



Chinese American Service League

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An Open Letter to Chancellor Thomas L. Keon

“Did he really just do that?” That was my first thought when I saw the video of Chancellor Thomas L. Keon mocking Asian language during the Purdue University Northwest commencement.

Did he really just do that?

Watching the video was painful for me, just as this type of mockery has inflicted pain on other Asian Americans and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders (AANHPIs). My heart broke for the AANHPI students in the audience, and their family and friends who were there to celebrate a milestone, but instead were subjected to openly racist remarks. Chancellor Keon’s remarks are insulting not just to members of the AANHPI community, but to every non-English-speaking immigrant who has come to the United States, including those who have worked hard to learn the language, only to be mocked because of their accent.

The chancellor’s actions are reflective of more than 100 years of hate, oppression, and suppression of the fastest-growing population of U.S. citizens: Asian Americans. Chancellor Keon does not need to go far to educate himself on why his actions were harmful and wrong. I encourage him to spend time in his own university’s history department to understand the origination and long track record of anti-Asian hate in America, and the criminal justice department to understand how that hate is growing and manifesting today. The Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism found that anti-Asian hate crimes increased by 339% in 2021. Earlier this year, the Pew Research Center found that 60% of Asian adults said violence against Asian Americans was increasing and 70% said they worried about being threatened or attacked. It is especially insulting considering the university boasts that they accepted one of its most racially diverse freshman classes this year, with nearly 3% of those freshmen identifying as AANHPI.

Chancellor Keon’s apology, in which he cast his remarks as “off the cuff,” rings hollow and shows he lacks a true understanding of the hurtful impact of his actions. And the unflinching acceptance of the apology by the Board of Trustees, as well as the university’s attempts to justify his racism, are equally hollow and disappointing. It is abominable that the chancellor of a major, well-respected university can make racist remarks on stage, during commencement, without any consequences.

As the CEO of the Chinese American Service League (CASL) – where the Midwest’s Anti-Hate Action Center is located – I know first-hand the impact incidents like this cause, even when it isn’t a specific act of aggression against a specific person. We know anti-Asian rhetoric is prevalent and pervasive in both private and public higher-education settings and that both AANHPI students and faculty are often targets. That is why CASL is partnering with higher-education providers to implement an anti-Asian hate program called CLASS (Campus Leading Asian Student Support).



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This training expands knowledge about anti-Asian racism and discrimination both historically and contemporarily, teaches practical skills to respond and intervene, applies skills training to “real world” interactions scenarios, identifies resources to utilize in the aftermath of an incident, and demonstrates and commits to supporting the AANHPI student and faculty.

Purdue University Northwest, like many other universities, has a problem. Apologies are no longer enough. We stand ready to help, and we’re happy to offer Purdue University Northwest our anti-Asian hate program, CLASS. While this program will be a great starting place to help Chancellor Keon and Purdue University Northwest to, as Chancellor Keon said, “prevent such missteps from occurring in the future,” we urge Purdue University Northwest to continue its efforts, initiatives, and commitments to fully understand the adversity the AANHPI community has endured in this country for more than 100 years.

Yours in service,

Paul Luu, CASL CEO