Visit [Safe at VT](#) to make reports, find support, and learn about resources available to survivors and those who are in a position to support survivors of sex-based harassment and violence.
- Consult directly or work with your department head and HR to contact the Virginia Tech [Threat Assessment Team](#). The Threat Assessment Team responds to behaviors exhibited by students, employees, visitors, and non-affiliated people prior to a critical incident in an attempt to prevent violence so that the Virginia Tech campus remains a safe and secure working and learning environment. The Threat Assessment Team is comprised of representatives from the provost's office, student affairs, law enforcement, human resources, counseling services, and residence life. The team meets on a regular basis to evaluate threat referrals, develop case management plans and, if necessary, intervene in a manner appropriate to the situation.
- Consult [VT Public Safety](#) regarding on-campus safety, and community police departments regarding off-campus safety. The [Virginia Tech Police Department](#) also provides transportation and walking escorts from dusk until dawn to students, faculty, staff and visitors through their [Safe Ride program](#).
- If you believe the harassers know where you live and you are concerned about safety in your home, create a safety plan for home and work. Public Safety can assist you in assessing risk and planning accordingly.
- Preserve 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. Seek out assistance to review and sort your incoming messages (e.g., find someone to read your messages and forward harassing ones to the Threat Assessment Team and work-related ones to you). See [Stay Safe Online](#) resources from the Division of Information Technology for additional guidance.
- Create a log to document and archive all threatening emails, social media 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.
- Be cautious about responding to threatening emails, social media posts, blog comments, etc. 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. If you choose not to respond, you may also want to encourage your friends and colleagues to do the same.

- Remember that all email communication you send and receive may be subject to a public records request through the [Virginia Freedom of Information Act](#).
- Consult with central Virginia Tech [Communications and Marketing](#) office for assistance in responding to the situation. Faculty Affairs can help you connect with that office and determine best next steps in responding. The Communications and Marketing team can also be of assistance in deciding whether/how to respond to media requests that may arise.
- Reach out to friends and develop a support system. The VT [Employee Assistance Program](#) offers a number of resources to support VT faculty and staff. VT employees also have access to counseling services through [TimelyCare](#).
- 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 harassment 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 [facultyaffairs@vt.edu](mailto:facultyaffairs@vt.edu).
- Consult with your department head if you feel the harassment has affected your progress toward tenure, promotion, or reappointment.

# ROLE: DEPARTMENT HEAD, CHAIR, SCHOOL DIRECTOR

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The leadership of department heads, chairs, and school directors is critical in supporting faculty members who are targeted by harassment or intimidation. Faculty rely on their institutional leaders not only to advocate for their safety and well-being but also to ensure a coordinated and effective response to such challenges. The department head, chair, and school director role includes helping faculty assess their situation, providing immediate support, leveraging institutional resources, and fostering a climate where targeted individuals feel protected and empowered..

The following guidance outlines steps department heads, chairs, and school directors can take to assist faculty in navigating these situations, emphasizing that each case requires thoughtful, context-specific actions. By offering steadfast support and demonstrating a commitment to their safety and professional standing, department heads, chairs, and school directors help uphold the values of respect, inclusion, and academic freedom within their units.

## POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- Contact the faculty member as soon as you become aware of the situation. Meet with them to offer support in the initial days of the targeting and/or harassment and review the [Quick Reference: Resource and Referral](#) page to ensure the faculty member is aware of campus resources.
- Before all else, work with the faculty member to ensure their on-campus and off-campus safety and security concerns are addressed. Be aware that the identity of the faculty member may influence their individualized needs (e.g., parental status, faculty rank, minoritized or other identity). With the faculty member's consent, reach out to appropriate campus resources to address whatever issues the faculty member identifies.
- It is possible that social media and phone harassment will be received by multiple offices. Inform the department administrative staff on a need-to-know basis. Ensure department 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).
- Inform and then 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 all email communication may be subject to an Open Records (often referred to as a Freedom of Information Act or FOIA) request.
- Consider the well-being of the rest of the departmental 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 members of the department. Instead of providing information or making statements through email, when 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 appropriate, and if the affected faculty member requests it.
- Facilitate the removal of the faculty member's direct contact information from department, college, and/or university webpages and the Virginia Tech directory if the affected faculty member requests it.



