



## Final Report

# Factors Influencing Leaders in Academia Series: Workplace Incivility at Canadian Business Schools in the Post-Pandemic Society

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# Land Acknowledgement

*Mount Royal University is located in the traditional territories of the Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) and the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta, which includes the Siksika, the Piikani, the Kainai, the Tsuut'ina, and the Îyârhe Nakoda. The City of Calgary is also home to the Métis Nation.*



# Table of Contents

- Executive Summary..... 3
- Introduction ..... 4
- Literature Review..... 5
- Methods ..... 7
- Findings..... 8
- Key Takeaways ..... 13
- Recommendations..... 14
- Strengths and Limitations ..... 15
- Future Directions..... 16
- References ..... 17
- Appendix - Interview Protocol ..... 19



# Executive Summary

This study explores workplace incivility experienced by business school leaders as victims and managers of these behaviours. The following primary research questions guided the investigation:

1. What acts of incivility do academic leaders encounter?
2. What are the causes and impacts of these behaviours?
3. What strategies do leaders employ to manage incivility?

The study, conducted in the winter of 2023, utilized a qualitative research approach that integrated constructivist philosophy with inductive research methods. The study participants included deans, associate deans, and department chairs from Athabasca University's Faculty of Business, the University of Calgary's Haskayne School of Business, the University of Alberta's Alberta School of Business, and the University of Lethbridge's Dhillon School of Business. These institutions were selected because their mandates and organizational structures as research-intensive universities governed under the Province of Alberta's Post-secondary Learning Act are similar.

A thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected from the semi-structured interviews. The results showed that incivility is ubiquitous, largely unaddressed, and significantly impacts leaders, faculty members, and their schools.

The report presents two recommendations highlighting the critical need to support academic leadership development and civility education and awareness.



# Introduction

Workplace incivility is a counterproductive behaviour representing a milder form of workplace abuse, encompassing subtle, rude, and disrespectful actions. These actions include belittling, humiliating, or demeaning comments and spreading gossip and rumours (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2023). Although these behaviours may not always be intended to cause harm explicitly, they adversely affect victims and organizations (Fouk et al., 2016; Heffernan & Bosetti, 2023; Namin et al., 2022; Porath & Pearson, 2013).

Across various sectors, most employees admit to occasionally displaying uncivil behaviour and experiencing negative behaviours from others (Porath, 2016; Namin et al., 2022). These behaviours are predominantly written or verbal, often passive, indirect, and nuanced.

This report presents the results of the "*Factors Influencing Leaders in Academia Series: Workplace Incivility at Business Schools in the Post-Pandemic Society*" study, funded by the Business Schools Association of Canada. The research explores leadership and organizational culture challenges related to workplace incivility and bullying in Canadian universities.

The report is structured into seven sections, comprehensively analyzing incivility in Canadian business schools. It includes a literature review, outlines the research methods used for the investigation, and presents the relevant findings. The report concludes with key takeaways, recommendations, strengths and limitations, and potential directions for further research.



## Literature Review

This section examines the relevant empirical studies, concepts, and theories that shaped the researcher's understanding of incivility in post-secondary settings. From the review, the researcher concluded that while the phenomenon had been previously explored, a gap remained for a more comprehensive investigation, specifically within the Canadian framework.

Workplace incivility, while generally less severe than bullying or harassment, reveals a disregard for others (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Uncivil behaviours, whether verbal, non-verbal, or written, manifest as impolite, discourteous, belittling, humiliating, and rude. Given their subtle nature and the ambiguous intent behind them, victims frequently find it challenging to identify or report these actions, while leaders hesitate to address them.

Faculty members and academic leaders increasingly report facing incivility and hostile behaviours at universities. The negative interactions often originate within their institutions and external entities (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2023; Keashly, 2023). Incivility research in higher education is still in its early phases. However, findings suggest that approximately 40% of faculty members experience such behaviours, with those from equity-seeking groups being targeted more frequently (Katuna, 2019; Keashly, 2021; Keashly et al., 2012).

Much of the prevailing research has focused on student-driven incivility, lateral aggression among academic peers, and top-down aggression, where senior leaders target those below them in the university hierarchy, including deans (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2023; Twale, 2017). However, a new study revealed that 80% of deans experienced incivility, mostly from faculty members within their units (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2023).

Several factors fuel this trend toward incivility, including personality traits, ingrained biases, and the overarching organizational climate. The often subtle and veiled intent behind uncivil actions can arise from a perpetrator's lack of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, or ignorance about how their words and actions impact their colleagues (Namin et al., 2022; Porath, 2018; Twale, 2017).

