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## Choice on Campus: Reflections on Anti-Abortion

### Activism at Western University By Robyn Schwarz and Madeline Vrolyk

It will come as no surprise to members of Canada's pro-choice community that reproductive politics continue to be a hot button issue on campuses across the country. Conservative Party leader Andrew Scheer commented on several occasions that if elected in 2019, he will move to defund universities that do not work to protect free speech on their campuses. Scheer's comments are often read by the mainstream media within the context of Jordan Peterson, Lindsey Shepherd, the alt-right, and the so-called marginalization of Conservative positions on campuses across the country. However, those of us who have been active in countering anti-abortion propaganda on our own campuses recognize that Scheer's position on this issue is in fact a promise to anti-abortion organizations who helped him win the Conservative leadership race. It is therefore more important than ever that pro-choice activists and student leaders work together to ensure reproductive rights are respected and protected at our institutions.

We hope this piece will start a conversation on both the successes and failures of pro-choice activists at Canada's universities and colleges in recent years. It brings together our reflections on how we have handled an increasingly vocal anti-abortion student group at London's Western University over the past year. It also highlights the different methods that university administrators, student governments, and

student activists have employed to counter anti-abortion messaging on campuses in Canada.

Ontario's Conservative government issued a statement in late August 2018 that universities and colleges that do not uphold their particular understanding of what free speech looks like will have their funding reduced (Shannon Dea does an excellent job of outlining why this policy represents an attack on academic freedom and what we can do about it more broadly here: <https://dailyacademicfreedom.wordpress.com/2018/08/30/ontario-government-blocks-academic-freedom-collegial-governance-and-institutional-autonomy-in-the-name-of-free-speech/>). This rule came into effect in early 2019, as the Province required every post-secondary institution to put in place a policy to protect free speech on campus. We know this policy is not about free speech in practice, but is rather meant to force universities and colleges to give a platform to hateful views. In light of this, we recognize more than ever the importance of reproductive rights advocates sharing successful strategies for countering anti-abortion student groups with one another.

Western Lifeline is an anti-abortion student club on our campus. They have been active at Western since 2010. However, over the last two years they have become increasingly aggressive with their activities, in part because many of their members participated in the Canadian Centre for Bioethical Reform (CCBR)'s

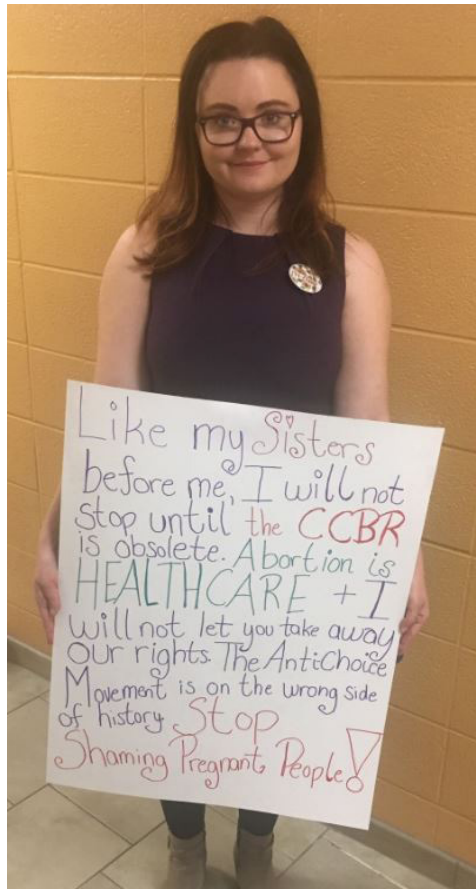
Summer Internship program. Many of the tactics Lifeline uses at Western will be familiar to ARCC members. Robyn (a PhD Candidate in the History Department) noticed their fliers around campus advertising weekly meetings in the 2017 Winter term. However, it was not until the fall of 2017, when Lifeline decided to host WeNeedALaw's pink and blue flag display in the centre of our campus, that Robyn and Pro-choice London co-founder Elliot Worsfold felt more needed to be done to counter anti-abortion messaging at Western. They reached out to the Undergraduate Student's Council (USC) executive and subsequently met with their President and Students Program Officer in November to discuss what steps could be taken to ensure Western supported choice on campus. Lifeline's ability to spread anti-abortion propaganda at Western unchallenged greatly concerned her, and she urged the USC to take steps to change this. Like the CCBR, she saw how Lifeline's images and messaging only served to spread misinformation about abortion. More importantly, with Western being a place of work and education for over 30,000 students, she saw the harm Lifeline could cause. Students going through accessing an abortion did not need to walk past an anti-choice display on their way to class. She made several recommendations with the hope that the USC would implement them in the new semester.

The two of us met at a workshop in early 2018 about reproductive justice on campus. Madeline (an undergraduate student in Criminology and Women's Studies) started out as a Communications Coordinator with Western's Women's Issues Network (WIN), eventually becoming interim coordinator to replace an absence. Before participating in the USC and

finding her place at WIN, she felt relatively underrepresented on campus as a pro-choice feminist. Right as she joined WIN, Lifeline's anti-choice demonstrations began to happen more often and with graphic materials. Even though she was part of a USC organization on campus, she still felt powerless. The USC allowed these demonstrations to happen in the University Community Centre, a hub of student activity and wellness. Lifeline also remained a USC ratified club. This does not equal an endorsement from the USC, but it certainly legitimizes the organization, which can come off as an endorsement to those most affected.