- If the harassment is identity-based (e.g., harassment based on gender, race, national origin), report the matter to the [Office for Civil Rights Compliance and Prevention Education](#) and coordinate with that office and the Office of Faculty Affairs to ensure the faculty member receives information about their rights and additional support options as well as others in the department who share their identity (e.g., students, colleagues, staff).
- If the faculty member is experiencing gender-based harassment and/or harassment that is sexual in nature, consult [Safe at VT](#) as soon as possible to ensure that the faculty member is fully aware of their rights and resources, and report the matter to the [Office for Civil Rights Compliance and Prevention Education](#) as required by [Policy 1025](#).
- 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 targeted, discuss how/whether it will affect their future research trajectory. Connecting the faculty member with other scholars who have experienced similar harassment 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/if targeting or harassment occurs.
- If you become the target of harassment, consult with the dean's office and refer to the strategies recommended for faculty members (see the previous section) to ensure your own safety.

# ROLE: COLLEGE ADMINISTRATION

Dean, Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs, HR Division Director or Leader

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College leaders—including deans, associate deans for faculty affairs, and HR division leaders—play a pivotal role in creating a supportive and protective environment for faculty targeted by harassment or intimidation. College administrators coordinate resources across the institution, provide visible and decisive leadership, and advocate for policies and practices that uphold the dignity and safety of faculty. Faculty facing such challenges need to know they are supported by leadership that prioritizes their well-being and stands firmly against harassment.

The following guidance outlines key actions college leadership can take to support targeted faculty, tailored to the unique perspective and influence of college-level leadership. By fostering a culture of resilience and accountability, college leaders reinforce the values of equity, academic freedom, and mutual respect that are central to their college and the broader university community.

## POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- In advance of any crisis, share support for the defense of academic freedom (see page 1 for the [Virginia Tech Statement on Freedom of Expression and Inquiry](#)) and the development of learning environments in which difficult issues are appropriately discussed. These messages can then be reiterated should a crisis emerge. Work with the central [Communications and Marketing](#) team to develop a message that emphasizes university values, draws upon 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 college protocols for dealing with internal threats and harassment. Provide training opportunities and resources for college faculty and staff. For more information, see VT’s policy on Harassment, Discrimination, and Sexual Assault (Policy 1025), the campus and workplace violence prevention policy (Policy 5616), and other VT policies.
- Consider inviting the VT Threat Assessment Team to present about their role and resources before or during a crisis.
- 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 department head, chair, or school director in crisis management conversations to ensure efforts are coordinated.
- Engage college HR leadership in the coordination of the college-wide response, including support for staff who may be experiencing stress due to being on the front line of answering harassing phone calls and/or may be concerned about their own safety.
- Support the department head in working with the targeted faculty member by offering assistance and resources. See the [Quick Reference: Resources and Referral](#) section of this guide to ensure that the targeted faculty member’s immediate and longer-term needs are addressed.

- Inform the dean'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 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.)
- Depending on the nature of the harassment, be aware that students, staff, and faculty who share the identity and/or research area (e.g., LGBTQ students, if the faculty member's sexual identity is the focus; students of color, if the faculty member's racial/ethnic identity is the focus) may also be experiencing trauma because of this incident. Consult with the [Office for Civil Rights Compliance and Prevention Education](#), Cook Counseling Center, and/or Hokie Wellness to identify appropriate support services for students and staff in the college.

# ROLE: UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING & COLLEGE COMMUNICATORS

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Virginia Tech's Office of Communications and Marketing, along with college communications staff, are uniquely positioned to help navigate and shape the narrative if a faculty member is targeted by harassment or intimidation. Their expertise in strategic messaging and public relations plays an important role in helping to protect the reputation of the targeted individual and the institution while ensuring accurate and fair representation of their work. Their skills are critical to crafting thoughtful responses, managing media inquiries, and controlling the spread of misinformation.

The following guidance outlines how communications professionals can provide support during such incidents, including developing proactive communication strategies, coordinating with institutional leadership, and addressing public narratives effectively. By acting swiftly and strategically, effective communications can help safeguard the faculty member's professional standing and reinforce the university's commitment to academic freedom and safety.

## POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- Inform the dean if you become aware a faculty member's name has shown up in a harassing social media post (e.g., via a Google alert notification). Keep the dean informed of ongoing mentions throughout the crisis management process.
- Provide support for the faculty member being targeted, including developing strategies to engage or not engage with the news media or social media, working with the media, managing one's professional and personal reputation, and guidance on [Managing Social Media Harassment](#).
- Work with the dean's office and central Communications and Marketing to coordinate information sharing on a need-to-know basis and to coordinate a consistent message (e.g., phone scripts for front-line staff answering aggressive callers).
- Consult with college faculty, staff, and administrators about the potential impact of speaking with the media about faculty harassment and offer media training and guidance. Also, remind them about the [Virginia Freedom of Information Act](#) and its impact on email communication.
- Work with the central [Communications and Marketing](#) team to reiterate support from the leadership for the defense of academic freedom (see page 1 for the [Virginia Tech Statement on Freedom of Expression and Inquiry](#)), the importance of faculty safety and the development of learning environments in which difficult issues are discussed and dissected

# ROLE: UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATION & GOVERNANCE

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## POSSIBLE ACTIONS

### Office of the President

- Maintain consistent communication with the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost and work together along with Communications and Marketing, as appropriate, to issue communications emphasizing the importance of free speech, academic freedom, and the safety of VT faculty (see page 1 for the [Virginia Tech Statement on Freedom of Expression and Inquiry](#)).

### Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost

- Establish open communication with the affected faculty member's dean and request updates, as needed, on the situation.
- In consultation with the Office of the President and Communications and Marketing, issue a statement (as appropriate) that asserts the importance of academic freedom, freedom of speech, and committing to the safety of the faculty (see page 1 for the [Virginia Tech Statement on Freedom of Expression and Inquiry](#)). The statement should emphasize the institution's mission and values rather than comment on the faculty member's scholarship.

### University Legal Counsel

- Provide legal counsel, representation, interpretation, and analysis on a broad array of substantive issues related to carrying out the affected faculty member's official duties as an employee or representative of the university.
- Provide/coordinate effective legal services on issues facing all sectors of Virginia Tech.

### Student Affairs

- Provide student support and broadly communicate the resources available to affected students.
- Provide student support, especially for students whose identities and/or interests are similar to the targeted faculty member.

### University Human Resources

- Provide support and assistance to the individual faculty members, departmental and college administration, and the broader unit via the VT [Threat Assessment Team](#) and [Employee Assistance Program](#).

### Faculty Senate

- Provide support and assistance to the individual faculty members.
- As appropriate, issue a statement that asserts the importance of academic freedom, freedom of speech, and committing to the safety of the faculty (see page 1 for the [Virginia Tech Statement on Freedom of Expression and Inquiry](#) developed by the [Task Force on Freedom of Expression and Inquiry](#) and approved by the Board of Visitors in 2023).

# QUICK REFERENCE: RESOURCES AND REFERRAL

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

Actions	Resource/s
<input type="checkbox"/> Engage with the VT Threat Assessment Team about on-campus safety resources and for assistance determining if an individual poses, or may reasonably pose, a threat of violence to self, others, or the VT community.	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Threat Assessment Team</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> Contact the public safety division which is dedicated to the safety and well-being of the community. This division encompasses an Emergency Management team; Environmental, Health, and Safety team; the Virginia Tech Police Department; and the Virginia Tech Rescue Squad.	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Division of Public Safety</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> If needed and if feasible, arrange for the 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).	<input type="checkbox"/> Departmental and college administration <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">University Registrar</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> If the threats are of a sexual nature or gender-based, consult the Title IX Coordinator, University Ombuds Office, and/or CARES Program.	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Office for Civil Rights Compliance and Prevention Education</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">University Ombuds Office</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">CARES Program</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> Arrange for a process to have someone other than the faculty member sort incoming emails, voice messages, etc. Seek out professional assistance regarding how to preserve the messages appropriately for potential use as evidence.	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Threat Assessment Team</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Division of Public Safety</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Division of Information Technology</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> Refer to VT Communications and Marketing for media consultation. Reporters may call for a comment or interview; deciding whether to talk with the press is a personal decision. Consulting with media experts can assist in the decision-making process and skill development.	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Communications and Marketing</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> Provide information about relevant academic policies that address specific concerns expressed by the faculty member. See the <a href="#">Relevant VT Policies and Resources</a> section of this guide for examples.	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Academic Policies and Resources</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">University Ombuds Office</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> Support faculty members who feel their social identity is a component of the harassment (e.g., faculty of color, LGBTQ faculty). 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.	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Office for Civil Rights Compliance and Prevention Education</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">InclusiveVT</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Faculty &amp; Staff Caucuses</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> Provide information about available campus resources to address stress management and counseling services.	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Employee Assistance Program</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Hokie Wellness</a>

