

It's a Dangerous Business, Being a Female Professor

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Image: Stefan Kamer, [Creative Commons](#)

By Kristina M.W. Mitchell

Two weeks ago, I received a rape threat in my campus office.

I am an academic, an instructor of political science, a researcher, and an administrator, and I received an anonymous phone call describing in explicit and vulgar detail exactly how and where the man on the phone would rape me.

The police were called, my phone number was removed from the university website, and I have taken steps to remain safe in my office, but the vulnerability remains.

The vulnerability. I was made to feel vulnerable in my office — my professional space — which is perhaps the one place in my life where I feel most empowered and assertive.

As I sat in my office the next day, I wondered how many of my male colleagues have received an anonymous rape threat on their office phones. As a woman in academe, I am held to the same standards as my male counterparts, and yet I am also being threatened with sexual violence while I am working. Just add that to the list of things female academics must deal with, all while still teaching, publishing, and serving their departments and universities.

Who would call and threaten a professor with rape? No, the police couldn't trace the call, but I have a pretty good guess as to who it was. I am the director of my department's online program, and I act as the instructor of record for nearly 5,000 students each semester. Yes, five thousand. I certainly don't do it alone: I have co-instructors, course coordinators, multiple assistants, and a horde of graduate students who facilitate the courses, but the buck stops with me. I am the name on the top of the syllabus, and I am the one who makes all of the final decisions for those 5,000 students.

That means I spend a great deal of time saying no to the countless requests you would expect from 5,000 online students: "Can I submit late work?" "Will you round my grade up?" "Can't you just let me take the exam again?"

This role has made me one of the least popular professors on the campus, even though most of my students have never met me. Most of them will never interact with me at all: They simply enter into the course, complete their required work asynchronously, get feedback from the course grader, and go on with their college careers.

The only students I interact with are the ones who have a problem. And countless times during the semester, I must exert power as a professor over the students who make these requests. I am the one saying no.

I didn't receive a death threat or some other threat of physical violence. Those are about anger. I received a rape threat. And because rape and attempted rape are all about power, I am reasonably certain that the caller on the phone last week was an online student who wanted to make me feel powerless.

It worked.

How have we gotten to a point at which female faculty members are subjected to rape threats by students?

The problem is that we are not holding individuals accountable for their own words. It seems like once a week there is a new story about cyberbullying, with children experiencing anxiety and depression, or, worst of all, [committing suicide](#) based on the hateful comments they receive online. Even our political leaders [mock those with disabilities](#) and talk about women as [sexual objects](#).

Is it any wonder that college students are following suit? We even provide a sanctioned platform for students to say whatever they like about their professors in the form of anonymous student evaluations.

In my case, I've seen evaluations ranging from "She's a bit prickly in her demeanor" to "I like it when she wears skinny jeans and heels" — commentary that my male counterparts say they never receive. Over and over again, studies have shown that evaluations don't really measure [what we think they measure](#) and are [biased against women](#) (including a paper I co-authored that is forthcoming in the journal *PS: Political Science and Politics*). And yet we still give students license through an anonymous platform to tell us that we are "too nerdy" (or worse).

From there, we see the rise of websites like Rate My Professors, which offers students yet another anonymous platform from which to talk about their female professors like objects. In my kindest reviews, I am called a "total babe." But I don't even know what it says about me anymore. I quit looking after I found a review that called me "literal garbage" and one that used misogynist profanity to describe me. (Rate My Professors did remove those comments, at my request).

When students — hiding behind the anonymity of a computer screen — are evaluating an online professor — who is also a faceless name, saying no behind a computer screen — the commentary can get vulgar and mean-spirited very quickly. It isn't much of a leap from there to anonymous phone calls with threatening and frightening messages. How much further of a leap is it to reach the point where someone shows up in my office with violent intentions?

It doesn't take much time to pull up Twitter or Rate My Professors and rattle off a hateful comment, but the impact of those hateful words can extend a lot further than the impulse to write them. If students are never held accountable for writing them, they may perceive that this language is acceptable, and that therefore, threatening phone calls or violent office visits are acceptable, too.

Bias against women is a compounding problem that begins with women receiving angry anonymous evaluations and ends with women fearing for their physical safety at their place of work.

We need to foster accountability. When men think they're speaking anonymously, or privately on a tour bus, their language about women changes. When men think they're speaking about a faceless automaton behind a computer

screen, instead of a real human being, their language changes. Gender bias in academe persists, and being sexually assaulted is [a very real fear](#) for many of the women teaching at our institutions.

Give women a level playing field. Women absolutely "know stuff," and if we weren't being threatened and objectified in our own places of work, we would have more time to tell you about it.

Kristina M.W. Mitchell is director of online and regional site education in the political-science department at Texas Tech University