

The Interrogation of a TA

University president apologizes after recording reveals how a graduate student was questioned over use of a video, which offended at least one student, of debate on nontraditional pronouns.

By

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https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/11/22/university-faces-uproar-over-recording-showing-how-teaching-assistant-was-questioned?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=351dd0d2ba-DNU20171122&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-351dd0d2ba-197532465&mc_cid=351dd0d2ba&mc_eid=d7f861a615

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A recording of the way professors at Wilfrid Laurier University questioned a teaching assistant about her use of a debate video in class has set off a major dispute about academic freedom in Canada.

The teaching assistant had shown her class a recording in which two professors - one of them of late a polarizing figure in Canadian academe -- debated the use of nontraditional pronouns for transgender people. The course was in communications, and the video was part of a discussion on the significance of grammar and language generally. Lindsay Shepherd, the teaching assistant, did not endorse a position in the debate, but told students that this was a subject being discussed in society today.

The recording now getting attention is one made by Shepherd as she was grilled days later by academics at the university who received a complaint about Shepherd showing the video.

In the audio recording, Shepherd's superiors are heard asking her repeatedly why she showed the video and why she didn't condemn the professor in the video who opposes nontraditional pronouns. Shepherd was told that her actions were hurtful and "transphobic," and she was told that her actions were the

equivalent of refusing to take a stand against Hitler or white supremacists. She was also told that she might have violated Canada's antibias laws.

Shepherd tried to defend herself.

"I don't see how someone would rationally think it was threatening," she said of the class. Students might be challenged in their thinking, she said, "but for me that's the spirit of the university."

Shepherd asked those questioning her to show her the complaint so she could learn how she offended someone, and she asked to know the number of students who had complained, saying, "Was it one?" After being told that confidentiality requirements made it impossible to share the complaint, she asked whether confidentiality would be violated by her being told how many students complained. She was told that it would, and that the complaint came from one or more students.

As the discussion went on, Shepherd said that she did not agree with the person who argued against the use of the pronouns many transgender people prefer. But she said her obligation to her students was to show them ideas that are in the world. "Can you shield people from those ideas? Am I supposed to comfort them?" Of her students, she said, "when they leave the university, they are going to be exposed to these ideas."

Shepherd apologized for crying during her questioning but said that she couldn't believe she was being asked these questions at a university.

Those who questioned her included two faculty members (one of whom supervised her work as a teaching assistant) and the university's equity officer. As Canadian press outlets covered the recording in the last 48 hours, many academics and others have demanded to know how Shepherd could have been treated as she was.

Apology From the President

On Tuesday, Deborah MacLatchy, the president of the university, issued [an apology](#) to Shepherd.

"After listening to this recording, an apology is in order. The conversation I heard does not reflect the values and practices to which Laurier aspires. I am sorry it occurred in the way that it did and I regret the impact it had on Lindsay Shepherd," MacLatchy wrote.

She vowed that an independent review would be conducted into what happened. Further, she said that freedom of expression is essential in higher education. "Let me be clear by stating that Laurier is committed to the abiding principles of freedom of speech and freedom of expression," she said. "Giving life to these principles while respecting fundamentally important human rights and our institutional values of diversity and inclusion, is not a simple matter. The intense media interest points to a highly polarizing and very complicated set of issues that is affecting universities across the democratic world. The polarizing nature of the current debate does not do justice to the complexity of issues."

David Robinson, executive director of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, said in an interview that Shepherd had been "treated very badly" by the administration. While Shepherd was questioned by faculty members and an administrator, Robinson said that the administrator should have seen that the discussion was going off track and that any suggestion that Shepherd violated the law couldn't be true.

Robinson noted that the video she shared in class came from Canadian public television, and so had arguably been produced by the government. He also said that Shepherd outlined a sound pedagogy that should not have been doubted.

The Jordan Peterson Impact

Robinson said that, generally, the culture wars that are a major force in American higher education have not been as present in Canadian higher education. But he said a few figures have been "quite polarizing," and that one of them is Jordan Peterson, who was the debate participant who opposed the use of alternative pronouns. Peterson, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, has said that his position isn't so much against the pronouns, but against efforts to persuade people to use them even if they don't want to.

In March, protesters [shouted down](#) a talk of his at McMaster University, in Ontario.

Then this month, Peterson announced a plan to create a website to list courses nationwide containing "postmodern neo-Marxist course content," in an effort to decrease enrollment in those courses. Amid criticism, [he abandoned the plan](#).

"These kinds of issues seem to come up daily in the U.S., but they are still rare in Canada," Robinson said of the controversies surrounding Peterson.

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