Despite the holder's self-perception as an equality advocate, these biases can contribute to subdued forms of racism and sexism (Ozturk & Berber, 2022). Historical remnants of a predominantly white, male-dominated sector manifest in deeply ingrained gendered expectations, often resulting in women being treated as subordinates (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2007; Katuna, 2019; Keashly et al., 2012). A significant disparity persists in academic leadership roles, with women and racialized individuals considerably underrepresented despite forming a significant part of the student body and faculty (Universities Canada, 2019).

Power imbalances and a passion for scholarly preeminence, especially between senior and junior faculty, can inadvertently alienate peers (Porath & Pearson, 2013). A disconcerting consequence is that victims of incivility may inadvertently transform into aggressors, further perpetuating toxic cultures (Fouk et al., 2016; Torkelson et al., 2016; Twale, 2017). Academic leaders, sometimes unintentionally but at other times consciously, might perpetuate or exacerbate such behaviours by neglecting to address them or mishandling complainants (King & Piotrowski, 2015). The detrimental effects are profound, likened to "a thousand slings and arrows" that continually degrade individuals and the broader organizational environment (Johnson & Indvik, 2001, p. 706).



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# Methods

## **Methods**

This study explores the experiences and perceptions of academic leaders regarding workplace incivility. A qualitative research approach was employed, merging constructivist philosophy with inductive research methods (Crotty, 1998).

## **Data Collection**

To take part in the study, participants were required to hold a tenured academic appointment and occupy the role of dean, vice dean, associate or assistant dean, or chair in their school of business. Based on this criteria, 47 faculty members from Athabasca University, the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and the University of Lethbridge were eligible to participate. These institutions were selected because of their similar mandate and organizational structure as research-intensive universities governed under the Province of Alberta's Post-secondary Learning Act (Alberta Government, 2020). All eligible faculty received emailed invitations, of which 13 were accepted, resulting in a 28% response rate. The participants provided their informed consent. The 60-minute semi-structured interviews, conducted face-to-face or via Google Meet, were completed between March 15 and June 12, 2023.

## **Data Analysis and Reporting**

Data analysis was executed using NVivo software, adhering to the methods outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016). The principal investigator simultaneously collected, coded and analyzed the data using thematic analysis and constant comparative methods. To maintain confidentiality, participants are referred to as "Academic Leader # [\_]" and all gender-specific pronouns were replaced with gender-neutral "they/them" in the study results. The interview protocol is included in the Appendix.

## **Ethics**

This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Board of Mount Royal University (103221), The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (REB22-1845), and The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (25094). Clearance was also received from The University of Lethbridge Office of Research and Innovation Services and The University of Alberta Research Ethics Office.





## Findings

### **Pervasiveness: 'That's just academia'**

All 13 participants shared experiences of encountering incivility in their workplace, emphasizing its multidirectional origins and describing it as “just academia.” They provided examples originating from students, faculty members, fellow academic leaders, and external stakeholders, including donors and a faculty association.

Student incivility emerged as a complex challenge for the study participants. They underscored the intricate interplay of heightened emotions, expectations, and adversities faced by today's students and, in some instances, their parents. The participants provided examples of interactions that included screaming, verbal attacks, aggression, and rudeness, highlighting the daunting task of navigating these interactions with empathy and compassion. Whether such behaviours were a temporary aftermath of COVID-19 or indicative of a broader cultural shift remained a subject of contemplation and concern.

*Over this last year, I've had a lot of students be beyond defensive. They're coming out attacking, "How dare I accuse them of this?" and "Don't I know that they have all these medical issues, anxiety and depression?" The anger that these young people have is immense, and I am trying to bridge that with compassion and empathy, but it's tough... We've been trying to figure out, "Is this just a momentary blip? Is this a post-COVID thing that it's going to resolve itself? Or is this a new normal for young people that are coming into post-secondary?"*

*[Academic Leader #5]*

Incivility from faculty members represented another intricate layer of challenges for academic leaders. Participants pointed to behind-the-scenes conversations and backtalk as the norm in their units. The toxic behaviours manifested in various ways, including overt rudeness and aggressiveness, both in private and public settings, and more covert tactics like gaslighting. Several participants noted a concerning trend where their communications were forwarded or responded to with a broader audience with added veiled messages aimed at discrediting and undermining them. Others cited deliberate attempts to disrupt meetings or instances where they faced public humiliation. Additionally, the participants provided examples of faculty members' passive-aggressive behaviours, which one leader described as “masterful” and upsetting.

