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Students' rocket dreams grounded by Ryerson University

There's an 11 foot rocket in pieces on a table inside a cluttered basement lab at Ryerson University. Holding a piece in hand, Balin Moher explains how he wanted to build a liquid engine that would fit inside a similar rocket, but the university won't let him do it.

School won't allow aerospace engineering students to build rocket engine, though other universities do

[Natalie Nanowski](#) · CBC · Posted: Aug 10, 2019 6:00 AM EDT | Last Updated: August 10, 2019



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Ryerson students David Machuca (left) and Balin Moher (centre) stand with Launch Canada's Adam Trumpour in front of a disassembled 11 foot rocket. (Natalie Nanowski/CBC News)

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There's an 11 foot rocket in pieces on a table inside a cluttered basement lab at Ryerson University. Holding a piece in hand, Balin Moher explains how he wanted to build a liquid engine that would fit inside a similar rocket, but the university won't let him do it.

"There's been basically no response from the faculty," said Moher. "There was an e-mail sent in April and despite following up with them, nothing, no reason has been given as to why we can't."

The recent engineering graduate came up with the idea of building a rocket liquid engine after participating in Spaceport America in 2018 as part of a Ryerson student team. He saw other schools — including Canadian ones — that had built their own engines.

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Ryerson's Rocketry club competed in 2018 Spaceport America Cup



On his return to Toronto, Moher created the Ryerson Propulsion Group and it was approved by the faculty.

4 Canadian universities build rocket engines

"We were promised a budget meeting in September [2018], which went through... and we had over 100 [student] applicants, so there was huge interest in the group," said Moher.

Aerospace engineering student, David Machuca, applied to the group right away.

"I thought that was fantastic," said Machuca. "Usually in high school or university you take courses and you learn theory... But you're not sure how it works. When you actually work with something at hand then you're able to apply what you learned and learn even more."

The group got backing from Launch Canada, an organization that supports student rocketry innovation. The founder, Adam Trumpour, has helped schools like Concordia and the University of British Columbia build rocket engines.

He offered up Launch Canada's facility so the new team could test its engine safely.

"There are hazards associated with these things," said Trumpour. As long as you approach it in the right way...it's entirely possible for it to be perfectly safe."

Group asked to change proposal

But things started to stall when Ryerson only gave the team \$5,000 out of the \$25,000 in funding it had asked for. A few months after, the administration requested that Moher change the team's proposal.

"We submitted that in January and everything seemed positive at that point. The request from the faculty was for the aerospace department to vet it," said Moher.

Moher says the department approved the report, but the university wouldn't let the team move forward.

"It's very frustrating...What we're always taught in school is to strive to do something great and to set yourself apart, and the school won't accommodate that," said Moher.



Rocket parts sit in the basement lab where Ryerson's rocket club works during the school year.
(Natalie Nanowski/CBC News)

The team went further by submitting contacts from other schools that build rocket engines, including one a few blocks away, the University of Toronto.

'Stifling young innovation'

CBC Toronto asked Ryerson University why the propulsion group was grounded.

A spokesperson for the school said in an email that Ryerson "is going to decline the opportunity to comment on this story."

Trumpour says Ryerson's decision is stifling young innovation.

"These types of projects are immensely valuable for learning how to really make things work in the real world and [the students] are more valuable to industry because they're not starting from zero," said Trumpour.

Since Moher is no longer a student at the university, he says he'll take a lesser role in the propulsion group come September. But Machuca says he will continue to push Ryerson to allow the group to build a rocket engine so it can compete in the 2020 Spaceport America Cup.

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