

Wilfrid Laurier professors seek protection amid freedom-of-speech debate



Professors at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo say the school has an obligation to protect faculty and students being targeted online and off in light of the recent debate over freedom of speech.

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Wilfrid Laurier University must protect faculty and students who are being targeted online and off as a result of the charged and public controversy over freedom of speech at the university, says an open letter from more than 60 of the school's professors.

Debate over how the Waterloo, Ont., university reprimanded teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd has led to harassment and intimidation of faculty and students through social media, e-mail and on campus, a petition released on Sunday night said.

"If we cannot dedicate more resources, provide a more comprehensive response, and speak against these acts in clear and unequivocal terms, we will be perceived as tolerating these acts," the letter states.

The letter asks the university to issue a statement condemning harassment. But university president Deborah MacLatchy said she has already clearly stated that freedom of expression does not include hate.

"We have been providing additional security and accommodation to those who ask," Dr. MacLatchy said. Campus police are monitoring the situation but there are no investigations under way at this time, she added. "At this point we are monitoring the gaps and filling them in as we can."

Wilfrid Laurier has been under an unrelenting avalanche of media attention and social-media criticism for almost two weeks, since Ms. Shepherd, who is a teaching assistant in communications studies, told a newspaper about being reprimanded for showing a clip of a Jordan Peterson debate in a tutorial.

Ms. Shepherd should have contextualized the views of the controversial University of Toronto professor, Nathan Rambukkana, her supervisor, told her in a meeting. Failing to do so could contravene provincial or federal anti-discrimination laws, he added. Ms. Shepherd released a recording of the meeting, which was attended by two other university administrators. (The bar for contravening such laws is higher, experts say.)

The university and president MacLatchy have since apologized to Ms. Shepherd and restated the institution's support for freedom of speech. Two separate task forces are examining the case and academic freedom on campus more broadly.

But professors who signed the petition said the past two weeks have had a "chilling effect."

"People are very concerned, they are scared, students are nervous," said Jonathan Finn, a professor in the Department of Communication Studies who signed the letter. "People are nervous to speak to anyone about this because they've seen the kind of vitriol expressed on social media," he said.

"Faculty and staff are scared to come to work right now," said Greg Bird, a sociology professor, who was one of the petition's first signatories. Dr. Bird said he received an e-mail with anti-Semitic comments after he wrote an article for the student and local newspapers arguing that the voices of trans students and community members are not being included in the discussion.

People are calling members of the campus support centre for queer students offensive terms online, Dr. Bird said. "One even said, 'This world needs a good plague.'"

On Friday, trans students and supporters held a silent protest across the street from a free-speech demonstration on the Waterloo campus of the university. Wilfrid Laurier will continue to encourage such peaceful expression of ideas, Dr. MacLatchy said.

"Those types of civil conversations are going on in our classrooms at Laurier and other universities every single day," she said.

But the incident has continued to light up social media where Dr. Peterson and other free-speech figures are sharing the story with hundreds of thousands of followers.

Ms. Shepherd has herself gained 15,000 followers on Twitter in a matter of weeks. On Monday, she suggested on Twitter that students should read the letter from the faculty members to know which professors to avoid.

Dr. MacLatchy plans to meet with Ms. Shepherd to talk about the continuing debate.

"Lindsay is a student and a TA and we will continue to communicate with her about this," she said.

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