

A STAIN ON OUR PROFESSION

By Patrick Quinn, PhD (Hon.), P.Eng., FEC

AN OBSERVER LOOKING objectively at the engineering profession in Canada might reasonably wonder about its culture. What is it about engineering that sets it apart from other professions in the offensive behaviours some of its students exhibit at university? And why do these behaviours endure?

Some 25 years ago I wrote of anti-arts chants at a major university by engineering students, and about the public harassment of a woman engineering student at an engineering university function that drove the woman out of that school. The pushback surprised me. Deans talked about esprit-de-corps; it was not the role of universities to promote behaviour or character; it was all in fun; and I should lighten up. Some women in engineering suggested that by drawing attention to these events, I was drawing unwelcome attention to them.

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Twenty-five years ago, at a time when date rape at universities was getting media coverage, I also wrote a column asking if our universities were really safe for women. Recently, former US president Jimmy Carter, in promoting a book wherein he spent some effort to bring the issue of violence against women to the public fore, decried the rape statistics of American universities where the school's reputation was more important than women's safety. I doubt our universities are any safer today than American universities. It is not a stretch to link violence against women to so-called fun activities that are, by their nature, abusive toward women or perceptually inappropriate. And when these insensitive activities become part of the public perception of engineering, we need to take note and action.

Recently, Engineers Canada circulated an article headed, "Engineers kidnap, ransom and bribe their way to Geer Week win," about a Canadian university. To see the reactions of engineer friends, I circulated the piece, wondering how others viewed the optics and asking for reactions. The only response was a "lighten up" one from a friend with children in university in recent years, who said, "These kids have been 'killing' on video games, etc., so this is not new to them. It's a game."

Enquiries of those involved in Geer Week elicited that they thought the situation was a lot less sinister than the article depicts; it was actually all about fun, and that the concerns of a woman who was not sanguine about features of Geer Week were capitalized on to make the article more sensational.

When this type of incident is publicized, the student response is: "We have been doing this for years...What's the problem now?" Those in authority have to know it is there as a constant, transmitted down from frosh to frosh. Action is taken only when it reaches public attention and university reputations are in danger.

The first response of enlightened universities (enlightened at least to the reality of the damage that a bad reputation can inflict) is damage control—apologies, suspensions, shutdowns of student activity, sensitivity training, promises about zero tolerance, etc. As time goes by it is obvious that this is not enough.

As a profession, we are shamed by these behaviours and their tolerance. We simply must address this rot, which is a continuing stain on our profession. Perhaps, if public perception about engineering were not that it is male-dominated and its students rough-acting boors, we could get away with ambivalence. But in 2014, when even universities with progressive attitudes toward women in engineering are dealing with a resurgence of offensive and insensitive behaviours, which can only be seen as a regression to attitudes many of us thought had long been purged from engineering faculties, something needs to be done by those who speak for our profession.

We have to *believe* that these examples are beneath the dignity of our profession and insist on student and faculty behaviour that does not besmirch a great profession. Character is a defining factor in the definition of a professional, and universities must, for accreditation purposes, be required to show they are involved in fostering and promoting their students' characters.

Where they fail, the regulatory bodies need to use their influence and power not just to ensure our profession's good name, but also to act responsibly toward the protection of women. Violence against women must be more of a real concern and anything associated with our profession that is perceived to, in any way, promote or condone it needs to be eradicated. It is a profession's obligation. Σ

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