

My Laurier interrogation shows universities have lost sight of their purpose

How can humanities departments justify charging students tuition if they are not teaching them to think critically?

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One of the research paper topics that students from Communication Studies 101 at Wilfrid Laurier University can choose to write about this semester is communication bubbles. Communication bubbles refer to the phenomenon of people becoming entrapped in ideological echo chambers as a result of only seeking out, or being fed, news that confirms their existing beliefs. This trend has been greatly exacerbated in recent years by social media. As a proponent of viewpoint diversity, I find the idea of communication bubbles fascinating but troubling—I believe a willingness to explore new ideas, entertain a variety of perspectives, and confront information that challenges one’s beliefs are critical values.

I am a teaching assistant for Communication Studies 101. Last month, I showed my students a clip from TVO’s *The Agenda with Steve Paikin*, which showed

University of Toronto professors Jordan Peterson and Nicholas Matte debating the contentious issue of gender pronouns. I mentioned to my class that watching debates such as the one we were about to view is a great way to break out of communication bubbles and decide for oneself whether an argument is valid or not. I emphasized that watching ideas being debated in action is how a “marketplace of ideas” is formed (a concept that is studied in the very course in which I was censored, ironically enough).



Wilfrid Laurier teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd finishes speaking at a rally in support of academic freedom near the university in Waterloo, Ont., on Nov. 24, 2017. *Tyler Anderson/National Post*

Apparently, one or more students in my tutorial would have preferred to stay in their own bubbles, as they complained about the content of my tutorial to the

course professor. I ended up being hauled before a three-person panel that many have described as “Orwellian,” “Maoist,” and “Kafkaesque.” I was told that playing the TVO clip was tantamount to violence, and that I had created a toxic climate and unsafe learning environment. I was also told that I had violated everything from the university’s Gendered Violence and Sexual Assault Policy to the Ontario Human Rights Code to Bill C-16.

I recorded this meeting, released it to the media, and—after the story had gone international—received a pair of lacklustre apologies from both the president of WLU and the course professor. The university has now launched a task force on freedom of expression in addition to a “neutral third party investigation” that will gather facts about the tutorial I taught in early November.

Despite the intellectual beating I got from my superiors, I still believe that debate, discussion, and dialogue are fundamental to the institution of the university.

My undergraduate degree is in Communication and Political Science, so I know first-hand that students of the arts and humanities must constantly defend themselves from criticism that their degrees are worthless and will never get them a job. But I still believe it is incredibly valuable for anyone to study culture, society, history, and language. Learning how to think critically is at the root of these arts programs. Or at least it should be.

WLU’s interrogation of my decision to air two sides of a topical debate was so troubling because it revealed that these educators don’t believe critical thinking matters, or that they fear students exercising critical thought might lead them to politically incorrect conclusions. If that’s the case, how can these departments justify charging students for these degrees?

While many may call to de-fund departments in the arts and humanities, I believe we should instead restore their integrity. The first step in this direction is to remove constraints aimed at making classrooms emotional “safe spaces.” One step would be for the university to institute a free speech policy such as the Statement on Principles of Free Expression adopted by the University of Chicago. The statement affirms the university’s commitment to ensuring that ideas that may be considered unwise or offensive are not suppressed.

I also believe students need to approach university with an openness to being challenged. If a student is not willing to discuss topical issues in an open and respectful way with peers who may have vastly different perspectives, that student should take a year off and only return to university if and when he or she is ready for dialogue and debate.

The reason I chose to pursue a master’s degree in the first place was not to advance my career prospects, but to advance my intellectual horizons. I am not sure I am achieving this goal, as I find myself surrounded by professors and students who are intent on pushing an ideological agenda, censoring certain topics from the classroom, and enforcing echo chambers of homogenous thought. I accept that I am partly to blame for this. I have been complicit in self-censorship these past years, by staying silent for fear of expressing ideas that could make me a pariah among the authoritarian left, who seem to think they have a stronghold on classroom morality.

But now, I have stopped paying any mind to the reactionary labelling and thought-policing from this group, and I feel more free than I have felt in a long time.