

The Washington Post

Students at Georgetown Law call for changes after professor used slur in class

A professor's apparent comment in class to a student spurred hundreds to ask for mandatory faculty training and other efforts

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February 17, 2022

Hundreds of students have asked Georgetown Law to confront “deeply embedded” problems at the school after a professor used an anti-Asian slur in class earlier this month, asking the school to demonstrate a clear commitment to diversity and inclusion.

A brief video clip recently [shared on Twitter](#) appears to show the professor asking a student to respond, addressing him with what sounds like, “What about you, Mr. ... Chinaman,” and then saying he should ask for his name. The 18-second clip doesn't show what happened before or after the comment.

The professor apologized, and the school's dean acknowledged the use of a derogatory term to the campus community last week.

“The statement I made was just after the break in the class, during which I had enthusiastically noted the great diversity of languages spoken by members of the class,” professor Franz Werro wrote in a note to his class released by the university. “As a non-native English speaker myself, I did not appreciate that it was a derogatory term, as I now understand it is. I am very sorry I used it.” In a later note to the law school community, Werro said he recognized that his use of the word “caused real hurt and pain for many people in the Georgetown community and beyond.”

But many on campus called on administrators to do more to confront what they called an urgent need to address institutional problems — such as making implicit bias training mandatory for faculty — and to more publicly acknowledge the incident.

“If Georgetown Law takes swift and decisive actions to correct the harms, it will demonstrate a clear commitment to diversity and inclusion,” eight student groups wrote in a letter to Dean William M. Treanor that was also signed by hundreds on and off the campus. They also said that while they appreciated the professor's apology, they found it lacking, noting that anti-Asian racism is prevalent globally and that it is inappropriate for a professor to address a student by his or her perceived race.

The Asian Pacific American Law Students Association posted a statement on Instagram last week calling for changes after learning of the slur incident. The [tweet](#) with the video clip, which had been viewed more than 140,000 times by Thursday

Werro teaches in Switzerland and D.C. In the new letter, students said that while they understand Werro is not from the United States, “this does not excuse the incident.”

In the new letter, students said they accepted the apology and the dean’s statement, though flawed. But they reiterated a call for “swift and decisive action to correct the harms” and said they hoped the letter made clear why they were “so hurt and so disappointed in this institution.”

The letter, signed by dozens of other groups on campus, more than 570 individual students, as well as alumni and faculty members, calls for mandatory faculty implicit bias training to “better hold professors accountable and avoid requiring us to try to discern their intent.” It asks for improvements to the system for reporting bias incidents, including timely responses from the administration, and public acknowledgment of the incident.

“We highly recommend that you immediately address this situation for the alumni, legal profession, and public audience beyond the GULC community,” they wrote, referring to the Georgetown University Law Center.

A student leader in the effort declined to comment on Thursday, saying that students would let the letter speak for itself.

Treanor said last week that he had learned the professor had used a derogatory term that is demeaning and hurtful, “with a centuries-long history of harm to Asian people.” Treanor wrote in his email to the school that he had met with students from the Georgetown China Law Society and the Asian Pacific American Law Students Association, and said he and the professor are committed to a serious dialogue about the incident.

“As a community of students, staff, and faculty we must take a serious look at our culture, structure, systems, and processes to ensure that we are a community that fosters respect, equity, and justice,” Treanor said in his email last week.

He wrote about new efforts to foster “... a community in which students can learn in an environment that is free from bias.” He thanked students, staff, faculty and alumni for their work on the initiatives and wrote, “I welcome your input on any of them, and on what additional steps the Law Center can take to ensure a diverse, equitable, and inclusive campus environment for all.”

It was the second time in weeks that the school has had to confront racial issues that flared into controversy.

Last month, Treanor announced that he had put an incoming administrator on leave pending an investigation into whether he had violated the school’s policies on professional conduct, nondiscrimination and anti-harassment.

Ilya Shapiro, the former vice president and director of the Robert A. Levy Center for Constitutional Studies at the Cato Institute, had been expected to become executive director of the school’s Center for the Constitution in early February, and a senior lecturer. Shapiro apologized last month for a series of now-deleted tweets about President Biden’s pledge to nominate a Black woman to the Supreme Court. He has said he expects to be vindicated by the investigation.