When Madeline assumed the interim coordinator position at WIN, there were a few instances in which the USC provided her with some warning of Lifeline's displays, so she could provide those on campus with a choice to avoid the demonstrations. The two of us actively worked together, using our individual social media accounts and connections with feminist groups on campus to let students know when and where Lifeline's demonstrations took place. While this was certainly a step in the right direction, it still was not enough. First, the UCC is perhaps the most difficult place to avoid on campus, especially if you are seeking medical treatment, mental health counselling, financial counselling, or even buying lunch. Second, these warnings were inconsistent, and both of us often found out about demonstrations from friends, hours after they began.

Universities and colleges continue to struggle with how to best address anti-abortion activism on their campuses. Our experience at Western and the lack of response from administrators and student leaders is actually not typical. Many



*Robyn Schwarz holding a defiant sign.*

universities and colleges across the country have taken varying steps to curb and combat groups like Western Lifeline in recent years. Their actions can generally be classified into three categories:

- Spreading awareness - Universities like the University of British Columbia, send out notifications to every member of their campus community about an upcoming anti-abortion display. This allows pro-choice students and feminist organizations to counter-protest and adequately support those who might be hurt by the demonstrations.

- Limiting protests – Universities such as Wilfred Laurier University listened to student feedback and stopped WeNeedALaw's flag display from reoccurring on their campus. They limited the days and places that anti-abortion displays can take place. In Robyn's favorite instance of pro-choice student activism this past year, students at the University of Victoria stopped their anti-abortion club from holding WeNeedALaw's display twice by pulling individual flags from the ground and taking them away. While we do not encourage vandalism, in this instance we believe the voices of students were being ignored by the UVIC student society and administration. The University of Alberta imposed a security fee on their anti-abortion group in 2016 to cover the costs associated with their displays.

- Revoking Club Status - Student unions at several institutions, including Ryerson, UofT Mississauga, and UOttawa, have denied or removed their anti-abortion student group's club status. Club status gives student groups

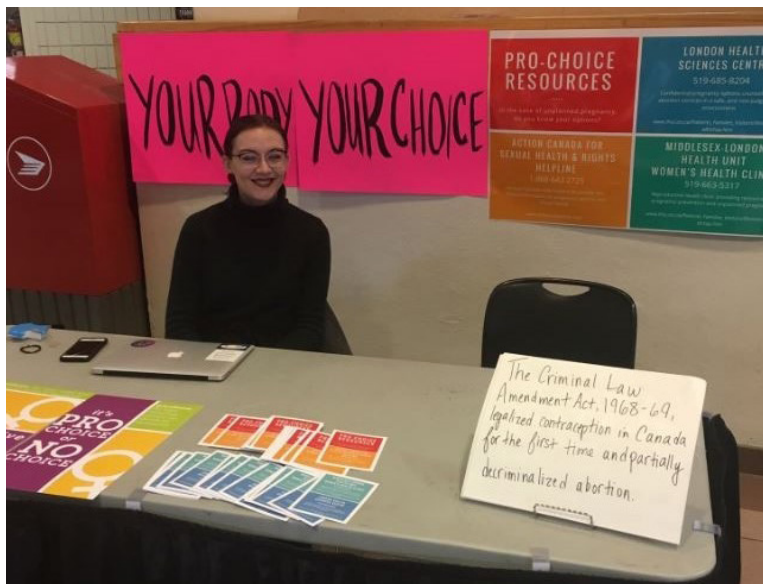
access to their local student union's resources, including funding, and the ability to easily book space on campus for events and outreach. Removing an anti-abortion club's status is the most effective way to limit their ability to hurt students.

In the last few years, Canada's pro-choice community has made significant gains countering anti-abortion student groups on campus across the country. In February 2018, the Ontario courts ruled in favour of the University of Toronto Mississauga Student Union and the Student Association of the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, refusing to grant their anti-abortion student group's official club status.

This builds on the legacy of the Ryerson Student Union (RSU)'s victory over Students for Life at Ryerson in October 2016, in which the Ontario Superior Court of Justice ruled that the RSU could deny any club standing and funding based on whether their mandate violate the Ontario Human Rights Code. In both these cases, we see the

courts moving towards classifying the message of anti-abortion student groups as hate speech.

However, these legal battles are long and costly for student unions. In our conversations with Western's USC, student leaders from both the past and current executives expressed a desire to avoid going to court to curb Lifeline's influence on campus. The Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms, a right-wing legal group, continues to provide anti-abortion student groups with free representation in these cases across the country. They turn any denial of club status to anti-abortion organizations into a conversation around free speech, rather than



*A pro-choice booth at Western's University Community Centre.*

what it truly is: a recognition that student fees and university space should not be granted to groups who seek to take away rights from other students. We know we don't need to explain to pro-choice readers that anti-abortion groups free speech argument is always unfounded. Neither of us is asking for students who do not agree with abortion to face academic or legal consequences. We are simply asking that every student's right to bodily autonomy be respected at their place of work, and we will continue to push for Western to take steps to better support students experiencing unplanned pregnancies.

