

It's a disservice to trans students to 'infantilize' them

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Not all trans people want to shut down free speech.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that they do, after events over the past couple of weeks have hardened and polarized the usually cheerful climate at Wilfrid Laurier University.

On one side, teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd has become the cause célèbre of free-speech advocates, after she was reprimanded for showing first-year students both sides of the debate on gender-neutral language.

On the other, transgender students and their allies say it violates their sense of feeling safe even to have a classroom discussion on whether people should use "they" or "ze" instead of "he" or "she."

Petition calls for safety measures to support trans people at Laurier

'I never thought we would get to the point': Students hold free speech rally at Laurier
"It's not up for debate," Shepherd was told in the meeting where she was reprimanded.

Most recently since the media furor, dozens of professors and library staff have circulated a petition saying they feel unsafe on campus. They've asked university administration to take action.

Outside the campus, some people with experience in being transgender and "gender-variant" are shaking their heads in dismay.

Lyn McGinnis of Waterloo, who is bisexual and gender-variant, studied at University of Waterloo in the 1980s and 1990s. That was before there were gay-straight alliances, gender-neutral washrooms, or before anyone had a clue that you could declare yourself "non-binary" when it came to gender.

If there were struggles to become accepted, it just made McGinnis, now 62, stronger.

But "I don't recognize the culture now. It's turned into a monster."

McGinnis thinks LGBTQ students are being "infantilized, as if they're weak, helpless, utterly fragile" in the bid to create safe spaces on campus.

As for gender-neutral language not being up for debate, "I think everything's up for debate," McGinnis says.

"Bring on the flat-earthers. Bring on the homeopaths. The way these things are dealt with is in the open air. Demonstrate why the claims have no merit."

McGinnis was born male, but started feeling more comfortable as a woman.

So did Melissa Paige Kennedy, a 60-year-old website developer and online marketer, who lives in Kitchener.

Both have worked hard to overcome challenges and gain acceptance from the wider society.

"Freedom of speech is important to democracy," Kennedy says. "Universities are about open discourse on different points of view. There is nothing wrong with presenting that clip in the class."

"When it gets to the point where you're saying 'open conversation can't happen because you're going to hurt my feelings' ... I'm concerned that it was getting out of control."

Kennedy has lived in rural and urban areas. "By and large, I am treated perfectly fine," she says. "I live my life, I do my thing. Nobody has a problem."

As for the younger generation of trans people, "I try and tell them society is not required to just embrace you," she said.

"They have to learn about you and understand. If you try to shut down legitimate conversation, people won't like it."

These are simple yet wise words from McGinnis and Kennedy: If you want to change the way we have thought about gender for centuries, be prepared for a discussion. That's all. That's everything.

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