

Rancour of free speech debate led gender-diverse people to feel unsafe, advocates say

A professor at Wilfrid Laurier is asking the university to do more to protect trans people

By Peggy Lam , CBC News

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Wilfrid Laurier University student Toby Finlay and sociology assistant professor Greg Bird say a debate over free speech on campus has led to gender diverse students, faculty and staff feeling unsafe. (Kate Bueckert/CBC)

A result of sometimes heated recent debates over free speech on campus, some staff and students at Laurier University are saying they're increasingly being harassed.

Greg Bird, an assistant professor, is asking the school to establish measures to protect staff and students who've become the subject of these 'attacks'. He started an online petition, demanding that Laurier make a public statement denouncing trans-phobic actions.

So far, it has garnered nearly 400 signatures.

"A lot of people are being attacked through phone calls...work emails and much more on our campus by some pretty violent and extreme people out there," said Bird.

Greg Bird is an assistant professor in the sociology department at Wilfrid Laurier University. He started a petition demanding the university put in measures to protect 'gender diverse' peoples. (Kate Bueckert/CBC)

In a conversation with Craig Norris on The Morning Edition, Toby Finlay, a non-binary and trans student at Laurier said student centres that act as 'safer spaces' are being compromised.

"The Rainbow Centre, Centre for Women and Trans People, are being increasingly targeted or entered into by folks who are bringing us threatening messages," said Finlay.

Finlay said the petition has been brought to Deborah MacLatchy, president of the university. However, they still feel she "hasn't responded to the petition in any meaningful way."

"The response has been, 'safety precautions are in place,' and the reality is that's not true for trans and non-binary folks," Finlay said.

Toby Finlay is a student at Wilfrid Laurier University and a non-binary trans community organizer. (Kate Bueckert/CBC)

"We have a president at Laurier who's coming out and speaking on one side in support of freedom of speech and freedom of expression very explicitly, but won't even name the experiences of trans and non-binary people."

In an interview request with the CBC, Laurier's spokesperson, Kevin Crowley, said the university is taking "these concerns very seriously."

He said the university's student affairs office and human resources have been "coordinating supports" for students, faculty and staff employees.

"We have policies and procedures in place to address harassment and discrimination," Crowley said. "Additional security measures and workplace accommodation have also been implemented in the wake of recent media reports."

Bird said the police and administration are currently investigating some of these harassment cases.