

At Wilfrid Laurier University, do as the campus thought police dictate, or else

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GatorEG / Wikipedia Commons Signage on Laurier's Waterloo campus.

In the last few weeks there has been a lot of news about free speech on university campuses. Typically, one group of students invites a high-profile speaker to give a talk and another group of students agitates until the speaker is shut down.

But it's not just high profile speakers who are getting shut down on university campuses. Students are being silenced too. But not all students, just those who don't conform to the accepted ideologies that now dominate Canada's universities. My story is just one example.

I'm an undergraduate student at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo. I'm also a member of the campus LifeLink Club. We are a pro-life club with no religious affiliation.

We don't use graphic pictures or loud, angry language; we practice calm, respectful dialogue.

In October of last year we planned a teach-in to motivate discussion. We got approval from our students' union to use a grassy, outdoor area known as the quad. In early morning we set up 10,000 small pink and blue flags, each represented 10 abortions that take place in Canada each year.

When classes began, we caught some people's eyes. I was encouraged throughout the morning by the genuine interest and respect of my fellow students.

But beginning in the afternoon the mood turned. Employees from my university's Diversity and Equity Office, an official administrative body whose mandate is the fair treatment of all students on campus, placed a sign on the walkway leading to our display. It read: "Warning: Anti-Choice display ahead."

I was dumbfounded. Why was a warning needed? We were peaceful and polite. And why had this "non-partisan" office of my university referred to my group as "anti-choice" when the term that neutrally describes us, and how we describe ourselves, is pro-life? The DEO hangs posters across my campus insisting that students use "proper terms" when addressing the groups it explicitly supports, but went out of its way to apply a negatively torqued label to ours.

The sign from the DEO seemed to have the effect of enabling other students whose desire was not respectful dialogue to come out and harass us. Some came and began to pull out our flags, yelling profanities and insults. Others spit on our club banner and the flags.

Though intimidated, I and other LifeLink members stayed calm — as we've been trained — and tried to get our opponents to talk to us, but with little success. Special Constable Services were called. One of the male students damaging our display, quoted in our campus paper, excused his behaviour saying, "The officers are here (telling me) you have to respect their rights and I'm like ... I don't because frankly, this is harmful."

In the hours and days following the attack on our display, I heard that notion a lot. I heard that my group — despite being the ones subjected to verbal abuse, intimidation vandalism, and spit — were the purveyors of harm and, as such, it was legitimate for our freedom of expression to be quashed.

That day, to mediate the “harm” of our actions Laurier’s Centre for Women and Trans People added to their hours of operation but, on Facebook, cautioned attendees “you may have to walk past the protest to get in. Please stay safe...” Alternatively, they said, “If anyone needs a place to hang out with social justice values, the DEO is open.”

About a month later the president of the Students’ Union joined the chorus condemning LifeLink. He issued a public letter to the campus saying we were wrong because, “the adversarial tone of the event evoked a confrontation which eliminated the possibility of respectful dialogue and created an unsafe environment for all students.” Furthermore, he promised to work with the Diversity and Equity Office and other university organizations “to ensure this does not happen again.”

True to his word, within a couple of weeks the Students’ Union changed the rules on acceptable practices by campus clubs. Displays like our flags are now prohibited.

To be clear, LifeLink members did not have an “adversarial tone”; we made no one feel “unsafe” — records of the event show that is the case. In fact, when the university’s special constables arrived to monitor the event, they raised no objections to our conduct, issued no warnings, offered no interference, and, in fact, commended members of our group for their restraint in the face of harassment and intimidation.

Again, these were university’s officials. They observed our behaviour and only commented negatively on those for our harassers. And yet our tone was adversarial? We were the ones making people feel unsafe?

Plainly, we were censored because our ideas and conduct, though respectful and lawful, contradict the new dogma of my university. I came to Wilfrid Laurier University to get an education and I sure got one. I’ve learned disagreement now equals harm. More specifically, I’ve learned that certain campus factions with a strong ideological agenda are manipulating language and the concept of victimhood to silence opponents ... and no one, least not the Students’ Union that theoretically claims to represent us all, is trying to stop them.