

Why are we killing critical thinking on campus?

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Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont., says in its mission statement that "intellectual inquiry, critical reflection and scholarly integrity are the cornerstones of all universities." It further claims that those words apply to itself.

And yet, based on a recent incident in which a grad student was disciplined for exposing her tutorial students to two sides of a debate, Laurier has lost track of its mission. If the disciplinary action is not reversed, Laurier will have abandoned "intellectual inquiry, critical reflection and scholarly integrity" and replaced it with ideology and bogus censorship.

The grad student in question, Lindsay Shepherd, teaches a tutorial on language to first-year communications students. When the subject turned to the current debate over gender and pronoun use – wherein people who don't identify along traditional gender lines request to be referred to by the pronoun of their choice, including newly created ones such as "ze" – she did what any good teacher ought to do: She exposed them to both sides of the argument.

To do so, she showed the students a clip from a TVOntario show that featured two University of Toronto professors debating the question.

The one opposed to the idea, Jordan Peterson, has been a sharp critic of a proposed federal bill that would amend the Canadian Human Rights Code and the Criminal Code in order to ban discrimination based on gender identity, and protect it from hate speech.

He has also made a name for himself as a deliberately provocative critic of a prevalent campus culture that focuses on identity politics, and which he believes is silencing politically unacceptable viewpoints.

He is, in short, a pariah in the current academic world. Ms. Shepherd was hauled into a meeting with two Laurier professors and a university official, at which they allegedly told her that showing the clip was "transphobic," and that she had created a "toxic climate" on campus.

They also told her that there are not two sides to the debate about pronoun use, that the issue is settled, and that exposing students to Mr. Peterson's views was the equivalent of letting white supremacists speak to them, or "neutrally playing a speech by Hitler," according to a recorded transcript of the meeting.

Ms. Shepherd has been allowed to continue teaching the tutorial but she will be monitored closely by the professors who met with her.

This is preposterous. The university's response has been anti-intellectual, and an affront to critical reflection. It's also an insult to the intelligence of its students.

Ms. Shepherd took publicly available material broadcast by a mainstream TV network and put it to use. Students watching it would have seen Mr. Peterson make his arguments, and also seen those arguments effectively countered by another, equally qualified professor.

That, in turn, could have led to a discussion of the issue and a better understanding among students of why it is important for some to be called by the pronoun of their choice, and of why others worry that policies or legislation enforcing such a request might go too far.

Instead, this university's message is that there are lines of inquiry that are no longer open for study, in particular ones that have been politicized in left-right terms. The only options are agree, or be silenced.

This is not scholarship – it's ideology. It views education as indoctrination, where those doing the teaching must be monitored to make sure their views are acceptable to self-imposed gatekeepers.

Furthermore, equating the use of a clip of a university professor, even one with controversial ideas, with "neutrally playing a speech by Hitler" is a fatuous argument. Is it now to be assumed that studying Adolf Hitler's rise is no longer a neutral act, but instead an endorsement of Nazism and therefore not allowed? How are we to learn from history if we fear that, in studying it, some fool might take the wrong lesson?

The issue raised by this case is not peculiar to Laurier. It has been felt on campuses across Canada and the United States. That issue is freedom of expression, and to what degree it overrides the desire to make universities welcoming and diverse places, where no one is ever presented with an uncomfortable fact, disquieting idea or repugnant viewpoint.

Whether the people who run Laurier like it or not, if their university is going to maintain intellectual inquiry and critical reflection as cornerstones of its mission, they are going to have to defend free speech and accept that some issues will make students and profs unhappy.

The same goes if they want to pursue their stated goal of "instilling the courage to engage and challenge the world in all its complexity." At the moment, too many universities are backing away from courage and engagement, preferring instead to be bastions of a comforting new conformity – at the risk of graduating some people who are not ready for the complexity that awaits them.

Every great advance in our world, whether scientific or social, has come in part thanks to freedom of expression and inquiry. Much of that freedom was found on universities, where professors, students and deans vigorously defended it against attacks by ideologues.

Laurier officials now say there will be a neutral third-party investigation of the case. What they really need to do is examine how they got to this point in the first place.