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Marquette suspends dental student for blog comments

Disciplinary panel says he violated conduct code, but ruling is being appealed

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A dental student at Marquette University has been suspended for the rest of the academic year and ordered to repeat a semester after a committee of professors, administrators and students determined that he violated professional conduct codes when he posted negative comments about unnamed students and professors on a blog.

Scott Taylor, the student's attorney, said his client, a 22-year-old in Marquette's School of Dentistry, was brought before the committee for a conduct hearing last week after a classmate complained about his blog, a Web site that contained musings about topics ranging from his education to videogames and drinking.

The focus of the hearing, Taylor said, were half a dozen postings including one describing a professor as "a (expletive) of a teacher" and another that described 20 classmates as having the "intellectual/maturity of a 3-year-old."

Taylor released what he said was a complete transcript of the blog, which is no longer available online. Taylor said the student did not want to be identified, and his name could not be confirmed.

In a letter to the student dated Dec. 2, Denis Lynch, the dental school's associate dean for academic affairs, said the committee had found the student "guilty of professional misconduct in violation of the dental school's Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct."

The student also violated a universitywide code that subjects students to disciplinary action if they participate in stalking, hazing or harassments, the letter states.

In addition to informing the student of his suspension and his need to repeat his fall semester, which costs \$14,000 in tuition, Lynch threatened the student with expulsion if he continued to post material on "any blog sites that contain crude, demeaning and

Marquette University

Online Poll

Do you agree with Marquette's discipline in this case?

Yes

No

Quotable

unprofessional remarks."

Marquette spokeswoman Brigid O'Brien Miller said the decision, which is being appealed, is the second time the private university has taken action against a student for statements made on a blog, a form of online communication that is becoming increasingly popular among students and professors across the country.

The decision drew criticism Monday on and off campus.

"Dear Marquette Administrators," read the opening entry Monday on *GOP3.com*, a blog maintained by several Marquette students who have never faced disciplinary action for postings that criticize the administration. "You decided to screw up again. . . . I am eager to learn the student's name; he has just made many new friends at Marquette University."

Mark Goodman, executive director of the Student Press Law Center, in Arlington, Va., said: "The decision raises serious questions about the school's commitment to free expression. If the university has the ability to punish students for expression that occurs outside of class and school-sponsored events, they are really controlling students' lives."

The critics, including the student's attorney, recognize that private universities have a greater ability to limit student speech than their public counterparts, Taylor said. When students enroll in a private university, they agree to follow restrictions of the administration.

What bothers Taylor and others is what they call vagueness of Marquette's codes of conduct and the decision to apply them in this case. The dental school's code requires students "to conduct interactions with each other, with patients and with others in a manner that promotes understanding and trust" and condemns "actions, which in any way discriminate against or favor any group or are harassing in nature."

The dental student's blog was written in a rambling stream of consciousness intended for his friends to view, Taylor said.

In one entry, he wrote, "haha the guy in my class I dislike extremely, no names mentioned, but he is the srpenidte, got yelled at today in the practical (skills) exam we took today in preservation of tooth structure. That brought a smile to my face, because it just one more display of his idiocy."

The student admits that some of the entries were "imprudent, immature or crude," Taylor said, but he denies that they constitute misconduct.

Daniel D'Angelo, an adjunct associate professor of behavioral sciences in the School of Dentistry, agreed. He reviewed the student's blog entries at the request of his parents before the conduct hearing. D'Angelo, who is a co-

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Marquette
spokeswoman*

director of Marquette's Ethics and Professionalism curriculum, determined that the postings did not justify disciplinary action.

"What he wrote was imprudent, immature and oftentimes distasteful," D'Angelo wrote in a letter to Anthony Ziebert, a professor who headed the student-faculty review committee that heard the case. "But no matter how much I or anyone else find these entries, rude, distasteful and imprudent, it doesn't make these entries unethical or immoral."

D'Angelo said he made the decision after consulting with the director of bioethics at the Medical College of Wisconsin and a legal ethicist.

Before the student came in front of the review committee, Lynch gave him the option of signing an admission of guilt that would have allowed him to forgo a conduct hearing and be placed on probation. The student refused, Taylor said.

John McAdams, a professor who posted details of the case on his blog, The Warrior, concluded that "the entire process did not look like the adjudication of a case of student misconduct. It looked like a vendetta."

Lynch's secretary referred calls for comment to O'Brien Miller, who said university officials could not comment on the case while it is being appealed.

O'Brien Miller said the student faced disciplinary action while other student bloggers don't because of the School of Dentistry's code of ethics and professional conduct, which she described as "in keeping with the highest standards of conduct expected of those entering professions like dentistry."

But Taylor said: "I think it will have a chilling effect on all student discourse in higher education."

The dean has five days to act on the student's appeal.

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