

Suppressing TVO video, stifling free speech, is making Wilfrid Laurier unsafe

The university is wrong to castigate a grad student and teaching assistant for showing to her students a debate on TVO's The Agenda that featured controversial professor Jordan Peterson.

<https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2017/11/15/suppressing-tvo-video-stifling-free-speech-is-making-wilfrid-laurier-unsafe.html>



Wilfrid Laurier University masters student Lindsay Shepherd was censured for showing a video clip from TVO's The Agenda featuring U of T professor Jordan Peterson, debating the pros and cons on whether to use gender neutral pronouns. Shepherd was admonished by the university after a student complained, saying that viewing the three-minute clip created "a toxic climate" in the classroom. (DAVID BEBEE / RECORD STAFF)

By **DAVID MILLARD HASKELL**

Wed., Nov. 15, 2017

The motto on the crest of Wilfrid Laurier University, where I'm employed, is *Veritas Omnia Vincit*. Translated, that means Truth Conquers All.

At one time my university may have elevated the pursuit of truth as its highest ideal but now I'm not so sure. The pursuit of truth requires that faculty and students allow ideas, even those deemed repugnant by some, onto the campus to be aired in open discussion. It's in a contest of competing ideas that the best facts win or, "truth conquers."

However, a few days ago some colleagues at my university showed that they place other values ahead of truth. I wish I could say it was the first instance of its kind on my campus. However, an internet search of "Wilfrid Laurier and freedom of expression" will show it's not. And the problem is growing.

Most recently, [the media reported](#) Lindsay Shepherd, a grad student and teaching assistant in Laurier's communications program, ran afoul of her university bosses while instructing a first-year class. She [showed a clip](#) of a debate between U of T professors Jordan Peterson and Nicholas Matte. The debate, which previously aired on public TV, had Peterson explaining his objections to the use of non-gendered pronouns while Matte argued in favour.

Shepherd showed a three-minute clip to spark discussion but it seems someone in class complained that the ideas of Peterson made them feel unsafe. Shepherd found herself called before a hostile tribunal of her thesis adviser, the program chair, and the manager of the university's Gendered and Sexual Violence Prevention and Support Office.

Quotes from the meeting, which Shepherd recorded, show that she was subjected to a barrage of accusations as her motives and character were called into question. She was ultimately told she was not allowed to expose students to views like those of Peterson because, according to her thesis adviser, discussions that create "an unsafe learning environment" are "not up for debate."

To her credit, during her inquisition Shepherd had the courage to suggest that it was not the duty of the university to make students comfortable but to make them think. Had she been given more chance to speak, she might have also noted that claiming certain ideas can make a classroom “unsafe” is, for the most part, an unscientific ruse used by many to simply rationalize censorship.

I base that conclusion on psychologist Scott Lilienfeld’s recent groundbreaking study in the journal *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. He reviewed the existing scholarship on the effects of normal exposure to ideas one finds offensive and found there “are many claims about psychological harm done by such microaggressions” but “there is little to no empirical evidence to support such claims.”

Other research shows that being exposed to opposing views makes the vast majority of students mentally more resilient, not fragile.

Research may show that diversity of ideas is a good thing but, in the past, when radical factions at my university have worked to stop it, Laurier’s upper administration has done nothing. So, I’m not hopeful they’ll come out strongly in favour now.

To be honest, even if the people at the top of my university did attempt change, it’s likely that most of my colleagues would agitate and cause the effort to fail. I’m basing my pessimistic prediction on what just happened at the University of British Columbia.

Certain concerned faculty there [attempted to pass](#) a policy guaranteeing no line of inquiry could be forbidden. To get the approval of the majority of professors, the policy was watered down to the point of uselessness.

Since the news reports related to Shepherd have come out I’ve received calls and emails from friends and neighbours. Many have kids at Laurier or they are about to send them. They’re worried. One thing I tell them is that the cultural climate of Laurier is actually pretty similar to most Canadian universities. No institution has risen to become a beacon of free expression.

I also give them this advice: if the universities won't offer your child a diversity of ideas, encourage them to search out those opposing ideas for themselves ... an excellent start are the YouTube videos [featuring Jordan Peterson](#).

***David Millard Haskell** is associate professor in the faculty of Liberal Arts at Wilfrid Laurier University.*