

President's statement re: independent fact-finder report

Dec. 18, 2017

<https://www.wlu.ca/news/spotlights/2017/dec/president-statement-re-independent-fact-finder-report.html>

I believe it is time for some clarity around the events of the past few weeks here at Wilfrid Laurier University, stemming from the very regrettable meeting that followed the showing of a TVO clip by a teaching assistant (TA) during a tutorial.

As the newly appointed President and Vice-Chancellor of this incredible 106-year-old institution, I'm here to set the record straight and announce some important changes.

The issue has highlighted some deficiencies. But as importantly, it has created opportunities. Opportunities for Laurier to improve our own performance, opportunities to lead a broader discussion on academic freedom and freedom of expression, and opportunities to work together as a community here at Laurier to demonstrate the strengths we have as an institution.

When the issue first broke, I erred on the side of caution. As a person, and as the president of Laurier, I am sensitive to the viewpoints and concerns of our students, staff and faculty. As an employer, I am cognisant that the four people who were in that meeting room are employees and one is also a student. All four are entitled to due process. I did not want to rush to judgement; rather, I wanted to ensure we were able to objectively assess the facts and make sound decisions flowing from that assessment.

We hired an external fact-finder with expertise in human resources issues. I have received the report and we are taking decisive action to ensure these events will not be repeated. The report, along with what we already knew, has led me to the following conclusions and actions.

There were numerous errors in judgement made in the handling of the meeting with Ms. Lindsay Shepherd, the TA of the tutorial in question. In fact, the meeting never should have happened at all. No formal complaint, nor informal concern relative to a Laurier policy, was registered about the screening of the video. This was confirmed in the fact-finding report.

The errors in judgement were compounded by misapplication of existing university policies and procedures. Basic guidelines and best practices on how to appropriately execute the roles and responsibilities of staff and faculty were ignored or not understood.

Procedures in how to apply university policies and under what circumstances were not followed. The training of key individuals to meet the expectations of the university in addressing an issue such as this was not sufficient and must be improved.

There was also institutional failure that allowed this to happen. And when there is institutional failure, responsibility ultimately starts and ends with me.

Going forward, we will implement improved training and new procedures and engage in a very specific administrative review to strengthen and enhance confidence in what students and employees can expect at Laurier.

Specifically:

There was no wrongdoing on the part of Ms. Shepherd in showing the clip from TVO in her tutorial. Showing a TVO clip for the purposes of an academic discussion is a reasonable classroom teaching tool. Any instructional material needs to be grounded in the appropriate academic underpinnings to put it in context for the relevance of the learning outcomes of the course. The ensuing discussion also needs to be handled properly. We have no reason to believe this discussion was not handled well in the tutorial in question.

I have apologized to Ms. Shepherd publicly, as has Dr. Rambukkana, her supervising professor. The university has conveyed to her today the results of the fact-finding report, to make sure she understands it is clear that she was involved in no wrongdoing. The university is taking concrete steps to make changes to ensure this doesn't happen again.

It has been made clear to those who were involved in the meeting with Ms. Shepherd that their conduct does not meet the high standards I set for staff and faculty.

As these are individual employment issues, I cannot go into greater detail on any individual case. But know that the university has, and is, taking action to rectify the situation and send a clear signal that this cannot and will not happen again.

One key improvement highlighted is the need to enhance our faculty and TA training. It is the responsibility of course instructors to develop guidelines for the roles and expectations of their TAs. The university also has high expectations of professors as

TA supervisors. We recognize the need to do more in this area. The university's intent is to enhance the training and support for both TA supervisors and teaching assistants, making these mandatory and standardized, for clarity and consistency across the university.

GENDERED AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE POLICY

It has become clear to us that managing the new Gendered and Sexual Violence Policy (GSVP) has led to a confusion in its application. In fact, the interviews conducted by the fact-finder confirmed that the rationale for invoking the GSVP did not exist. It was misapplied and was a significant overreach.

To provide clarity of the policy's intent and to strengthen accountability, we will engage in an administrative review with the goal of finding the appropriate structure to oversee and execute the GSVP and its accompanying procedures. We will also undertake a full review of the policy and its procedures.

In the interim, we will ensure access to the existing support and complaints procedures by providing management and oversight through the Office of Dispute Resolution and Support. This has the added benefit of improved accountability as that office reports through to me as president.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

For those who have chosen to use this incident as an indictment of Wilfrid Laurier University or the plight of Canadian universities in general, I say your assertion is unreasonable and unfounded. Laurier has a clear commitment to academic freedom and freedom of expression.

Laurier prepares our students and instructors for difficult discussions. We support our teachers in navigating complex and divisive issues with care and confidence. We are leaders in ensuring our students, faculty and staff have the necessary supports and tools to help those who have experienced marginalization and discrimination to engage fully. Properly grounded academic debate at Laurier occurs every day and encourages critical thinking and civil discourse. Ideas that one finds objectionable should be challenged and debated. The common good of society depends upon the search for knowledge and its free expression.

Free expression and academic freedom at the university require accompanying responsibilities and accountabilities to be met by members of the university community. We will continue to ensure we are protecting against, and dealing with, hate and intolerance. Those have no place in civil society, let alone on a university

campus. They will not be tolerated at Laurier. I remain concerned by the way faculty, staff and students involved in aspects of this situation were targeted with such vitriol. Members of the university community must be supported to work and study in an environment free of discrimination and harassment and they have my commitment we will continue to make this a university priority.

It bears repeating in the current context that Laurier's support for our lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer and two-spirited (LGBTQ2S) campus community and transgender people in particular is unwavering. In light of recent events, we have created and communicated additional supports for LGBTQ2S students, faculty and staff, and added measures to improve campus safety.

We will ensure that all students, staff and faculty know exactly what our commitment to academic freedom and freedom of expression means in the classroom. To that end we have established the Task Force on Freedom of Expression to take input from our community, look at best practices beyond Laurier, and develop a clear, tangible set of practical, implementable guidelines that will bring clarity to this issue for our own classrooms, and will have the potential to serve as best practices for others. That is my commitment to you.

MOVING FORWARD

Laurier offers an incredible student experience and exemplifies excellence in teaching, research and scholarship. I know this. Our students, faculty and staff know this. Our alumni know this. Our supporters and community partners know this. Our application numbers are outpacing last year's high level, demonstrating that prospective students know this as well.

Today, we turn the page on a very unfortunate incident. We are here to make sure it does not happen again. We are here to put an end to the ongoing politicization of this issue. And we are here to seize the opportunity to lead in developing useful tools for the classroom to ensure challenging, academically grounded debate thrives at Laurier and that others can learn from what we develop.

Deborah MacLatchy, PhD
President and Vice-Chancellor
Wilfrid Laurier University

[Previous statements on this topic.](#)