# RELEVANT VT POLICIES & RESOURCES

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## Policies & Guidance

All University policies can be found at [policies.vt.edu](https://policies.vt.edu). Additional information can be found at the [Academic Polices and Resources webpage](#).

- [Academic Freedom and Free Speech](#)
- [Acceptable Use of Information Systems](#)
- [Campus and Workplace Violence Prevention Policy \(5616\)](#)
- [Extension of Pre-Tenure Probationary Period \(Extending the Tenure Clock \(Faculty Handbook Chapter 3\)\)](#)
- [Flexible Work Options](#)
- [Harassment, Discrimination, and Sexual Assault \(Policy 1025\)](#)
- [Political Activity by Faculty \(Faculty Handbook Chapter 2\)](#)
- [Research Integrity](#)
- [Statement of Business Conduct Standards](#)
- [Title IX Sexual Harassment and Responsible Employee Reporting \(Policy 1026\)](#)
- [Social Media Policy \(Policy 1030\)](#)
- [Usage of University Name \(Policy 12000\):](#)
- [Work-Life Resources](#)

# RELEVANT VT POLICIES & RESOURCES

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## Campus Resources

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

- CARES (Campus Advocacy, Resources, and Education for Survivors): [cares.vt.edu](https://cares.vt.edu)
  - Phone: 540-231-7806
  - Email: [CARESupport@vt.edu](mailto:CARESupport@vt.edu)
- Civil Rights Compliance and Prevention Education, Office for: [civilrights.vt.edu](https://civilrights.vt.edu)
  - Phone: 540-231-2010
  - Email: [civilrights@vt.edu](mailto:civilrights@vt.edu)
- Communications and Marketing: [brand.vt.edu/communications.html](https://brand.vt.edu/communications.html)
  - Phone: 540-231-5396
- Cook Counseling Center: [ucc.vt.edu](https://ucc.vt.edu)
  - Phone: 540-231-6557
- Executive Vice President and Provost, Office of the: [provost.vt.edu](https://provost.vt.edu)
  - Phone: 540-231-6122
  - Email: [provost@vt.edu](mailto:provost@vt.edu)
- Faculty/Staff Caucuses: <https://www.inclusive.vt.edu/resources/FS-Caucuses.html>
- Hokie Wellness: <https://hokiewellness.vt.edu/>
  - Phone: 540-231-8878
  - Email: [hokiewellness@vt.edu](mailto:hokiewellness@vt.edu)
- Information Technology, Division of: <https://it.vt.edu/>
  - Phone: (540) 231-4357
  - Email: [vpit@vt.edu](mailto:vpit@vt.edu)
- Ombuds Office: [ombuds.vt.edu](https://ombuds.vt.edu)
  - Phone: 540-231-3125
  - Email: [ombuds@vt.edu](mailto:ombuds@vt.edu)
- Public Safety Division: [publicsafety.vt.edu](https://publicsafety.vt.edu)
  - Email: [publicsafety@vt.edu](mailto:publicsafety@vt.edu)
- SAFE at VT: [safe.vt.edu](https://safe.vt.edu)
  - Title IX Contact: Angela Catena
  - Phone: 540-231-1824
  - Email: [angelamc@vt.edu](mailto:angelamc@vt.edu)
- Threat Assessment Team: [threatassessment.vt.edu](https://threatassessment.vt.edu)
  - Phone: 540-382-4343
  - Email: [threatassessment@vt.edu](mailto:threatassessment@vt.edu)
- University Legal Counsel: [ulc.vt.edu](https://ulc.vt.edu)
  - Phone: 540-231-6293
  - Email: [legal@vt.edu](mailto:legal@vt.edu)
- Virginia Tech Police Department: [police.vt.edu](https://police.vt.edu)
  - Main Phone: 540-231-6411
  - Phone: 540-382-4343 (non-emergency)



# MANAGING SOCIAL MEDIA HARASSMENT

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According to a [2021 report by the Pew Research Center](#), roughly four-in-ten Americans have experienced online harassment, and there is evidence that the severity of that harassment has increased over a 2017 survey. Most online harassment targets say their most recent experience occurred on social media.

