

Shouldn't the dentistry Facebook posters be punished?

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What would be the point of punishing, by expelling or through other sanctions, the dentistry students involved in the misogynistic Facebook postings? From what those who advocate punishment are saying, I count four different answers. First, the point of punishing them is retribution. The students acted wrongly and deserve official sanctions. Second, they have shown themselves by their actions to be unfit to join the profession of dentistry. Third, punishing them will serve to reduce the likelihood of other students making misogynistic remarks, and that will, in turn, make dentistry school more hospitable to women students. Fourth, the point of punishing them is to rehabilitate the school of dentistry, to help it to reclaim its reputation as a place that treats women students well.

1) About retribution: Not all wrongs we commit are wrongs we should be punished for. In a free society, we should not be punished for our opinions, emotions, or values, or for expressing our opinions, emotions, and values. Our opinions might be false and our values unsound, and our expressing them disturbing or hurtful, but respect for each other requires that we apply no pressures other than argument and evidence to try to change opinions or values.

Canadian society, though, as many commentators have pointed out, is not a free society. We have laws against the expression of hate, and our defamation laws are strong and punitive. Too bad for us, I say. But even those who don't mind punishing people for the content of their public expression should be uneasy when it comes to going after posters in the relative privacy of Facebook, I would think. Or is it only behind the locked doors of our houses that we can say what we want without worry?

But the case we're considering is not a matter of law, one might respond. The school of dentistry is not a government agency and should be free to settle matters in its own house as it wants. Well, we don't live in a free society even if the government isn't involved in censoring and suppressing opinion, so long as other powerful institutions are taking up the slack. Moreover, consider that the school of dentistry is part of Dalhousie University. A university is a place of intellectual community, or should be, and intellectual community is sustained only if members of that community are free from institutional pressures to believe and value this way or that. Of course we want that we and others believe truly and value soundly, but we also want that we believe truly and value soundly for our own good reasons, not out of fear or hope of reward.

That, I think, is the main reason why the students should not be punished or even face the threat of being punished. Since they are university students, they are members of an intellectual community, and such a community is destroyed when members are directed to have certain

beliefs and values, rather than allowed, through investigation and critical discussion, to come to their own beliefs and values.

2) About gatekeeping: The school of dentistry is part of a university, yes, but, one might add, it is also a professional school, training students to assume a position within a profession. As such, the school of dentistry has a responsibility to ensure that only people fit to join that profession are invited to do so.

This is a strong argument for expelling the students. It would be even stronger were there some good reason for thinking students involved in misogynistic expression would put their patients at risk of harm were they ever to have patients. (Is there any evidence to support that worry?)

One response is, again, that powerful institutions, such as schools of dentistry, should in a free society have great regard for freedom of expression. Another response is that because it is part of a university, the school of dentistry is a place of education rather than training and, thereby, should not be playing any official gatekeeping role at all. That role should be left exclusively to professional societies.

Maybe schools of dentistry shouldn't be part of universities. Maybe their associations with universities should be much looser than they are, and their ties to professional bodies tighter. In any case, they cannot be both academic institutions of education and training centres that keep watch on the gates. If a school of dentistry wants to be a gatekeeper, it shouldn't be housed within a university.

3) About making the school friendly to women: The threat of sanctions for getting caught making misogynistic remarks might well reduce the number of misogynistic postings on Facebook, and that would make for a more pleasant environment. And, yet, that more pleasant environment would be a result not of changed attitudes but of enforced manners. Manners cannot be enforced at a university, I argued above, without compromising that university's status as a place of education. Here, though, I want to make the additional point that we're aiming much too low if our goal is merely to create the façade of respect and good will toward women. Let's be more ambitious, and try to create the real thing.

To create a place in which all students respect and help each other, we need candidly to discuss the attitudes people have that demean others and that lead to hurtful behaviours such as misogynistic postings. Punishment doesn't change attitudes, but discussion can and often does. If the school of dentistry is to become a place in fact friendly to women, then it has to uncover through critical discussion alone the basic attitudes that make the school hostile, and attempt to change those attitudes through showing them to be pinched, narrow, and debilitating.

4) About restoring the reputation of the school: If the school of dentistry wants to have the reputation of both being friendly to women and being a place of education, it cannot resort to punishment in service of the former, for then it loses the latter. And because threats of punishment create, at best, merely the appearance of friendliness, the school will not gain a reputation for being friendly to women by policing bad behaviours. Its reputation will, rather, be that of a school where misogyny lingers just under the surface.

A fifth reason I've heard for punishing the students is, with the first, retribution, but the wrong to be made right by punishment in this case isn't the expressing of false or obnoxious beliefs or values. The wrong, rather, is the violent assault on the women who were mentioned in the postings.

Yet posting something on Facebook cannot be an act of violence, even if it hurts and even if it harms.