

Hypocrisy defines university safe space argument

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When Canadian universities claim to strive to create “safe learning environments” for their students, they overlook the obvious.

That is, the seriousness with which they carry out this task often depends on the views of the students who feel unsafe.

And whether those views fit ideologically with the left-wing and politically correct attitudes that typically dominate among the faculty teaching in the humanities and social sciences.

As we have seen in the case of Wilfrid Laurier University, it takes complaints by transgender students very seriously.

This as indicated by the inquisition of graduate student Lindsay Shepherd by two professors and an official from its gender and sexual violence office, for which the university’s president and one of the professors involved have since apologized, in the face of public outrage.

The point is, all it took for Shepherd to be subjected to this academic inquisition was a complaint by one student or students, that he, she or they were offended, or made to feel uncomfortable, or unsafe, by something that was said in Shepherd’s tutorial class.

This happened during a discussion she led as a teaching assistant in a communications course, on the views of Jordan Peterson, the controversial University of Toronto professor who opposes the use of gender-neutral pronouns, in which the views of a professor who opposed Peterson were also presented.

Shepherd’s interrogators refused her repeated requests to know the specific nature of the complaint against her so she could defend herself, citing confidentiality.

This was a denial of natural justice given that, in democracies at least, an accused has a right to know the substance of the complaint against her.

How could Shepherd defend herself without knowing what the specific complaint was, which could obviously have been revealed without naming the student or students who complained?

It also appears that at Laurier, on the issue of gender identity, the mere assertion one has been caused emotional or mental harm is accepted at face value, without attempting to determine if this is a justified or rational response to what actually happened.

Or whether it merits interfering with the freedom to discuss contentious issues, which is presumably one of the reasons for having a university.

Now let's compare what happened at Laurier to how Jewish students at universities across Canada have typically been treated by university administrations when they complained about verbal and physical harassment and intimidation by campus proponents of the anti-Israel Boycott Divestment and Sanctions campaign, and Israeli Apartheid Week movement.

Despite numerous students expressing concerns to university administrators for many years that the way these campaigns are conducted on campus has led to increased incidents of Jew-hatred, the typical response from universities (with some exceptions) has been to deny, downplay or ignore them.

Or to use the argument Shepherd's interrogators denied to her, that a university is a place for the vigorous debate of controversial ideas, even if some people are offended.

Wilfrid Laurier University (Twitter)
Universities cannot have it both ways.

They cannot claim to be bastions of free speech if all it takes to derail it is one anonymous complaint on one controversial topic, while public complaints from many students on another controversial topic, are downplayed or ignored.

Because that's not creating a safe learning environment for students, nor it is defending free speech. It's hypocrisy.

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