Having realized our student union was not willing to take steps to revoke Western Lifeline's club status, we started to work together to promote pro-choice resources and give Western students the unconditional support and unbiased information about reproductive health that our campus administrators did not seem to be interested in providing. Robyn filed several complaints with Western's Equity & Human Rights Services about Lifeline's multiple displays in the UCC, and heard nothing in response. We also created an infographic of resources for unplanned pregnancy and sexual health. The ones circulating on campus featured our local Crisis Pregnancy Centre, and were therefore misleading and anti-choice, despite being displayed as otherwise. The infographic is now in circulation on campus, and the feedback has been positive.

To build upon this, the two of us and the other interim WIN co-coordinator Maggie Sullivan, planned the first Pro-Choice booth (as dubbed by Western's student newspaper, the Gazette) to ever take place in the UCC. This was a day of encouragement and positivity, especially coming at a time of discouragement and feeling

like we were not advocating as powerfully as we could for our fellow students and the campus community. Madeline was amazed by the mass of young women and trans students that came by to the table and expressed their gratitude. Most of them had the same feeling of not feeling represented on their own campus, and felt unequipped to engage with Lifeline. This day was full of delightful discussion, networking, and even recruiting for next year's core WIN team. Even

folks who viewed abortion as something that should be discussed from multiple perspectives on campus, found themselves agreeing that subjecting students to harmful imagery is wrong. They agreed that protesting the bodily autonomy of more than half of the student population was overreaching the limitations of free speech. We both saw the positive impact our booth had on pushing the conversation away from the binary of pro-choice/anti-abortion and towards ensuring no student feels alienated in their day to day life on campus.

During the most recent 2018-2019 academic year, Madeline took on the role of full-time coordinator of the renamed Gender Equity Network (formerly WIN) at Western. Both of us worked together to implement the strategies other pro-choice activists have employed on campuses across the country in recent years, as outlined above. We met with the new USC President and Student Programming Officer in July to discuss strategies. After that meeting, we were cautiously optimistic that the student government would finally take steps to ensure students would be given advance notice of Lifeline's displays. Each of the four times Lifeline booked space in the University Community Centre building since that meeting, the USC gave students advance notice of their displays. While Lifeline would argue that their presence



*Madeline Vrolyk, Gender Equity Network Coordinator*

on campus creates an important dialogue around abortion, we disagree and feel it is the student union's role to represent student's interests. Announcing Lifeline's activities to the campus community ahead of time allows those who might not want to be confronted by anti-abortion propaganda to avoid these areas.

Madeline also leveraged her experience to provide Western students with accurate sexual health information and pro-choice resources. In her role as GEN coordinator, she put together engaging booths that received a positive reception from students who felt misrepresented by Lifeline's characterization of abortion. These booths, and the work of student leader and fellow ARCC member Carina Gabriele to bring free menstrual products to campus, made 2018-2019 a landmark year for the feminist movement at Western. When Lifeline hosted Jonathon Van Maren as a speaker at Western in November, we organized a dozen people to come out and peacefully protest his talk. We consider this a step in the right direction, but we will not be satisfied until he knows he is no longer welcome in our community.

As those reading will appreciate, of course there is still more work to do. We learned so much from the general student population's response to our efforts that can help guide the struggle to end anti-abortion activism on Canadian campuses once and for all. First, we found that using social media to give people advance notice of Lifeline's displays generated discussion and allowed us to more quickly educate the campus community. However, it also promoted what would we classify as "online call-out culture" at Western: many people expressed outrage and sadness about the anti-choice displays, but were unwilling to educate themselves or engage in actions that would result in real change. When students did physically show up, they sought to debate Lifeline as a response to their presence on campus. Madeline watched as many ignored our resource booth, choosing instead to aimlessly debate Lifeline.

The pro-choice community knows from years of experience that change will never come through debate. Our challenge now is educating the broader student body and directing them towards positive action, such as providing sexual health resources or supporting friends who might be experiencing an unplanned pregnancy in order to permanently change the culture around reproductive rights at Western. Every student in Canada deserves a safe learning environment free from harassment, and this can only happen if we work to normalize abortion and create pro-choice communities across the country.

If anyone reading this wants to connect on countering anti-abortion activism on their own campus, Robyn would love to hear from you. Her email is [schwarzrobyne@gmail.com](mailto:schwarzrobyne@gmail.com) and she can be found on twitter at [@RobynSch](https://twitter.com/RobynSch) and [@ProChoiceLdnOnt](https://twitter.com/ProChoiceLdnOnt). Going forward, she is looking to put together a more comprehensive guide for ARCC members on how Student Unions across the country are supporting choice and addressing anti-abortion activism on their campuses. [A](#)

## CALL TO ACTION: WANT TO WRITE FOR OUR NEWSLETTER?

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