

# Waterloo's two universities: so close together, so different

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In some ways, Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Waterloo could not be more different, writes Luisa D'Amato.

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In Waterloo, there are two universities a 10-minute walk from each other on University Avenue. But in some ways, they couldn't be further apart.

Wilfrid Laurier University constantly faces issues in which free speech is suppressed. University of Waterloo does not.

Consider, in just the past year:

- Since early November, Laurier has received negative publicity across Canada after teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd was reprimanded for showing first-year students both sides of the debate about whether people should be required to use gender-neutral pronouns such as "they" or "ze" instead of "him" or "her." She was accused of creating a toxic classroom environment and threatened with losing her job. An investigation is underway.
- In March, a speech on Laurier's Brantford campus by lawyer Danielle Robitaille was cancelled after a group of students opposed it. The group, dedicated to ending sexual violence, didn't want Robitaille to speak to criminology students, because she had earlier helped acquit Jian Ghomeshi of sex assault charges. One group founder, Taylor Berzins, said it was a "victory" that Robitaille didn't visit, "because we believe survivors."
- In December 2016, the operator of the Veritas café on the Waterloo campus was abruptly terminated from his job by the graduate

students' association at Laurier. Sandor Dosman's offence was that he had posted a humorous help-wanted ad in which he asked for a "slave" to help run the café. The ad was clearly intended to be funny. But Dosman was escorted off campus by security officers. He received no offer to apologize or make amends.

It's not an accident that there are three such incidents in one year. Meanwhile, the last similar episode I can recall at University of Waterloo was in 2013, when students shouted down a speaker opposed to abortions, so that he couldn't be heard by the students who invited him.

That behaviour immediately drew a firm rebuke from university president Feridun Hamdullahpur, who said: "The silencing of anyone who proffers an opinion is unacceptable."

Why do these events happen in one place and not the other?

I've spoken to about half a dozen professors from both universities for their ideas.

**Waterloo is dominated by science-oriented students and professors.** Science and humanities are two solitudes. Science lets you offer any crazy hypothesis, as long as you can prove it by the scientific method, the procedure of which is agreed to by everyone. There's some discipline required.

By contrast, many arts and humanities programs have changed over the years. Scholarly activity is increasingly viewed through a lens of sympathizing with the oppressed. That way of seeing things can't be proven or disproven, because it's an attitude, not a scientific fact. But get enough true believers in the room, and it is treated like a scientific fact.

**Laurier has a more authoritarian culture than Waterloo.** Laurier profs are unionized. Waterloo's aren't. One professor says that in order to keep the professors happy, and unlikely to join a union, the Waterloo administration fosters a libertarian culture in which scholars are free to do their work as they see fit. You aren't second-guessed on

your grades, or policed on what you say in class. That culture even extends to those with little power, such as teaching assistants.

**Laurier has a historic culture focusing on social justice.**

One professor familiar with both universities said Laurier has for decades had a "holier-than-thou" attitude and a special sense of identity and purpose due to its early association with the Lutheran Church. Until 1973, it was called Waterloo Lutheran University.

Today, Laurier's definition of "gendered violence" is stricter than what the law requires.

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