

Colleagues write letter of support for Wilfrid Laurier profs embroiled in free speech controversy

The letter, sent via an email distribution list on Monday, was followed by a statement from the university announcing the outcome of an independent fact-finder's investigation.

A group of 20 faculty members published an open letter Monday in support of the professors who chastised Shepherd for showing a video clip featuring a controversial figure in class.

<https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2017/12/19/colleagues-pen-open-letter-for-wilfrid-laurier-profs-embroiled-in-free-speech-controversy.html>

By **VJOSA ISAI** Staff Reporter
Toronto Star
Tues., Dec. 19, 2017

Twenty faculty members at Wilfrid Laurier University signed an open letter in support of two colleagues who criticized teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd for showing a video clip that featured a controversial figure in her tutorial.

The letter, published Monday on an academic listserv for the Canadian Communication Association, underscored the supervising professor's academic freedom to decide what material is presented to supplement lectures.

"While the 'free speech' of a single individual has dominated discussion surrounding this situation, 'academic freedom' is also a decisive term in this context," the letter said.

"We reject efforts of those who have seized this episode as a strategic opportunity to disparage disciplines and scholars with commitments to improving social and economic equality within universities and in society at large."

Communications studies department professor Nathan Rambukkana, Shepherd's supervisor; Herbert Pimlott, co-ordinator for the masters program that Shepherd is enrolled in; and Adria Joel, acting manager for Gendered Violence Prevention and Support, were secretly recorded by the 23-year-old during a subsequent meeting.

Shepherd was criticized by the three staff members for failing to condemn the views of University of Toronto professor Jordan Peterson, who has refused to use gender-neutral pronouns. She [aired a short clip](#) of a TVO debate featuring the professor as part of a communications tutorial to "contextualize" the complexities of grammar, she said in the clip.

“The thing is, can you shield people from those ideas? Am I supposed to comfort them and make sure they are insulated away from this? . . . To me that is so against what a university is about,” Shepherd can be heard saying in the recording, adding she disagreed with Peterson.

In the open letter, faculty and staff from the communications studies department responded to the claim, which has been hotly debated on social media.

“Charges that our program shelters students from real-world issues or fosters classrooms inhospitable to discussing contentious issues from different vantage points seem to us simply preposterous,” the letter said.

“Likewise, commentators who characterize our students as millennial ‘snowflakes’ not only insult our students but also paint a dramatically inaccurate representation of what happens in our classrooms.”

The university apologized to Shepherd last month after she discreetly recorded the meeting with the staff members and released it publicly.

The two professors who attended the meeting did not respond to requests for comment from the Star.

Also on Monday, Laurier president Deborah MacLatchy [confirmed in a statement](#) that no formal complaint or informal concern was ever filed in relation to Shepherd’s class.

However, a university spokesperson said it was a later discussion among students about the video that led to the meeting with Shepherd.

MacLatchy’s statement, issued following the faculty’s open letter, detailed the outcome of an independent factfinder’s investigation into the incident and outlined ways in which the university plans to improve handling future cases.

“We are here to put an end to the ongoing politicization of this issue,” MacLatchy said.

In addition to the review of relevant university policies, including that for “Gendered and Sexual Violence,” Laurier also plans to standardize training and support for teaching assistants and supervisors.

The university is also introducing a 13-member Task Force on Freedom of Expression, with names to be announced later this week. The members will work from January until March 2018 to develop a statement on freedom of expression that balances academic freedom, freedom of speech, and Laurier’s mission, vision, and values.

The university declined to comment on the open letter, or detail whether the two faculty members would face discipline.

“It’s really unacceptable to invent a complaint, and bring me into a meeting and accuse me of something they had no understanding of, and to abuse their power in that way,” Shepherd said. “It’s weird to not address the fact that you made up a fraudulent complaint. I think they need to address it.”

On Tuesday, Shepherd said on Twitter that she will be a teaching assistant next semester for one of the faculty signees of the open letter.

With files from the Waterloo Region Record

