

News, Views and Careers for All of Higher Education

Dec. 6

## Dental Pain at Marquette

A sophomore whose blog described classmates and professors in derogatory language and bragged about his drinking exploits was suspended Friday by Marquette University. Growing numbers of faculty members say administrators overstepped their bounds and should immediately reinstate the student.

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One day, the 22-year-old reported being “full and buzzin’ a little bit from the booze” — one of several blog entries involving his experiences with alcohol.

A few months later, he labeled an anonymous professor a “cockmaster of a teacher” because he didn’t like his teaching style. “I don’t even gratify him by calling him a professor,” said the student. “He is one who teaches, as in should teach infants and children.”

And in one entry, the dentistry student wrote about his classmates, “I don’t know how I am gonna manage [being with] the same 80 people for the next 3 years, especially when 20 of them have the intellect/maturity of a 3 year old, or are just a plain pain in the ass.”

The student, ranked 11th out of 82 students as of last semester, has made the dean’s list at the undergraduate dental school at least two times. Until his suspension, he participated in a dual degree program with the University of Rochester. One professor Monday called him “one of our best and brightest students.”

Upon learning about the blog from one of the student’s classmates, the dental school’s associate dean for academic affairs, Denis Lynch, gave the student a letter, dated November 2, indicating that he “may have a

problem with binge drinking” and calling the student’s writings “crude, demeaning and unprofessional.”

Lynch gave the student an opportunity to sign an “admission of guilt” and to waive a hearing of the Student-Faculty Review Committee, which he declined. His punishment would have included academic probation for the rest of his time at Marquette, a public apology to his class, and counseling for “both your alcohol abuse and the underlying basis of your remarks posted on your blog site.”

The student deleted his blog but did not consent to the punishments. He and his parents hired a lawyer to help defend him in front of the Student-Faculty Review Committee, which includes five faculty members and the presidents of the dental school’s four classes.

On Friday, the committee found the student guilty of professional misconduct in violation of the dental school’s Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. Section IV, Subsection E of the code in the school’s handbook states: “Each member of the MUSoD community is obligated to conduct interactions with each other, with patients and with others in a manner that promotes understanding and trust. Actions, which in any way discriminate against or favor any group or are harassing in nature, are condemned. Respect for the diverse members of the MUSoD student body, administrators, faculty, staff and patient base is expected.”

The committee’s decision states, in part: “You are suspended from the School of Dentistry, effective immediately. You will remain suspended from the School of Dentistry until the 2006 Fall Semester. At that time, [you] will be allowed to resume your matriculation and will be required to repeat the second year of the predoctoral program in its entirety.”

It also requires that the student remain on probation until graduation, get counseling for “behavioral issues,” and make a public apology to his class by the end of the fall semester. “That apology must explicitly state your contrition for the crude, demeaning and unprofessional remarks posted by you on your blog site and an admission that you violated the School of Dentistry’s Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct,” according to the committee’s decision. In addition, the punishment indicates that the student must repay the university a scholarship he received of \$5,000.

The student’s lawyer, Scott Taylor, a graduate of Marquette’s law school, said Monday that his client was “not comfortable” speaking with reporters at this time “because the administration has construed his comments as being critical, and he’s being punished for that.” *Inside Higher Ed* decided not to reveal the student’s identity.

Taylor said Monday that Lynch seemed intent on embarrassing the student while questioning him at the hearing. Taylor said that Lynch asked whether the student’s parents were proud of him, and whether he would teach his younger brother or sister how to create such a blog. The lawyer was not allowed to speak at the hearing, and said “it was a daunting task for a 22-year-old who has never been through this kind of inquiry to have to defend himself.”

Said Taylor, “It would be like me trying to perform a root canal,” noting that administrators did not allow the student to call six of his seven witnesses to his defense.

“The notion of due process at a private university is extremely limited, which is not to say it’s right or moral or fair,” he said.

On Monday, Lynch said he would not comment on this matter.

An official statement from the university said, in part: “Marquette respects the confidentiality of all those involved in the student conduct process which is subject to federal laws regarding educational privacy.”

Some Marquette professors have labeled the punishment “abusive,” “a travesty” and “unethical.”

Kevin Siebenlist, a biomedical professor, testified at the hearing that the student’s blog entries were no more egregious than words said to his face by students. He called the blog “crude,” but asked, “Why should I care?”

John McAdams, a professor of political science, wrote on [his Web site](#) Sunday that the code the student was charged with violating is “so absurdly vague that it could be stretched to cover about any kind of uncivil behavior, but it must be stretched to the breaking point to apply to comments directed against unnamed individuals on a blog.”

“Increasingly, students have blogs, and students in high pressure professional schools often ‘blow off steam’ by posting about their experiences,” he wrote. “Anybody with any ‘blog sophistication’ won’t take statements on student blogs very seriously.”

