

# University, heal thyself

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The strange case of Lindsay Shepherd, the university teaching assistant who showed her class a short video of a debate on the politics of pronouns, and the Wilfrid Laurier professors and administrators who thought that in doing so she had somehow engaged in a form of violence and gender discrimination, is a small story that has a lot to say about what the modern Canadian university has become.

On the one hand, our universities are bigger than ever, and more central to our society and our economy. A record-high percentage of Canadians have post-secondary credentials, which all else equal is a good thing, given that more education tends to lead to all sorts of positive outcomes, from better job prospects for the recipients to increased economic productivity for the country as a whole. All else equal, the more schooling, the better.

But the pulling back of the curtain at Laurier, courtesy of Ms. Shepherd's decision to record and make public the ideological purity struggle session that her superiors subjected her to, is the latest troubling reminder that something is not quite right in the state of higher education. Not all things calling themselves education are created equal. And not all things calling themselves education, are.

Laurier's attempt to muzzle one of its lowliest student-employees, followed almost immediately by craven and mealy-mouthed apologies, is a sad illustration of how today's universities often work, and how they are sometimes not working in ways that are best for students, scholars or the search for Truth.

Since the Second World War, North American universities have undergone two great changes. The first is easy to spot, because it's measured in bricks and mortar, vast new campuses and a boom in the number of degrees conferred. Beginning in the 1960s, this country's universities rapidly expanded, from a handful of small institutions educating only an elite, to a multitude of enormous operations with huge student bodies. This democratization of higher education was and is a very good thing. Canada is wealthier and better for it.

But starting a generation ago, the university – or rather, one half of the university – also began to undergo a pronounced shift in culture and values, and in its sense of mission. The sciences, the engineering faculties, the medical schools – these fields sailed on as before, pursuing knowledge as they always had. But the other part of the university, the humanities and social sciences, underwent, and continue to undergo, profound changes.

Some might say this part of the university moved sharply to the left, but there's more to it than that. After all, some of the biggest critics of the new atmosphere on campus are, in fact, left-leaning professors who came of age a generation ago, before the shift.

The visible manifestations of this change, which have recently transfixed the public, are fights over speech. The liberation of speech on campus, the project of two generations ago, has now been replaced by an attempt at keeping an increasingly tight lid on what it's possible to say, enforced by anti-discrimination speech codes and practices, ostensibly to protect students from harm. As at Laurier, the notion of harm has been stretched to include hearing something subjectively perceived as offensive, while the definition of offensive has grown broad enough to encompass just about anything.

And whereas the ideological guardians of 50 years ago might have been conservatives, the new speech-code enforcers are all on the other side of the spectrum.

The most spectacular fights on North American campuses have been battles between right-wing provocateurs and left-leaning, so-called anti-fascist protesters, with each side more than happy to use the other as a foil for its own purposes. Neither group is liberal. Both see the world through the lens of identity politics, which is increasingly the touchstone of truth on the non-science side of the university. It's why Ms. Shepherd found herself in hot water for using a brief, mainstream television debate to illustrate a language issue. It's also why that outcome would not be unexpected to anyone who attended university in the last few years – and totally bizarre to anyone who went to university a few decades earlier.

The science side of the university has more technology than ever before, but the scientific method used in, say, today's chemistry department would be entirely familiar to the chemists of a century ago. At the other end of the campus, however, so much has changed. Many of the subjects and methods of the academy on the arts and humanities side of the university would look strange to a visitor from 30 years ago.

Take the Department of Communication Studies at Laurier, home to Ms. Shepherd and her supervisor/accuser, Professor Nathan Rambukkana. It, and not a traditional field like history or English, proudly proclaims itself "the largest program in the Faculty of Arts."

Communications studies is, of course, not about teaching people to communicate better. (Looking for help with that? You might want to go to a college.) Anyone who's heard the tape of Ms. Shepherd's badgering by a tag team of Mr. Rambukkana, a fellow communications professor and the university's manager of gendered violence prevention, will immediately get that.

Ms. Shepherd comes across as the most clear-headed and sympathetic person on the tape, and not just because she's the underdog. Her thoughts can be grasped and understood; they are expressed in clear English. Her professorial accusers, in contrast, speak the language of power. They wield it and, under the new speech rules, they fear it.

The university is supposed to be a place dedicated to intellectual freedom and curiosity, where ideas can be challenged, and logic may even win out over power and vested interests, based solely on evidence and argument. That can still happen in the sciences. Ms. Shepherd seems to have been under the impression that's also how things worked in the Faculty of Arts. How very old-fashioned.