

Free speech at universities is pretty simple

It's all about using appropriate expertise and respectful language, writes Harriet Lyons, who taught at Wilfrid Laurier in the 1980s.

By HARRIET LYONS

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I taught at Wilfrid Laurier in the 1980s, before the days of “political correctness.”

This was the era of the annual panty raids, which were only cancelled after the Star ran a front-page story by Michelle Landsberg. The administration defended the raids, which included public displays of the purloined underwear, smeared with mustard and ketchup, with the observation that “boys will be boys.” In 1982, the first gay students’ association was founded at Laurier, over considerable opposition, and its members actually asked to disband three years later, because they were experiencing harassment.

The following are some examples of the “free speech” that was exercised at Laurier during my time there:

From a senior member of the business faculty, on proposals to promote equity in faculty hiring: “Next, they’ll make us hire Black, Marxist, lesbian Eskimos.”

From a senior administrator: “Sometimes departments have valid reasons not to want to hire a woman. In X department, for example, they like to tell off-colour jokes at faculty meetings.”

From the same source: “I like to think of Laurier as a place where parents can send their daughters and know their virginity will be safe.”

I guess that’s why women needed to be protected from dirty jokes at department meetings, though perhaps not from the rambling joke told as part of the welcoming speech for new faculty during my first year as a tenure-track faculty member, a narrative that involved a member of a church choir showing her knickers while swinging from a chandelier.

The treatment of Lindsay Shepherd was indeed inexcusable, but its worst effect may be to give ammunition to those who would like to return us to the days before programs like women’s studies and cultural studies existed to question the assumptions behind actions and utterances like the ones recounted here.

I am skeptical of the proposal to appoint a task force. I served on task forces at Laurier on sexual harassment and employment equity. In the atmosphere I have described, they were

wonderful excuses to kick the can down the road. In this regard, I wonder if there has been much change.

The answer to the question of free speech is actually pretty simple: if one has a position on a social or intellectual issue, one should have the freedom, at a university, to advance it, in class or published research, using appropriate expertise and respectful language. Students should be given training in participating in such conversations, something Ms. Shepherd was trying to do. In day-to-day interactions on campus, outside formal scholarly debate, the same rules of conduct should apply as govern other workplaces.

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