Incivility from fellow academic leaders revealed a deeply personal aspect of participants' challenges. They felt betrayed upon discovering colleagues participating in damaging backtalk or contributing to narratives that undermined them. One leader remarked, "That's not incivility; that's just academia." However, beneath this acceptance was a history of interactions involving bullying and humiliation by fellow academic leaders.

*That's not incivility; that's just academia. I had some specific incidents of being bullied, but I have tended to get that from people who were my superior, associate deans, deans, and that sort of thing... It is absolutely 100% rampant and happens all the time... The repeated humiliations; this low-intensity, rude, discourteous, aggressive behaviour, it's all low-intensity bull\*\*.*

[Academic Leader # 9]

Lastly, incivility stemming from external stakeholders added another dimension to the complexities academic leaders faced. One participant shared an example of interactions with a donor that escalated into high-pressure situations. The leader felt trapped between fulfilling their academic duties and appeasing the influential benefactor. A particularly distressing encounter involved a donor adamantly opposing a School's initiative, even though it aligned with research trends and student preferences. The relentless pressure from the donor was so overwhelming that the leader felt they were on the brink of "having a heart attack." The participant summed up the challenge of navigating such situations as, "You have to find a way to just take a beating."

**Causes: 'They don't realize how their comments impact other people'**

The insights gathered from participants underscored the multidimensional causes of incivility within their academic settings. These causes spanned from individual personalities and temperaments to deeply rooted biases, further extending into their institutions' broader organizational culture. Faculty members' personalities were frequently identified as significant drivers of uncivil behaviours. Participants recounted instances where a sense of superiority and a lack of self-awareness and emotional intelligence resulted in faculty members routinely offending others. Such comments often stemmed from a failure to genuinely understand the effects that their words have on others.

*Let's be honest; there's sometimes a lack of self-awareness with a lot of academics... they don't realize how their comments impact other people. I was out for dinner with my spouse and a colleague who told me that I would never be hired at another academic institution and that I was lucky to work here. So that's incivility. But again, I don't think this person understood that because why would you say something like that in a social setting when you're out for dinner with the person?*

[Academic Leader # 8]

The participants' testimonies highlighted how societal biases were also prevalent in the academic environments. The historical backdrop of academia, primarily shaped by patriarchal constructs and power dynamics, alongside current societal prejudices, cultivated settings where incivility, even if unintentional, thrived. Immigrant leaders spoke about encountering episodes of racial and cultural insensitivity. However, they hesitated to admit the behaviours were offensive because they appreciated their new homeland and privileged University position. The prevalent issue of 'mansplaining' was an example of such biases in action toward women in academic leadership roles.

*I definitely get mansplained all the time, and it comes from multiple directions. I have had several male faculty members explain my own discipline to me. They've explained to me how to do the [title] role, even though they've never held one themselves. From above, I've had members of the senior executive make gross assumptions about the points I'm trying to make because they think they know better than I do what my own mind is.*

[Academic Leader #13]

Faculty members' sense of superiority, biases, and a lack of self-awareness shaped organizational cultures where rudeness became normalized. Deeply ingrained values of power, hierarchy, and entitlement defined these environments. This, coupled with an absence of adequate institutional support, intensified the culture of incivility. Moreover, leaders, particularly below the dean level, expressed that they were ill-equipped or supported to manage uncivil behaviours, leaving many unresolved issues and entrenching toxic behavioural patterns. A recurrent complaint among participants was the undue importance given to research accomplishments over pedagogical expertise.

*We've been trying to deal with second-class citizenry for many years. Basically, a group of people feel that others treat them as inferior, and I see it because I've experienced it a lot from research faculty. People who are top publishers who get the most credit look down on others and sometimes send very aggressive emails or will outright say things.*

[Academic Leader #2]

### **Impact: 'It's not worth it for me'**

Participants' narratives illuminated the profound effects of incivility on their personal well-being and the faculty, staff, and the broader academic units they led. On a personal level, experiencing or witnessing incivility led to heightened stress levels, feelings of unease, sleep disturbances, demoralization, and anxieties about potential reputational damage. This adverse impact on their well-being undermined their leadership practice and effectiveness in their roles.

*It's just incredibly stressful and upsetting. It can impact your sleep, and it really affected my ability to do my job as [title]. When your authority is constantly questioned, and you can't really do what you're supposed to do, for example, you're supposed to allocate courses to faculty to teach, but there's a constant disruption and the questioning of everything. To the point where I just didn't feel that I should hold meetings or send communications because I expected some kind of retaliation.*

[Academic Leader #7]

The effects of incivility also permeated the participants' units. They described a prevailing "collective silence" within their areas, noting faculty members retreating to their offices to avoid interactions. Other observed behaviours included junior faculty members acting excessively deferential, faculty of all ranks leaving the university, and academic leaders hesitating to make decisions.

