

Laurier's crisis on campus

A public-relations nightmare reveals a school divided

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A student runs by the front entrance sign at Wilfrid Laurier University. The debate around what's offensive has pushed the university into the national news. - David Bebee, Record Staff

WATERLOO — In 1980, the gay American poet Allen Ginsberg was invited to give a public reading at Wilfrid Laurier University.

By that era's standard, it was a scandal — people were so offended by his sexual language they walked out of his talk, and the university's provost privately fumed that he would fire whoever had dared to bring him to town.

"Laurier was a very uniform, white, conservative campus then. It was *very* conservative," said Andrew Lyons, the retired professor who invited Ginsberg.

"His performance would be considered pretty tame today. But many people left. And both student newspapers afterward said it was disgusting."

Fast forward almost 40 years, and people are still getting offended on campus. But today, the debate around what's offensive has pushed the university into the national news, and for all the wrong reasons.

By now everyone knows the strange case of Lindsay Shepherd, the WLU teaching assistant who went public after her supervisors tried to muzzle her for showing her class a video about a debate around gender neutral pronouns.

The outrage on both sides has been deafening, with some claiming Laurier is censoring freedom of expression and academic freedom while others say the public uproar has made campus unsafe for transgendered students.

But while criticism continues to be heaped on Laurier, there's been a surprising silence from some of the people at the centre of the issue.

Deborah MacLatchy, the university's president and vice-chancellor, declined to talk to The Record about the deeply divisive, and increasingly dysfunctional, ideological struggle on campus that's become a public-relations nightmare.

On Thursday night, she gave a stilted interview with TVO's The Agenda, but in general has avoided getting in front of this issue, and opted to remain out of sight and wait for the results of a task force months down the road.

Lyons, who taught about anthropology, sex and gender between 1977 and 2009, said he's not surprised at the administration's deer-in-the-headlights response to the media circus.

"Once the media was called in, nobody knew how to handle it," he said. "Bureaucracies often take days to react, they're slow. But once the press is called, there's a panic."

The debate has also unleashed the ugly side of social media, with faculty and transgendered students receiving a torrent of online harassment, according to Greg Bird, an assistant professor of sociology. He accuses the university is ignoring what's happening.

"There's been a lot of hatred thrown at them," said Bird, who started a petition that argued faculty and staff are scared to come to work.

"We feel like the administration's initial reaction was a bit knee-jerk, and they're still refusing to name transphobia as a problem on our campus ... It's completely silenced the trans and non-binary members of our community."

Laurier's professors are openly taking shots at each other, pitting faculties and colleagues against one another. Some tenured faculty are calling for outright boycotts of their own university, urging parents not to send their kids there and for donors to keep their money.

Pundits are piling on, accusing Laurier of abandoning the pursuit of higher learning.

"Laurier's attempt to muzzle one of its lowliest student-employees, followed almost immediately by craven and mealy-mouthed apologies, is a sad illustration of how today's universities often work, and how they are sometimes not working in ways that are best for students, scholars or the search for Truth," declared the Globe and Mail, in an editorial.

But as the university increasingly relies on young, inexperienced teaching assistants to run classes, Lyons says he's surprised these kind of problems aren't happening more often.

"Do you think they're given training as to how to conduct a debate? I very much doubt it," he said. "You have TAs handling situations that trained professors should be handling. This takes a certain skill."

Bird believes the case shows both teaching students and professors need better training to handle controversial issues in class.

"We're dealing with some very complicated social issues that are changing constantly," he said. "What we don't do is drop a controversial issue that could hurt people onto students without the instructor setting parameters up."

David Haskell, who teaches sociology of religion and communication studies at Laurier, wants the university to adopt a statement for freedom of expression that's used by dozens of universities around the world.

He's critical of Laurier for what he sees as foot-dragging during "a crisis."

"Why are they holding a task force to decide if freedom of expression is a core value at our university," he said. "Objectionable ideas, while offensive, do not do harm ... But they seem to think facts are not as important as feelings."

Claims that campus has become unsafe because of the freedom of speech debate are disingenuous, Haskell believes.

"Do I believe that it can hurt their feelings? Yes. Is that a terrible thing? Yes. But to escalate it to the point where you say actual harm is being done so you can use that as a ploy for censorship? That's beyond the pale," he said.

"We need to call this for what it is. It's a sham, it's a ploy, it's a lie. And it will be used to shut down freedom of expression."

The university has tried to quell the anger internally. MacLatchy issued an apology to Shepherd and reiterated her support for freedom of expression. The university also created a task force to report how it should handle situations like this, and launched a third-party investigation.

The school's board of governors unanimously endorsed the president's statement on freedom of expression and backed the creation of a task force to give the university guidance around issues of academic freedom in the future.

Laurier's undergrad and graduate student unions, meanwhile, said they support debate in the classroom, as long as it contains "proper contextualization and intentional facilitation by instructors and teaching assistants."

"In this environment students learn to think critically, understand the nuance of complicated topics, and listen to the perspectives of their classmates. Educational engagement with challenging material should not wilfully incite hatred or violence," the student groups said, in a joint statement.

But the bigger problem, Haskell argues, is that Laurier is governed by a Gendered and Sexual Violence Policy — a policy that goes beyond provincial law — that he says essentially makes hurt feelings a form of violence.

"It's incredibly flawed ... It's thought crime. If you have the wrong thoughts, or someone thinks you have the wrong thoughts, you can be convicted under that policy," he said. "It doesn't require any evidence, it only requires that someone says they felt harmed."

In Shepherd's case, someone complained they were offended by the TVO clip shown in class. Under Laurier's policy, that's enough to breach the policy, he said.

Haskell says if you compound that policy with a humanities program he believes is increasingly filled with like-minded faculty who object to any diversity of opinion, you've got a recipe for trouble.

"The people in arts and humanities have a religion. And that religion is social justice. Social justice was once a noble thing, but it has become a fundamentalist religion among faculty," he said.

"When you do not agree with their ideology, they're all about exclusion."

He points to efforts to defund Laurier's conservative, pro-life student group Life Link, which he says is proof of a changing culture on campus that's increasingly unwelcoming to opposing views.

But Bird said Laurier is far from a radical, left-wing campus.

"I think there's a diversity of opinions across the political spectrum," he said. "We're open to having discussions across the spectrum. We're scholars."

He feels some alt-right groups are trying to exploit Laurier's debate around freedom of expression, and believes there's an undercurrent of intolerance at play. He points to a rally by the Proud Boys, a controversial, far-right men's group, at the Laurier campus in Brantford in support of Shepherd.

"These very fringe groups have come out of the woodwork, and have appeared on our campuses," Bird said. "I think there are people who are trying to make this into an ideological battle."

There's also a well-organized effort online to attack and discredit people who speak up in defence of transgendered people, he said.

Lyons, who started teaching at Laurier in the 1970s, said campus has evolved a lot over the decades, and that's a good thing. He recalls when the university's first gay student group was forced to shut down because its members were being threatened.

But while diversity on campus has improved a lot, the retired professor feels one thing has gotten worse — our inability to relax when presented with views we disagree with.

"Campus has changed, that's for certain," he said. "But sometimes we still need to lighten up. Everybody seems to have lost their sense of humour. That's the saddest thing of all."

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