

Laurier's apology and a petition won't fix the cancer on campus

The crisis of free speech and academic freedom on campuses has been growing for years. The Laurier incident is one small part of it



Wilfrid Laurier university campus in downtown Brantford.



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We are pleased that several professors at Wilfrid Laurier University are trying to make a positive change at their institution after its recent humiliation.

As has been widely reported, WLU teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd was recently hauled before the university's ad hoc Star Chamber and read the riot act for showing her class a clip of TVO's *The Agenda*, which involved University of Toronto professor Jordan Peterson debating a colleague over gender-neutral pronouns. Shepherd was wise enough to record her dressing down. The recording — once released to the public — was so embarrassing to the school that Laurier apologized this week, as did one of the professors who'd led the shaming ceremony.

Unfortunately, Laurier's promise to better protect speech in the future is hard to believe. In a public letter, WLU president and vice-chancellor Deborah MacLatchy wrote, "Giving life to (principles of academic freedom and free speech) while respecting fundamentally important human rights and our institutional values of diversity and inclusion, is not a simple matter."

Wrong. MacLatchy, and Laurier, still don't get it. Not trampling on free speech rights is actually quite simple. It may be unpopular at times, and even difficult in the face of a mob of social justice warriors demanding someone be punished for thoughtcrimes. But the "cure" for unpopular free speech is more free speech, with

people pushing back, respectfully but clearly, against points they disagree with. Laurier should try it. The simplicity will amaze them. They might even get used to it.

It would seem that some of the school's professors agree. They have launched a petition on Change.org, calling for WLU to adopt a written declaration that reads, in part:

“Because Wilfrid Laurier University is committed to free and open inquiry in all matters, it guarantees all members of the Laurier community the broadest possible latitude to speak, write, listen, challenge, and learn. Except insofar as limitations on that freedom are necessary to the functioning of the institution, Wilfrid Laurier University fully respects and supports the freedom of all members of the Laurier community to discuss any issue that presents itself.”

This petition (inspired by a similar declaration from the University of Chicago) stresses the importance of civility, and notes that all legal restrictions on speech — threats, harassment, defamation — would be maintained, as would all restrictions necessary to allow university operations to run without disruption.

This sounds entirely reasonable. As of press time, the petition had received nearly a thousand signatures. But the fact that faculty members felt it necessary to release a statement committing themselves to basic norms of liberal democracies is astonishing. It's nice to see professors standing up, but it's depressing that they need to.

The crisis of free speech and academic freedom on Canadian campuses has been growing for years. Laurier's capitulation this week is satisfying, but we aren't getting too excited. The far-left urge to regulate and restrict free speech has infested nearly every North American university campus down to its roots,

particularly in the humanities departments. One university's self-inflicted wound and a petition aren't going to cure it.

But it is, at least, a positive sign. We hope to see more like it soon. Eventually, the time may come when Western campuses are restored to sanity. But that day is not today.