Responding to online harassment can be challenging, even scary if the harassment becomes threatening. The university's Social Media Policy ([Policy 1030](#)) addresses resources and actions related to VT social media accounts, and [Communications and Marketing](#) can assist in navigating issues on those accounts.

Those experiencing harassment on personal accounts may consider the following steps to respond to harassment on social media.

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. Mute them. If you are tired of seeing what someone is saying about you on social media platforms, mute them. This can be a good first step. The harassing party is not notified that you've muted them, and you can blissfully ignore their hateful comments. If you are worried their comments may become threatening, ask a friend or colleague to check your feed on your behalf.
3. 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.
4. 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. If you choose to respond, make sure to follow these steps:
  - a. Stick to undisputable facts that are not open to interpretation. Trolls are not interested in having rational or open-minded conversations. Keep responses short, concise, and above all factual. Correct inaccuracies and move on.
  - b. Maintain your dignity. Be polite, professional, and unemotional. Resist becoming defensive or fighting fire with fire. You will only appear combative.
5. 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.

# POSSIBLE PREEMPTIVE ACTIONS

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In an era where public scholarship and academic freedom are increasingly intersecting with the polarized dynamics of social and political discourse, faculty members face heightened risks of being targeted or harassed by external individuals or groups.

While the responsibility for harassment lies solely with the harassers, proactive steps can help mitigate its impacts and effects, empowering faculty to focus on their teaching, research, and service without undue fear. Just as fastening a seatbelt doesn't prevent accidents but reduces potential harm, preparing in advance with thoughtful safeguards and strategies can create a protective buffer, minimizing vulnerabilities and limiting the reach of those who seek to disrupt or intimidate.

To minimize the possibility of becoming a target and to reduce the impact of harassment if targeted, faculty members can take several preemptive actions. These actions are about readiness and resilience—not blame—and are intended to help ensure that faculty are equipped to respond effectively and maintain their professional and personal well-being.

## Secure Online Presence

- Regularly review and adjust privacy settings on social media accounts to restrict access to personal information.
- Use aliases or separate professional accounts for public-facing activities like publishing or speaking engagements, making it harder for harassers to access private details.
- Set up alerts for your name online to track any mentions or inappropriate content.
- Host a professional webpage on the university's site, which provides accurate, curated information about your work, minimizing reliance on less secure platforms.

## Strengthen Digital Security

- Implement strong, unique passwords for all accounts and use multi-factor authentication where possible.
- Consider using encryption for sensitive communications, particularly when dealing with personal or sensitive information.
- Regularly back up personal and professional data to prevent loss during a potential cyberattack or harassment campaign.

## Utilize University Resources

- Keep your department head, college leadership, campus security informed if you have reason to believe you are at risk, ensuring they are prepared to assist if needed.
- Report any targeting or harassment to the appropriate university office immediately, such as your department head, college leadership, campus security, faculty affairs, and/or legal services.
- Take additional steps as outlined in this guide.

## Limit Access to Personal Information

- If targeted, immediately remove personal contact information from public profiles and request that third-party platforms (such as Google) remove any personal data that may have been shared.
- Use anonymous or institutional email addresses for public communication, keeping your private contact details private.
- Regularly search your name online to understand what information is publicly available, to correct inaccuracies where possible, and to remove personal information.

## Strengthen Public Advocacy for Academic Freedom

- Make it clear that any harassment is an attack on academic freedom, which is a core principle of the university's mission. This framing can deter harassers, as they will be confronted with an institutional commitment to defending the integrity of faculty work.
- Encourage public support from professional organizations that champion academic freedom and faculty rights.
- Work with shared governance bodies, particularly the Faculty Senate, to ensure policies address harassment and public attacks on faculty.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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