

Free speech protest at Wilfrid Laurier University caps turbulent week

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It was a protest that started with Pink Floyd's *Another Brick in the Wall* on the loudspeakers and ended with fangirls and boys asking for selfies with their hero, Lindsay Shepherd, the Wilfrid Laurier University student who has become a globally recognized figure in the debate on campus free speech.

"Learning is a process and exploring new ideas unrestricted is how we become closer to the person we want to be," Ms. Shepherd told the crowd of 150 who had gathered to hear her speak alongside local and student Conservative politicians and free-speech advocates.

The event on the edge of campus in Waterloo, Ont., capped off a week when the university of 17,000 students has been thrust into the centre of discussions about freedom of expression on university campuses for its treatment of Ms. Shepherd, a master's student in communications.

Last week, the university was forced to apologize to her after Ms. Shepherd made public a recording of her discussions with an ad hoc tribunal that was investigating why she had showed to students a clip of a debate on gender pronouns between psychology professor Jordan Peterson and sexual diversity studies professor Nicholas Matte.

Across the road from the protest, a group of two dozen people lined up on the sidewalk, wearing messages that said "Trans People Deserve Justice."

The smaller group maintained a silent vigil during the protest, representing the absence of the voices of trans people from the highly charged debate, a spokesperson said.

"In light of all the media attention that has been brought to Lindsay Shepherd [and] in light of the understanding of transphobia, the needs of trans students and their voices have been silenced," said Toby Finlay, a media spokesperson for the Rainbow Centre, which provides support and education to LGBTQ students on campus.

"Trans students are being tasked with defending their humanity against arguments that they don't exist," they said.

But Ms. Shepherd challenged the centre to discussion and said the group had alleged that she was transphobic.

"If you are labelling someone like me transphobic it becomes clear to me that leftist authoritarianism has gone too far," Ms. Shepherd told the protesters.

The clip of the gender-pronoun debate had led to the most engaging discussion of the term, Ms. Shephard said Friday.

"People said this was the best class of the year. It's not like I am dominating the discussion. I make them think about it and talk, they get marks for participation."

Students and others who attended the protest surrounded Ms. Shepherd after she spoke. Many simply wanted to take selfies with her and their signs, whether home-made or printed with the slogan "I Stand with Lindsay."

A petition organized by several faculty members at Wilfrid Laurier has gathered almost a thousand signatures in the past two days. It demands that Laurier adopt the principles of free speech articulated by the University of Chicago that place free expression above all other values.

"We wanted to bring to the fore a tried and true method that has been used at 30 universities in the United States," said David Millard Haskell, an associate professor in religion and culture at WLU who was one of the professors who began the petition. "What happened to Lindsay Shepherd would not have happened or at least she would have had a defence," he said.

The incident is the latest in a string of controversies about free speech at Canadian universities this fall, which have included incidents at Dalhousie University and the University of British Columbia.

They have highlighted a conflict between free expression and demands for protection from harassment. Such concerns are legitimate but they cannot be allowed to override the exchange of ideas, said James Turk, the director of Ryerson University's Centre for Free Expression.

"In Canada, we do have systemic racism. There is rampant homophobia," Dr. Turk said. "A lot of the people calling for restrictions on speech come from a good place, [but] their recommendation is wrong. ... You give someone else the authority to decide who can say and hear what, and in a democracy that raises a lot of real questions."

Ms. Shepherd's case has also become political fodder.

On Wednesday, Conservative Party Leader Andrew Scheer asked Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to condemn "the egregious crackdown at Wilfrid Laurier" during Question Period. "Our government is committed to creating open spaces for Canadians to debate and express their views," Science Minister Kirsty Duncan said in response. But she

added that "[intolerance] and hate have no place in Canadian society or in our postsecondary institutions."

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