McAdams said that Marquette “encourages students to post public comments about their professors” through an online posting board called “DogEars” that can be accessed via a link from the student government [Web page](#). He said that the link can only be interpreted as Marquette encouraging students to go to the site and review their professors.

Daniel D’Angelo, the Marquette Dental School’s ethicist, said Monday, “I did not feel what the student had done had risen to violating the ethical codes. The punishment was unduly harsh, and I can’t support the decision of the committee.”

D’Angelo noted that he played no part in the defense of the student. “I’ve been very surprised by this,” he said. “It’s a blog. It is what it is.”

Marquette’s general counsel informed Taylor Monday that the student can attend classes until an appeal to William Lobb, the dental school’s dean, is resolved. Initial appeal forms were filed Monday, and will be supplemented on Friday after the student and his lawyer have had an opportunity to review the full transcript of the committee hearing.

— [Rob Capriccioso](#)

## Comments

Wow. Since half the internet is rants about professors and bragging about drinking, I bet we could eliminate any overcrowding in schools by kicking all of those bloggers out of school right now — esp. people w/ livejournal accounts. (I also wonder why the school would offer someone “academic probation” for something that, at best, is not academic in nature.)

**Larry**, at 6:50 am EST on December 6, 2005

## **Thank you Marquette!**

I think this is wonderful! More universities need to do this. Blogs and websites like Facebook are not helping with education at all. There is a serious issue at hand with college aged students (18-23) who think nothing of posting pictures from their late night at the bar or talking about their professors in a negative way in their blogs. Something needs to be done and I really think that universities need to ban the facebook and ask them to remove their schools. These young adults need to be taught about what is proper to post on a website/blog and what is not proper. Their blasé attitudes about having their lives open to the world to read is something that is rather scary.

**Katherine**, Thank you Marquette! at Ole Miss, at 11:31 am EST on December 6, 2005

## **Other reasons to cover up expression**

Katherine, Why is it a problem? If students (who are adults) do things that will impact badly on them later in life, that is their problem not the school's. To some extent schools encourage such behavior (e.g. I know that your school has a reputation for heavy drinking), but the schools now seek to censor the fact that someone might want to communicate the fact that they are drinkers because it is embarrassing.

Your view of “teaching” people what is “appropriate” to post is nothing more than a public relations stunt to cover up for the fact that most people like to drink and have a good time. It also is an attempt to cover up for the fact that many student don't like their professors and want to complain about it. Indeed, the students WANT people to know that their professors are mediocre, their classmates are drunks, and their education is not all that the development office want people to think it is.

**Larry**, at 12:20 pm EST on December 6, 2005

I am sure Katherine would not like to have her life “open to the world to read”, but thousands of college students have decided otherwise: they want to communicate and be open and truthful about their daily lives and experiences. It is the 21st century and an old cliché about what is “proper” will not stop social reality. We probably do not want to start the crusades once again, do we?

**Gus**, Not again... at Indiana University, at 12:20 pm EST on December 6, 2005

## **Marquette**

Well, I have friends at Marquette — this should scare them more than a little. The school apparently feels a need to poke into the private lives of its students. They have no business whatsoever concerning themselves with this blog or its contents. Given the qualifications of this student, I would hope that he finds a good school to transfer to — one that will respect the distinction between classroom and private life.

**Kevin**, Undergraduate, at 1:20 pm EST on December 6, 2005

## **I Agree with Katherine!**

Far too many people post information that they should just keep to themselves. It's just not right that professors should have to deal with students publishing criticisms that can be read by anyone. Hopefully this student sets an example and people will begin to understand what they're allowed to post on their personal online journals.

**Miguel**, at 8:24 pm EST on December 6, 2005

Miguel, You do not get it. In America (my country), People can post just about anything on their journals and put them on the web. The framers of the constitution (many of whom were sinners, pamphleteers, and educated at boring schools) were quite clear on this. I know that this might come as a shock to you, but many people are proud of the way they live and want to share it with others. Sometimes those ways of life involve more than just going to church and saying prayers. Sometimes they involve drinking. Sometimes they involve hating professors.

Although this school, not being a government entity is not bound by the constitution, by attempting to constrain what people say about it, because, they want to either shape reality, or they fear that the schools "positive" messages won't be able to convince people that there are good things at the school.

The big irony of the whole thing even before blogs, most people knew that this school had a reputation for drinking and a few professors who should have retired awhile ago. But the same could be said of many schools. By trying to punish this kid for stating the obvious, they actually make it look like the reality is much worse.

**Larry88**, at 7:50 am EST on December 7, 2005

Its a free country — folks can and should be able to make these sorts of comments, however they wish to. The objections of some in this forum seem to be of the "he got what was coming to him" sort. Thats too bad. If you teach at the post-secondary level and can't take criticism, then you have chosen the wrong profession. If this guy had said half of these things in the student newspaper (for example, decrying the maturity of some of his classmates), nothing would have happened to him.

