

Disagreement is what universities are for

CLIFFORD ORWIN

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

DECEMBER 19, 2017

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/disagreement-is-what-universities-are-for/article37384869/>

Clifford Orwin is a professor of political science at the University of Toronto. In 2013 he received the University's Dean J.J. Berry Smith Award for Distinguished Doctoral Supervision.

With the stunning revelation that there never were student complainants against teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd – not even one – the reputation of Wilfrid Laurier University should hit rock bottom. Ms. Shepherd's hectorers were lying to her, like cops trying to extract a confession from a suspect, and they knew they were lying to her.

Rather than complainants, there were merely students overheard discussing Ms. Shepherd's class. Isn't that what is supposed to happen at a university, students discussing their courses (hopefully with some animation)? Even taking strong stances pro and con about the teachers and their presentations? My dream of the perfect end to one of my lectures would be a vast crescendo of buzz, indicating that the students will carry the discussion far beyond the lecture hall. If that was Ms. Shepherd's effect on her students, then some Canadian university should snap her up. One doubts that it will be Laurier.

That there were no student complainants is, as far as it goes, encouraging. Yes, there's this culture of outrage on our campuses, and the multiplication of groups dedicated to squelching those who offend them. But only a tiny minority of students believes that to disagree with them is an affront (or even a threat) to them. Most are grateful to teachers who introduce them to opinions other than their own. They recognize this as an integral (even the most important) part of a true education. I've been disagreeing with students for 43 years now, and they have thanked me for it.

To confront Ms. Shepherd with these phantom complainants was indefensible. You hear a lot about vulnerable groups on campus; you can count graduate students among them. Begin with their material problems: They are faced with a declining job market and the rising costs of education.

This economic reality aggravates the predicament of graduate students in other ways, including their dependence on the opinions of their supervisors. The temptation is to play it safe in the hopes that the jobs will go to those who have done so. (This, too, was an anxiety on which Ms. Shepherd's supervisors were playing: conform or find yourself professionally toxic.)

In these difficult times, professors are called more than ever to perform their duty of mentorship. Whether in supervising students' theses or their teaching, we must put their intellectual development first.

In the case of teaching, that means both modelling best practices on the one hand and encouraging our teaching assistants (TAs) to find their own voices on the other. Here Ms. Shepherd's teachers set bad examples in both regards. They sought to crush her budding intellectual and pedagogical independence; attempted to coerce her into agreement with them concerning both the substance and the methods of their course; banned her from bringing further videos into her classroom and required her to submit all future teaching materials for their prior review. This was an object lesson in how not to treat a graduate student. Did it not occur to them that a TA as engaged and lively as Ms. Shepherd was a blessing to their program?

Every large university course is a collaboration between the lecturer and the teaching assistants. Of course there must be co-ordination, and the TAs must avoid contradicting the lecturer in ways that might confuse the students. But the success of any large course depends on the TAs' contribution as much as on the lecturer's. That contribution should not be micromanaged. The lecturer should offer them advice where they solicit it, leave them to spread their wings where they don't. Should an issue arise between a student and a TA, then of course I must look into it. Otherwise, the lectures are mine, the tutorials are theirs. The course will succeed only if they buy into this arrangement. If I treat them like Lindsay Shepherd was treated, they won't.