

# Western University: Students come under the gun on social media after the Black Lives Matter slogan was co-opted by defiant young people marking an unsanctioned school homecoming



By [Debora Van Brenk](#), The London Free Press

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Smart kids, bad move.

The social media debate ramped up Wednesday over a student bedsheet banner that Western University administration has condemned as repugnant and student leaders have called “the epitome of ignorance and privilege.”

Some on Facebook and Twitter said the official reaction has been overblown, while others insisted it’s no less than racist to appropriate from Black Lives Matter the #LivesMatter meme to protest a university decision to change the school’s Homecoming date.

The banner has been termed on social media in various ways: Hateful, satirical, tasteless, racist, innocuous, naive.

“How people define it, I suppose that’s an individual decision but I will still stand firm in representing a university who wants to ensure our students’ support and our community’s safety,” said Jana Luker, associate vice-president of student experience at Western University, who calls it racist.

She said the issue is not a matter of free speech, but of respecting students’ right to feel safe and supported.

“I would encourage the discussion around different issues, there’s no question about that. And I think this is a place where we can educate. But to be clear, our community standards are such that there’s no room for hate and hate crimes,” Luker said.



*Western University Students' Council president Eddy Avila and associate VP of student experience Jana Luker stand in the University Community Centre on the Western campus in London, Ont. on Wednesday October 5, 2016. Both are concerned over an image posted to Instagram showing four young men in Western sweaters posing in front of banner reading "Western Lives Matter", which appeared on the image-based social network over the weekend. (CRAIG GLOVER, The London Free Press)*

And how did some of Canada's brightest young adults, at a university with some of the highest admission standards, fail to consider their homemade "Western Lives Matter" sign, posted on Instagram during the unsanctioned homecoming this past weekend, might prove contentious?

One anti-racism activist said the young age of the students is no excuse for the offensive banner.

"We can minimize racism as we always have done, we can minimize the experiences of people of colour, we can say kids can be kids, but they are adults," said Mojdeh Cox.

"The reality is, that is racism. Anyone who tags anything and sticks "lives matter" on the end isn't fooling anyone.

"There are well-informed people who will say that is racism."

The controversy over the online sharing of the misused Black Lives Matter images and symbols blew up on a weekend when thousands of students held their own homecoming, after the school moved the event to three weeks later in October in a bid to nix rowdy and booze-fueled behaviour.

Not a month earlier, Western found itself under another harsh spotlight after a message advocating sexual violence was spotted on the front window of a house in a student neighbourhood.

“No means yes. And yes means anal,” said the message, which prompted criticism by the head of the London Abused Women’s Centre. While the students at the address didn’t write the message, which was on the outside of the window, it wasn’t immediately removed, either.

Wednesday, in the fallout of the latest controversy, the president of the university’s student council said Western and its student groups are pondering organizing a day-long forum that would bring in different student groups to speak about some of their experiences of discrimination.

Eddy Avila, the student president, said his science courses provided him little formal opportunity to learn about systemic racism.

“These types of conversations need to happen if we’re to try to combat this in any way.”

“Just because we are, on paper, fairly intelligent, doesn’t mean we have fully learned everything we should learn in a higher education institution like Western. What has been positive is that a lot of peers have been educating themselves in a respectful manner,” he said.

The #BlackLivesMatter movement has become a forum for discussing systemic racism against black people.

It shouldn’t be co-opted by students annoyed that Western changed its Homecoming date this year, Avila said. “Equating that type of displeasure with a potential date change of Homecoming is nothing compared to the years of struggle and years of oppression that a lot of marginalized peoples have experienced and still face day to day . . .

“I think this calls for more education on some of the more important, human aspects of being a student and being a member of society,” he said.

The person who posted the photo appears to have removed their profile on Instagram.

Luker said London police are looking into whether the matter is a hate crime and it may also be turned over to campus police to determine if it violated the school’s code of conduct for students.

— *With files by Jennifer O’Brien, Free Press reporter*

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#### **Some reaction on Twitter:**

“What’s next? Ban editorial cartoons because they offend some people. What a bloody world.”

“THANK YOU to @westernu for its speedy and unambiguous response to the recent deplorable Western Lives Matter banner incident...I don’t know what these students take but we DO teach social issues, imaginative sympathy, critical thinking and empathy.”

“No organization or set of ideas is above scrutiny & satire. Eddy Avila, Jana Luker and @westernu should leave these students alone.”

“So Western lives don’t matter?”

“I’m actually in shock as to how ... ignorant those @westernu students are who made that sign.”

#### **Some reaction on Facebook:**

“Black Lives Matter is definitely an important social movement, and satirizing it is in poor taste. That said, punishing students for engaging in satire is stupid. It will only make people hostile to the cause.”

“Though I agree the sign is somewhat distasteful, constituting it as hate speech is a bit out of proportion. Resources would be better spent sitting down with the offending students and having a discussion.”

“If the sign was meant to be a joke, I’m still waiting for the punchline.”

“Being white is a privilege, which is why it came as no surprise that these white students felt it was appropriate to do this. It’s likely the most “injustice” they have ever felt.”

“Whether or not those students intended to be racist, it is still a racist banner.”

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