This is about the medium as much as the message. Some "old school" educators fear the uncontrolled nature of the Internet and wish to either eliminate its use or bend it to their will. Potential Marquette students should vote with their wallets and choose a public university, or a private school that will respect their constitutional rights.

**Dan**, at 4:37 pm EST on December 7, 2005

Those who have sided with the University on this matter need to do some serious soul-searching. Its fine with you that power is blatantly misused to "improve" people. What happens when that power moves against one of YOUR vices? This article describes fascism, plain and simple.

[Samwise](#), at 2:09 pm EST on December 8, 2005

## **Dental pain at Marquette**

Dentistry is a profession. Members of this profession are expected by their peers to hold to the professional code of ethics. Indeed, it is a criterion for graduation at most professional schools. Do you want a dentist to work on

your teeth who does not show you respect? Would you like to be a dentist who hears charges about your professionalism from another dentist, and does not give you a chance to respond? Do you want a dentist doing a root canal who is drunk? If professions don't call their own future and current members to account, using fair procedures and a public code of ethics, who protects the patient?

**Marcia Mentkowski**, at 4:59 pm EST on December 8, 2005

Marcia, First of all, this school is not a profession. Second of all, professions at least make an effort to provide people with due process. Third, even in such professions the ability to speak and criticize things is generally preserved (because the 1st amendment protects professions from any adverse action via a self-regulatory agency.) Fourth, and most of all, you seem to want people to be censored so that you don't know the truth. I guess I have to break it to you, but just about all professions have a very large segment of people in them that lead debauched lives. Some of them are quite good at their professions. Yes. Dentists get drunk. So do doctors, lawyers, dentists. Policemen get drunk, too. Some have affairs. Don't get me started on pilots. You just don't want people to be honest about it so that you can feel like the world is pure. All of those professions have sex. Sometimes the sex is deviant!

Of course you could just not read the guy's blog and you could continue to live in your fairy-land.

You asked "Who protects the patient?" Certainly not Marquette. In general, you can either sue a dentist for malpractice, or complain to your state's regulatory agency. (In reality, most professions don't really get to regulate themselves as much as they like to make you think.)

**Larry**, at 4:38 am EST on December 9, 2005

Clearly, these are people that have way too much time on their hands. Face, it people are miserable and only find joy when bringing someone else down.

**Ayana**, at 9:52 pm EST on December 9, 2005

## **Free Country**

It is a free country and people should be allowed to say whatever is on their minds but what every Cliff Notes constitutionalist forgets is that you can be held accountable for what you say. This is a private university and by attending this guy agreed to abide by the rules of the school. Whether fair or not that is the way it is interpreted by the council, hopefully the appeal dismisses this because it is way over the top.

As a medical doctor I have seen this type of stunts in med school and it is all part of growing up. So while yes this is a professional school and medical doctors and dentists are held to higher ethical standards you can't expect a 22 year old fresh out of the frat filled puke fests that are 4 year bach schools to be mature enough to realize what is and what is not acceptable in a profession such as ours.

I myself got into academic trouble for referring to cadavers as meat popsicles; at the time I thought the punishment was irrational but now I see my comments as unprofessional and disrespectful so gave these kids time to grow we can't all be born with an instant professional ethics code.

**Dr A**, at 11:02 am EST on December 13, 2005

## **Marcia, Marcia, Marcia**

Marcia, there is a large difference between drinking in college during your second year of Med school and showing up to work hammered. I think you should go to your boss tomorrow morning, tell him that you drank in college (assuming you did), and ask him what he thinks. Not only will he not care, it will not affect your job competency, which should be the ultimate judgement in the workplace. Also, he, being a 22 year-old, has the right to drink as he sees fit. The ACLU will have a field day with this, and that unnamed student will probably end up living a good life courtesy of Marquette, not for the education he received either.

**Matthew**, at 4:28 am EST on December 22, 2005

The real issue at hand is not drinking or not drinking. It is weather this man should be able to write comments in a public domain or not. The punishment may seem harsh to some, but I feel otherwise.

The Dental community is a place that is self governed by peers belonging to that profession. As such this community has a responsibility to ensure that the next generation of professionals is committed to the ethics and morals of the community as a whole.

Dental School is a trying experience that is a furnace of tests a person's ability to cope with all types of challenges. I have personally verbally slammed my share of professors in my time at Dental School. However, my comments were made within the profession to my classmates and professors. The difference is in the audience receiving the verbal complaints. Sure he is entitled to his own opinion about his professors, but those opinions should not be expressed in a public domain. Through my own experience in school I have learned a universal truth: "The more I learn only shows me how much I don't know". This young dental student would do well to not be so sure of himself and his ability to judge his professors abilities to teach him what he does not know that he does not know.

**bean**, at 9:00 am EST on December 23, 2005

Got something to say?

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