

# Losing Admission to Harvard

In early June 2017, *The Harvard Crimson* reported that Harvard had rescinded the admission offers of at least 10 students who had previously been admitted to Harvard's Class of 2021.<sup>1</sup> Harvard rescinded these offers because of the students' participation in a Facebook group devoted to sharing highly offensive memes—including memes joking about sexual assault, child abuse, and the Holocaust, and memes mocking racial or ethnic minorities.<sup>2</sup> While the Facebook group was not affiliated with Harvard, it was exclusively for members of Harvard's Class of 2021, and was formed by students who found each other on the official Facebook group for students admitted to that class—a page managed by the university's Admissions Office to help students connect with each other before arriving on campus.

To some people, Harvard's decision seems like an objectionable form of censorship or thought-policing. For instance, one student interviewed by *The Crimson* thought that as long as people aren't directly harming or threatening someone else, they "can post whatever they want because they have the right to do that," adding that it was just "people doing stupid stuff." Moreover, since this Facebook group was not officially affiliated with Harvard, this may seem like an unwarranted intrusion into students' private social media lives. Partly due to such concerns, some colleges shy away from monitoring students' social media. The University of California system, for instance, issued a statement that "Social media presence plays no role in our admissions process. [...] Only if an incident is reported to us that purportedly violated our Principles of Community and/or Student Code of Conduct, will it be investigated in the proper channels."<sup>3</sup>

Others defend Harvard's decision. Students are frequently reminded that their social media activity has consequences. In fact, the official Facebook group for Harvard's Class of 2021 explicitly states, "As a reminder, Harvard College reserves the right to withdraw an offer of admission under various conditions including if an admitted student engages in behavior that brings into question his or her honesty, maturity, or moral character." In this case, many people think that the offending students simply crossed the line. "I appreciate humor, but there are so many topics that just should not be joked about," said another student interviewed by *The Crimson*—"those actions really spoke about the students' true characters." Additionally, some people argue that Facebook groups like the one in question promote a less respectful culture, and undermine colleges' attempts to establish safe and welcoming learning environments—especially for members of socially disadvantaged groups that are often targets of vicious memes. Thus colleges have a responsibility to place a check on their students' social media behavior.

But some who agree that the students should not have shared these offensive memes still worry that having their admissions rescinded was too harsh a penalty. Perhaps there was a better way to make this into a learning opportunity for these students and their peers. Rescinding admissions offers, it might even be argued, could have a chilling effect on student speech, and might ultimately scare students away from discussing important issues openly and honestly in an online setting. But then again, maybe not—there is a clear difference between engaging in an open and honest debate about sensitive topics, and sharing patently offensive jokes.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

- (1) Should students' social media presence play a role in the college admissions process? If so, what kind of role?
- (2) Should offensive social media use lead to rescinding admission? If so, how should we decide what is offensive enough? And how should the line between public and private social media be drawn?
- (3) How should the right to students' free speech be weighed against colleges' interest in promoting safe and welcoming learning environments?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2017/6/5/2021-offers-rescinded-memes/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/06/05/harvard-withdraws-10-acceptances-for-offensive-memes-in-private-chat/?utm\\_term=.8b3418679c83](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/06/05/harvard-withdraws-10-acceptances-for-offensive-memes-in-private-chat/?utm_term=.8b3418679c83)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/06/06/531591202/harvard-rescinds-admission-of-10-students-over-obscene-facebook-messages>