

Laurier University's "free speech" controversy ignores the complexities of academic freedom

Arguments for unfettered free speech are far too easy when they disregard how academia functions as a complex institution and community

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Lindsay Shepherd.

The **vitriolic free speech debate** that erupted at Wilfred Laurier University last month over teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd, has since spread far beyond the campus.

In the process, Shepherd has become a **darling of followers of the extreme right**, including among those who use the subtext of "free speech" as an excuse to promote hate against marginalized people.

The community that's rallied around Shepherd's ever-growing social media presence after she showed a video in class of University of Toronto psychology professor Jordan Peterson – who opposes the use gender-neutral pronouns – has revealed political goals beyond free speech. The popular saga is promoting transphobia and sexism in Canadian politics.

Many of the responses to Shepherd's tweets on the controversy around her are focused on labelling critics "snowflakes" and "social justice warriors."

This is common language in the far-right lexicon that discounts the feelings of vulnerable populations in favour of "preparing" students for the "real world."

In Shepherd's secretly recorded meeting with her supervising professor, she says of showing the Peterson video: "I don't see how I am doing a disservice by exposing them [students] to ideas that are already out there." As a transgender student, I can attest that we are very aware of what's "out there." It's called cis-sexism.

Biologist and cultural critic Julia Serano defines cis-sexism as "the belief or assumption that cis people's gender identities, expressions and embodiments are more natural and legitimate than those of trans people." Cissexism serves to delegitimize our identities as unnatural and inauthentic. Indeed, transgender students face disproportionate rates of discriminatory violence in our everyday lives.

But those who say the Laurier controversy is about freedom of speech also ignore the complexities of scholarship.

The academic world is laden with formal and informal processes that shape how knowledge is constructed, debated, disseminated and taught.

Sociologist John Law draws our attention to the messiness of the world in practice, and how human emotions, scientific methods, institutional priorities and the power and processes of ethics boards, committees, class syllabi and codes of conduct become entangled when we go about the business of education.

When we talk about free speech, these constraints are made opaque despite their centrality in shaping how we talk, write and debate as scholars.

For instance, academic journals use a peer-review process, which means a committee of scholars assess the quality, reliability and credibility of academic work and reject any that doesn't meet academic standards. A lot of work is rejected for not meeting the criteria of the peer reviewers. **Some work, even though peer reviewed, can still be problematic.**

But questions about these processes are typically swept away in popular debates around free speech. Arguments for unfettered free speech are far too easy when they ignore how academia functions as a complex institution and community.

These formal restrictions on how knowledge is produced are complemented with informal occupational codes that are enforced by students, faculty and administration.

These are the everyday restraints on knowledge of the academic world. And regardless of free speech policies at an institution, these restraints underlie the pursuit of knowledge in an academic setting.

These restraints are also underscored by power dynamics that shape scholarly priorities.

Universities have traditionally been dominated by white, **cisgender** men and this arguably still impacts who gets funding, who gets published in high-impact journals and who sit as senior administrators. Those in academia who are not situated in male-centric privilege have to work through many more barriers in order to achieve success.

None of these processes or practices are immune from criticism. But that is an entirely different discussion than the one being advocated by the supporters of Shepherd.

Academic freedom is certainly important, but so are the ways in which it can and cannot be practised. Teaching assistants do not have the freedom to supersede the class syllabus and classrooms aren't spaces of unrestrained debate.

University administration, faculty associations and student and labour unions are constantly in friction over how these limits should take shape and what rights should be protected and how. These are discussions that are always happening and they do not get the same media attention that Shepherd's controversy has attracted.

If Canadian universities are in crisis, their critics are focusing on the wrong issues. We need to focus on whose knowledge gets marginalized, and judging by Shepherd's mainstream popularity, it's not hers.

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