*A lot of academic leaders don't want to make decisions because they'll just get punted down the road. They're afraid, too. They fear making a decision that is going to anger somebody. If anybody really showed ambition for a while here, they were cut off. Some people were run right out of the faculty. We lost some good researchers because of that, it wasn't just junior faculty, there were also some senior-level people.*

[Academic Leader #11]

From a broader institutional perspective, incivility posed significant consequences, especially regarding succession planning. Participants revealed that some faculty members, despite possessing the requisite leadership potential and drive, hesitated to assume leadership roles to avoid becoming targets of uncivil behaviour. This hesitancy deprived the school of significant leadership potential and narrowed the pipeline for senior positions at the dean's level.

*We have a lot of people with good ideas, innovation, and the drive and interest to do something, but they say, "It's not worth it for me." You know what? "If that's what it's like when I'm at this level, what's it going to be like if I get higher?" That is why I don't think the right people end up in academic leadership. I don't see a lot of really brilliant, inspiring leaders in those roles.*

[Academic Leader #9]

### **Strategies: 'Apologize, learn, and move on'**

Comments from participants, particularly below the dean level, indicated a need for more support and knowledge regarding institutional policies and strategies to address uncivil behaviours. Most deans understood the institutional policy. However, they acknowledged that implementing policy to correct behaviour or dismiss faculty, when necessary, was labour-intensive and could take years to finalize.

Study participants who proactively managed incivility in their areas underscored the importance of self-awareness and accountability. This self-awareness and sense of responsibility were often deepened through discussions within their leadership networks. By connecting and collaborating with peers facing similar challenges, these leaders found solace, advice, and innovative solutions to implement in their contexts. They also emphasized the value of “listening with curiosity” and promptly apologizing if they acted uncivilly themselves.

*A simple apology on the spot is needed once you realize that you did something wrong. That would solve the issue in one out of ten cases. Something else may need to be done but start with a simple acknowledgement and apology once you realize that something went wrong for the person who is the victim. Let them explain their feelings and acknowledge that you're going to make mistakes. You don't need to walk on eggshells. You're going to make mistakes. Apologize, learn, and move on.*

[Academic Leader #10]

To support faculty in their areas, some participants described taking a direct approach by privately addressing uncivil behaviours, aiming to make individuals aware of the inappropriate nature of their actions. One participant emphasized the delicate nature of these conversations, noting that they often met with denial. This leader stressed the importance of remaining inquisitive, thoughtful, and open-minded, genuinely striving to understand the underlying motivations behind such behaviours.

*I'll just take them afterwards and say, "That was really offside" but for the most part, they don't necessarily agree and think that I misunderstood... You can't control what other people do, but you're not going to help them unless you have a full understanding of "Why do they think this way? Where did that come from?" And by the way, they might be right. So, I want to understand.*

[Academic Leader #1]

In summary, the pervasiveness of incivility in business schools is a multifaceted concern deeply rooted in individual biases, power dynamics, and broader institutional cultures. The narrative accounts from the study participants underscored the complexities of managing uncivil behaviours. They emphasized their significant impact on their personal well-being, leadership efficacy, and institutional succession planning. These leaders highlighted the importance of self-awareness, accountability, and open dialogue in fostering mutual respect and understanding.



## Key Takeaways

This research illuminated several salient points concerning incivility's dimensions, causes, and impact in academia. The findings unveiled complexities within the academic environment and shed light on the underlying institutional dynamics. The essence of these research findings is concisely captured in the subsequent key takeaways:

### **Multidimensional Origins of Incivility**

Incivility in academia is pervasive and has multidirectional origins, stemming from students, faculty members, academic leaders, and external stakeholders. While incivility from students may be influenced by external factors, such as the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, incivility among faculty members, academic leaders, and external stakeholders is deeply ingrained in academia's institutional culture and power dynamics.

### **Underlying Causes and Institutional Culture**

The leading causes of incivility are connected to individual personalities, temperaments, and societal biases deeply embedded in the patriarchal constructs of academia. A significant driver is the lack of self-awareness among faculty members, coupled with a sense of superiority. Organizational cultures that prioritize research achievements over pedagogical expertise further entrench incivility.

