

# An open letter from members of the Communication Studies Department, Wilfrid Laurier University

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The letter below was sent from some faculty members in the WLU Department of Communication Studies to an academic listserv for the [Canadian Communication Association](#). It addresses the ongoing fallout from the [Lindsay Shepherd incident](#), and the way it has been covered in the press.

The letter acknowledges that Shepherd's meeting with her supervisor Nathan Rambukkana and others from Laurier was "mishandled." It also stresses that Rambukkana has the academic freedom to set the curriculum for his class, and to discuss with his teaching assistants how that course material is taught.

"CS101 tutorials largely operate as workshops that address writing, grammar, and research skills," the faculty members write. "We maintain that the use of materials that invite controversy into the

classroom needs to be approached with pedagogical care and forethought.”

The open letter was sent to me by a friend on the listserv. It has been republished here in full.

*December 18, 2017*

*An open letter to our academic colleagues:*

*We are writing in response to the ongoing situation involving teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd and our colleagues Drs. Nathan Rambukkana and Herbert Pimlott in the Department of Communication Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. We are writing to share our perspective, clarify some information, and support our departmental colleagues and students.*

*A meeting with Shepherd, who is a student in the Cultural Analysis and Social Theory (CAST) MA program, and was assigned a Teaching Assistantship in Communication Studies as part of her MA funding, was secretly recorded and sent to the media by the TA. This act sparked columns and op-eds that rushed to assess the meeting, generalizing from this single event a diagnosis of our program, the University, and the state of higher education in Canada. We welcome the widening range of perspectives on this situation that are beginning to emerge in the public sphere.*

*We recognize that the meeting was mishandled. We specifically acknowledge the power imbalance in the meeting, as Dr. Rambukkana acknowledged in [his open letter to his TA](#). In future meetings, where serious matters pertaining to the conduct of TAs are under discussion, we acknowledge that students should be encouraged to bring someone representing them and their*

*interests. We would support a graduate student initiative to unionize TAs, which could provide student-employees with a grievance process and other forms of support in cases such as this one.*

*As we understand it, Dr. Rambukkana did not operate unilaterally when he called a meeting with his TA. Rather, we believe, he acted in response to a disclosure made by one or more students to University offices set up to provide confidential student support. Upon being notified of this disclosure, Dr. Rambukkana—as course instructor—understood that he had a responsibility to act in line with University policies, including those laid out in the Gendered and Sexual Violence Policy.*

*Shepherd is a Master's student in the CAST program who was assigned a Teaching Assistantship in Communication Studies as part of her MA funding. Because the Communication Studies program is large, the program is sometimes assigned TAs from outside its own graduate program. The student in this case is one of 6 Teaching Assistants and 2 Instructional Assistants who are collectively responsible for 14 tutorials for 350 students registered in CS101 (Canadian Communication in Context). In the context of a large course like this it is necessary to strive for consistency across tutorials. When TAs work outside their home department, we see the need to work toward more integrated TA training. Plans to augment existing TA training need to consider the constraints of TA contract hours within which we operate.*

*While the “free speech” of a single individual has dominated discussion surrounding this situation, “academic freedom” is also a decisive term in this context. Dr. Rambukkana exercises academic freedom as a course supervisor by setting parameters for the multiple tutorials that supplement his lecture. It is within the scope of a supervising professor's academic freedom to have workplace meetings with TAs regarding how course material is*

*taught. CS101 is a mandatory course for majors in Communication Studies, and it sets foundations for the rest of the program's undergraduate curriculum. CS101 tutorials largely operate as workshops that address writing, grammar, and research skills. We maintain that the use of materials that invite controversy into the classroom needs to be approached with pedagogical care and forethought.*

*Public debates about freedom of expression, while valuable, can have a silencing effect on the free speech of other members of the public. We uphold the rights of trans, non-binary, and queer folk to be addressed in our classrooms in ways that they define. Those in positions of authority in the classroom—faculty, instructors, teaching assistants—are not sitting equally around the table with students. Instead, they have a responsibility to foster an environment of mutual respect and critical thinking, one wherein students should never feel that either their grades or their well-being could be impacted because of their gender, sexuality, race, class, or any other facet of their identity. We appreciate that our University has mechanisms through which students who feel unsafe, unfairly treated, or who have experienced intolerance in the classroom or otherwise in their role as student can make appeals and find support and resources to help them. We also acknowledge that we can do a better job of making students aware of these mechanisms. We are always so grateful when students do approach campus offices designed for reporting problematic classroom situations, as their courage makes us do our jobs better. We thank you for coming forward: you are such valued members of our community.*

*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. Courses taught by Drs. Rambukkana and Pimlott—and many other professors in our department and*

*across the university—directly confront societal issues ranging from poverty to the global economy, sexuality, racism, and beyond. 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. 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, where students participate in facilitated, respectful, and rigorous critical and scholarly discussion regularly.*

*Commentary on this event in the press and social media has emboldened individuals who see themselves as noble defenders of free speech to intimidate our faculty and students—to the point that protective measures have been taken in an attempt to secure their safety. Against this politics of revenge, we acknowledge the moral imperative to support and protect our colleagues and students. We urge our colleagues at Laurier and beyond to monitor carefully how this event has been framed and taken up.*

*We agree with Laurier’s President that we live in an increasingly polarized world; understanding the forces and discontent driving this polarization, including how they are at play in this situation and with what consequences, is a collective task in which we all have a stake.*

*Undersigned faculty members and affiliate faculty in the Department of Communication Studies:*

*Neil Balan*

*Alexandra Boutros*

*Darryl Burgwin*

*Gregory Cameron*

*Greig de Peuter*

*Jonathan Finn*  
*Brent Hagerman*  
*Andrew Herman*  
*Jeff Heydon*  
*Jeremy Hunsinger*  
*Dru Jeffries*  
*Barbara Jenkins*  
*Alex Levant*  
*Sara Matthews*  
*Patricia Molloy*  
*Judith Nicholson*  
*Nicholas Ray*  
*Ian Roderick*  
*Peter Urquhart*  
*Rade Zinaic*