

Laurier president promises change after Shepherd affair

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NEWS 07:16 PM by [Greg Mercer](#) Waterloo Region Record
19 December 2017

<https://www.therecord.com/news-story/8003890-laurier-president-promises-change-after-shepherd-affair/>



Laurier president Deborah MacLatchy: "There were numerous errors in judgment made in the handling of the meeting with Ms. Lindsay Shepherd." - Peter Lee, Record staff

WATERLOO — The president of Wilfrid Laurier University says the school is taking steps to ensure a situation like the Lindsay Shepherd case never happens again — and says the "very regrettable meeting" that sparked the whole free expression controversy "should have never taken place."

Deborah MacLatchy, Laurier's president and vice-chancellor, broke her silence Monday after receiving an independent report into an issue that has put the university in an uncomfortable spotlight for weeks. She vindicated Shepherd, the teaching assistant who was scolded by three supervisors after showing her class a TVO video about a debate on gender neutral pronouns.

"There were numerous errors in judgment made in the handling of the meeting with Ms. Lindsay Shepherd," MacLatchy said in a statement.

"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."

That contradicts the assertion of the Rainbow Centre, the campus LGBTQ support group, which reported an anonymous student had complained to them about the discussion in Sheppard's class. No one from the Rainbow Centre could be reached for comment on Monday.

MacLatchy confirmed Shepherd did nothing wrong in showing the clip from TVO, and added there's no reason to believe she didn't handle the class discussion appropriately.

She also called for a review of the university's Gendered and Sexual Violence Policy, and said the policy was misinterpreted and incorrectly used against Shepherd. The three supervisors who rebuked Sheppard have been told "their conduct does not meet the high standards I set for staff and faculty," the president said.

The report showed "the rationale for invoking the (policy) did not exist. It was misapplied and was a significant overreach," she added. She also called for increased training for teaching assistants and faculty.

Shepherd, meanwhile, said she's happy to be cleared of any blame in the situation, but added that the ordeal isn't over with a task force still months away from submitting its own recommendations.

"I feel somewhat vindicated. There's a lot in here I'm so happy she admitted to," Shepherd said. "A lot of my detractors have tried to twist this into saying I had bad teaching skills, and I didn't know how to handle the conversation ... This just proves that's just not true."

The teaching assistant has already received an apology from MacLatchy and her supervisor Nathan Rambukkana. But she's frustrated by the silence from the Rainbow Centre, and two other people who reprimanded her in the meeting: Herbert Pimlott, a tenured associate professor, and Adria Joel, Laurier's acting manager of gendered violence prevention.

"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."

She does not believe the problems at Laurier will be resolved any time soon, however. Shepherd accuses the departments of communications and cultural analysis and social theory of being "fundamentally corrupt," and being more interested in censorship than academic freedom.

"You can't just brush this aside. This basically uncovered what is happening in universities," she said.

The Laurier president was critical of how the three employees handled the now-infamous meeting with Shepherd, where she was accused of spreading transphobia, violating the human-rights code and effectively endorsing Hitler.

"The errors in judgment 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," MacLatchy said.

"Procedures in how to apply university policies and under what circumstances were not followed."

MacLatchy says she wants to move on from the controversy that has consumed her campus, and believes there's an opportunity for Laurier to show leadership in the steps it takes from here. She expressed concern for the vitriol that has been targeted at students, faculty and staff.

The president reiterated that Laurier remains committed to academic freedom and freedom of expression, while teaching students how to challenge and debate objectionable ideas.

"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," she said.

gmerc@therecord.com , Twitter: @MercerRecord