### **Adverse Impact on Well-being and Leadership**

Incivility leads to profound personal effects, such as stress, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and an undermined ability to lead. Incivility also affects the broader academic community, causing faculty members to retreat, making leaders hesitant in decision-making, and hindering the identification and nurturing of potential leadership talent.

### **Addressing Incivility through Self-awareness and Accountability**

Addressing incivility requires a combination of institutional policies and personal actions. Leaders stressed the importance of self-awareness, accountability, and open dialogue. Key strategies included apologizing for mistakes, conversing directly with offenders about inappropriate behaviours, and seeking to build mutual understanding through curiosity and open-mindedness.



# Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to better understand workplace incivility as experienced by business school leaders, both as victims and managers of these behaviours. The study identified that incivility was pervasive and multidimensional and had a palpable impact on leaders, faculty members and the institution. A notable finding was the need for more knowledge and support available to academic leaders, particularly those below the dean level, to counteract incivility in their areas. Given these insights, the following recommendations are proposed:

## **Academic Leadership Development**

To promote healthy organizational cultures, academic leaders could be offered opportunities to strengthen their leadership skills. Schools may emphasize the importance of establishing and leveraging leadership networks for timely support and provide training in emotional intelligence, conflict management, and interpersonal skills. Additionally, ensuring that these leaders are well-versed in the accountabilities of their roles and institutional policy can enable them to address uncivil behaviours in their areas more effectively.

## **Civility Education and Awareness**

To raise awareness of the detrimental impact of incivility and foster a productive academic environment, all faculty, staff, and students could be engaged in a comprehensive education initiative. Schools may implement awareness campaigns, workshops, and seminars highlighting the effects of uncivil behaviours and promoting mutual respect and understanding. By ensuring that every stakeholder is informed about the nuances of incivility, institutions can cultivate an inclusive environment where all members feel valued and respected.



# Strengths and Limitations

This research stands out in its scope, capturing perspectives from academic leaders across four separate universities, thus offering a multifaceted view of the phenomenon. The diverse representation not only strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings but also enhanced potential transferability to other academic settings.

The insights derived from the participants represent a subset of the academic leadership population and thus might not have comprehensively captured the full spectrum of experiences, views, and contexts present in Canadian business schools. Moreover, the study's primary lens is on the experiences of academic leaders, which could lead to the inadvertent overlooking of insights from other crucial stakeholders like faculty members, students, and administrative staff.



**To promote healthy organizational cultures, academic leaders could be offered opportunities to strengthen their leadership skills.**





## Future Directions

Future research could incorporate more diverse viewpoints by broadening the participant demographic and criteria across various post-secondary institutions. Quantitative measures, such as structured surveys or questionnaires, could complement the qualitative data in future studies. Such approaches allow for identifying patterns or trends potentially prevalent in larger populations.

Given that the efficacy of institutional support systems emerged as a significant concern in this study, subsequent research might consider a systematic evaluation of existing policies and support mechanisms across different institutions. These insights may allow intervention strategies to be developed and tested to address incivility.



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# Appendix: Interview Protocol

The study sought to better understand academic leaders' experiences, including those from equity-deserving groups, as recipients of workplace incivility and the strategies they have found helpful to manage the behaviours. The following questions were asked:

1. How long have you been in your current leadership role?
2. What are the top 3 qualities needed for academic leadership these days?
3. Overall, what are the biggest intrinsic and extrinsic rewards of your role?
4. What are the biggest internal and external challenges of your role? What do you anticipate will be the most important challenges in the future? How prepared do you feel to face these challenges?
5. Do you self-identify as a member of an equity-deserving group as defined by your institution? If yes, Are you comfortable sharing with us which group or groups? How has this factor impacted the way others treat you in your faculty?
6. What shifts have you observed in organizational culture attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic? Please share examples of 1) positive/helpful shifts and 2) negative/problematic shifts.
7. Workplace incivility refers to low-intensity rude, discourteous, or aggressive behaviour. Some examples include belittling others through rudeness, humiliation, or sarcasm, disrupting meetings, sending unkind email messages, talking about others behind their back, and disregarding or intentionally misinterpreting instructions or requests. Have you been a target of workplace incivility? If so, please list some examples.
8. How do these behaviours impact your personal life, career, and unit?
9. What institutional supports have you utilized to manage the behaviours? What have been the results?
10. What skills do you consider essential to manage incivility in your unit? How did you go about developing these skills? What resources would you recommend to others interested in developing these skills?
11. What skills do future leaders likely need to develop, and how can they go about it?
12. Lastly, what advice would you share with incoming academic leaders who wish to prepare for the role?

