

Campus LGBT group: Wilfrid Laurier isn't going far enough to silence 'climate of transphobia'

A Tuesday statement by Wilfrid Laurier University's Rainbow Centre appears to endorse a policy of silencing all mention of the debate on gender neutral pronouns

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Though Wilfrid Laurier University has apologized to Lindsay Shepherd, the university's Rainbow Centre appears to be endorsing the disciplinary action originally taken against the teaching assistant, and suggesting the school isn't doing enough to combat "profound violence" against transgender people.

"In the face of recent media attention, we feel it is our responsibility to speak out against the climate of transphobia that is being fostered at Laurier," reads a statement released Tuesday by the Wilfrid Laurier University Rainbow Centre, a service within the school's diversity and equity office that offers support to queer and trans students.

Shepherd, a teaching assistant in the university's communications department, was accused of violating the university's Gendered and Sexual Violence Policy for showing her class a short clip of a debate over the use of non-gendered pronouns that aired in 2016 on TVO's current affairs program The Agenda.

In a subsequent 43-minute disciplinary meeting, Shepherd's superiors told her that she was fostering a "toxic" and "unsafe" learning environment, and compared her screening of a portion of the debate to exposing her students to Nazi ideology. They also claimed, falsely, that she had broken Canadian law.

When a recording of the encounter was made public, Wilfrid Laurier University responded with a statement saying the hearing "does not reflect the values and practices to which Laurier aspires." In an accompanying open letter, Shepherd's supervising professor, Nathan Rambukkana, wrote that "maybe I have to get out of an 'us versus them' habit of thought."

The Rainbow Centre, by contrast, accused Wilfrid Laurier University of "silence" on the issue of transphobia.

"The discourse of freedom of speech, is being used to cover over the underlying reality of transphobia that is so deeply ingrained in our contemporary political context," reads the Rainbow Centre's statement.

Articles and columns written in support of Shepherd, meanwhile, were said to be "defending and perpetuating transphobic beliefs and attitudes."

The statement does not directly name Shepherd or the professors who met with her, claiming that "confidentiality" makes the Rainbow Centre "unable to comment directly." (Shepherd had already chosen to name herself in the media.)

Nevertheless, the statement suggests that the debate of gendered pronouns is “disallowable speech” that constitutes “a form of epistemic violence that dehumanizes trans people by denying the validity of trans experience.”

The term “epistemic violence,” used in this context, roughly translates to “knowledge violence.”

Shepherd responded Tuesday with a Tweet criticizing the Rainbow Centre for equating transgender issues with silencing seminar debate.

“Why is (The Rainbow Centre) suggesting that being trans and supporting academic freedom are mutually exclusive?” she wrote.

On Wednesday, a group of four Wilfrid Laurier University professors released a press released condemning the university’s treatment of Shepherd and urging colleagues to sign their newly drafted “Laurier Statement on Free Expression.”

“It is axiomatic that intellectual inquiry, critical reflection and scholarly integrity are NOT POSSIBLE in an institution that prevents some ideas from being articulated,” reads the opening preamble of the statement, which is [available online](#).

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