

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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In the Era of Mean Tweets... And Much, Much Worse

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Abstract

"Each year, the Dordt College junior social work students create a theme for Social Work Month which is in March. This year, the class has decided to focus on the ideal of community, and in doing so, specifically focusing in on the breakdown of community that happens from bullying and incivility."

Posting about about what it means to engage civilly in a world that has accepted incivility as par for the course from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/in-the-era-of-mean-tweetsand-much-much-worse/>

Keywords

In All Things, incivility, bullying, community, social work, social media, Twitter, Yik Yak

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

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 inallthings.org/in-the-era-of-mean-tweetsand-much-much-worse

Abby Foreman

On one of the late night shows, the host has politicians and celebrities read mean tweets about themselves. The other night, President Obama [read mean tweets](#) about himself. Other politicians have appeared on the show and have done the same. In an ironic sort of way, it is humorous to hear the person read mean comments about themselves. However, it also indicates that we have accepted as normal the “mean tweeting” nature of life today. People do not have to be politicians or notable public citizens to be subject to the sting of criticism and derision that is delivered so easily to us through the comments sections on articles, and through social media.

Each year, the Dordt College junior social work students create a theme for Social Work Month which is in March. Some years the class aligns with the official theme for Social Work month, which this year is “Social work paves the way for change.” But many years the students choose a theme based on a favorite Biblical passage or ideal the class identifies—the students use the theme to raise awareness on campus and in the community about social problems and the profession of social work. This year, the class has decided to focus on the ideal of community, and in doing so, specifically focusing in on the breakdown of community that happens from bullying and incivility.

There has been a great deal of education and awareness raising done around the issue of bullying and cyber-bullying, particularly when it comes to children in elementary, middle and high school. One particular area of concern on college campuses has been the rise of online anonymous tools like Yik Yak which allows people to post anonymously while in the vicinity of a particular college campus. At its best, such tools can establish a back channel where students and others can comment on things happening and to be creative and funny. At its worst, it can become a tool to objectify, be disrespectful, or to bully others specifically. In this, just as with all of the created world, we can see how a specific tool can be used for good or for ill. The students, in developing their theme for this year, desire to encourage positive interactions among people in person and online. This generation of students is often referred to as “digital natives”—the online world is one which they have grown up with and is probably even more real to them than it is to those of us who grew up in a time where sending an email to someone was seen as technologically savvy.

Ultimately, the students are interested in cultivating discussions about what it means to engage civilly in a world that has accepted incivility as par for the course. Here’s where the values of the social work profession can help us out. First and foremost, we teach and try to put into practice the principle that all people deserve and require dignity and respect. All people includes those in power—politicians and public figures are people too—to the people in society with whom we disagree or those whose experience we cannot seem to connect with. From our Christian worldview, we know that all people are image bearers of God and therefore require our respect. We also know we are sinful people, and prone, in our brokenness, to divide and separate and to break down community. Our communal response should be one in which we hold each other accountable for our words in a grace-filled way. We should use words to build up rather than break down. In the next few days, my colleagues will offer insights into how to build community in our homes and on an individual level. Clearly, the uncivil are not always “other people” but is very often ourselves; we all struggle with this. A very influential book in our program is [Uncommon Decency: Christian civility in an uncivil world](#) by Richard Mouw. In this excellent book, Mouw points out that two fruits of the spirit are kindness and gentleness. We can rest secure in the fact that God is sovereign over all, and

holds all things in his hands. We can, and should, cultivate communication—in person and online—that is both kind and gentle, respecting each other in our differences and yet being able to engage in meaningful dialogue about what we believe.