

Wilfrid Laurier must truly change

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A student walks by the front entrance sign at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo. - David Bebee, Record file photo

Wilfrid Laurier University has its work cut out for it if it wants to repair the nationwide damage to its reputation caused by the Lindsay Shepherd affair.

Shepherd is the 22-year-old graduate student who was brutally censured by university officials last month simply because she showed her class a video of a televised debate on gender-neutral pronouns broadcast by TVO.

But an independent investigator who reviewed the incident has vindicated Shepherd, while severely criticizing the two professors and university bureaucrat who rebuked and bullied her.

In the wake of the investigator's report, WLU president Deborah MacLatchy promised on Monday to implement necessary changes at the school — and her words are welcome.

But the value of MacLatchy's commitment will be seen in what happens next.

She will be judged by how she protects free speech and academic freedom in the future, and by how she ensures no one else at Laurier is forced to endure the kind of nasty, groundless inquisition Shepherd was subjected to.

At that disciplinary meeting, Shepherd was explicitly told "one or multiple students" had complained about her, that she had violated Laurier's "gendered and sexual-violence policy," and "created a toxic climate for some" students.

As a result, she would be closely watched and need to have her lesson plans approved before teaching them.

As it turns out, none of the accusations was true.

"The meeting never should have happened," MacLatchy admitted Monday.

"No formal complaint, nor informal concern relative to a Laurier policy was registered about the screening of the video."

Even more damning for Laurier, the report showed "the rationale for invoking" the university's Gendered and Sexual Violence Policy "did not exist ... was misapplied and was a significant overreach," MacLatchy said.

It is, at least, heartening that Shepherd's good name as an instructor, student and human have been upheld. She deserves applause for courageously standing up for herself and the free exchange of ideas when confronted by a flawed system careening out of control.

However, although MacLatchy deserves credit for launching the independent probe, troubling questions remain.

Why did the disciplinary meeting take place if there was no official complaint?

The investigator's report contradicts the assertion of The Rainbow Centre — the support group for the campus LGBTQ+ community — that an anonymous student had complained about Shepherd's class.

So what caused Shepherd's supervisor, Prof. Nathan Rambukkana, Prof. Herbert Pimlott and WLU diversity and equity official Adria Joel to put the young woman through an ordeal based on false information?

Were they misinformed? Were they carried away by overzealous political views?

Why couldn't the system Laurier had put in place conduct better due diligence?

Moreover, what happens to the people who went after Shepherd?

Rambukkana and MacLatchy apologized to Shepherd. Yet Pimlott, Joel and the Rainbow Centre have not.

More apologies are owed to Shepherd.

And those who pursued her so vehemently and unjustly should somehow be held accountable.

A fair start has been made, but Laurier has miles to go before this matter can sleep.