

# Ryerson students threatened with expulsion over Facebook group

Claim that online study-group constitutes academic misconduct has students questioning the university's right to police the 'Net

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The Eyeopener (Ryerson University)

TORONTO (CUP)—A first-year student at Ryerson University could be expelled for running an online study-group through Facebook.

Chris Avenir, a chemical engineering student, joined to help himself and others study for upcoming test and assignments. The group, called "The Dungeon / Mastering Chemistry Solutions," eventually gained 146 members.

After a university administrator discovered it, however, Avenir's professor gave him an F in the course, charged him with academic misconduct, and recommended that he be expelled.

Of the 146 members, Avenir was singled out because he was designated as a group administrator. He now says that he's being treated unfairly, especially since he never posted any answers on the discussion pages.

"What we did wasn't any different than tutoring, than tri-mentoring, than having a library study-group," Avenir said. "I'm being charged with something I didn't commit."

This is the first strike in a new initiative by Ryerson University to try and crack down on student conduct on the Internet and off campus. A policy has been introduced to the University's senate that would extend its Non-Academic Student Code of Conduct to incidents that happen online.

"The student code of conduct needed updating, recognizing that there are things like Facebook, YouTube, stuff like that out there," Ryerson President Sheldon Levy said. The change to

the policy was partly prompted by Ryerson students who set up "white culture" groups on Facebook last year.

The proposed policy changes would give the school the power to punish students for infractions that happen off campus if they're using the Ryerson.

The policy and Avenir's pending expulsion have ignited student opposition to the University's bid for more authority over student behaviour.

"The University is interfering in students' personal lives," said Salman Omer, a third-year aerospace engineering student and Senate member. "This is an infringement of our rights."

But the fight is only the latest chapter in a trend at North American universities to police students' online activities, opening a debate on security culture.

South of the border, Georgia's Valdosta State University expelled student Hayden Barnes in January for posting a collage online that made fun of the school president.

When Trent University in Peterborough, ON tried to bring in a similar policy, 2000 students signed a petition to have the policy revoked.

"People really feel that the Internet shouldn't be policed," Tyler Roach, President of the Trent Central Students' Association said. "There's a large contingent [of students] that thinks we shouldn't even have a student non-academic policy."

Kim Neale, student issues and advocacy coordinator with the Ryerson Students' Union, thinks the move to police students' activities outside school will create a culture of fear on campus.

"When did we lose faith in our students and how they behave?"



FACEBOOK FIASCO Chris Avenir (far right) addresses the media with his lawyer following his appeal meeting on Tuesday.

Neale asked.

The issue highlights a generation gap between students who use the Internet as an informal forum and school administrators who are trying to figure out how to deal with it, she said.

"I don't think any university has caught up with the technology," she explained, pointing out that none of the adult members of the Senate committee that drafted the policy have a Facebook account.

The committee made a few compromises for students—such as protecting the right of students to hold protests off campus—but refused to

budge on the Internet policy.

Levy maintained that it strikes a balance between students' rights and the University's desire to hold them accountable for what happens online.

"There's lots of opportunities for a complaints process and appeals process, as with all policies," he said.

Now that the policy has been presented to Senate, there will be a one-month waiting period until it gets voted on. Some are fighting the policy by getting throngs of students to come to Senate and sign a petition.

So far, Avenir is the only member of the Facebook group charged with aca-

ademic misconduct on the Internet.

Avenir had an appeal on 11 March and the outcome is expected to be announced in a few days. Avenir says that even if he wins, he's hoping to get his friends involved in the fight to get the policy changed.

He has already missed one appeal because the school informed him of it in an email rather than calling him. He noted that it's ironic that the school would embrace one form of technology while punishing another.

"It's stupid to reject new technology," he said. "If they win this, it will set a precedent."

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