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Purdue University Northwest faculty 'no-confidence' vote passes after Chancellor Keon's comments mocking Asians

By Michelle L. Quinn
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Purdue Northwest Chancellor Thomas Keon applauds for soon-to-be graduates during the first of two commencement ceremonies in the school's Fitness and Recreation Center on Saturday, December 10, 2022. (Kyle Telechan for the Post-Tribune) (Kyle Telechan/for the Post-Tribune)

With a vote of 135 to 20, the majority of Purdue University Northwest's tenured, tenure-track and clinical faculty voted to ceremony. Administrators with faculty status — department heads, deans, and some members of the senior leadership team — were also included in the vote, according to a letter the Post-Tribune obtained that Faculty Senate Chair Thomas Roach issued Wednesday morning.

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The 135 members who voted “no-confidence” represent 65% of those who were polled, Roach said in the letter, and as such, he and members of the Faculty Senate Executive Committee were

didn’t receive ballots because the ballots came from a third party and ended up in spam folders” and that they tried to rectify the situation but weren’t able to for everyone.

The vote, which started Monday night and ended at 11 p.m. Tuesday, is the second one taken this year against Keon, Roach said previously. Keon disregarded the first one, Roach said, because the system used could’ve allowed voters to vote more than once, so this time, Roach and the committee used a third-party system to ensure one vote per person.

Colette Morrow, an English professor who helms PNW’s Women, Gender and Sexualities Studies, said Wednesday that Keon’s disrespect is “pervasive and ongoing” and “has contributed significantly to systemic bigotry in the campus culture.” His remark, however, so angered her that she on Tuesday wrote the Board of Trustees in West Lafayette and returned the Title IX Distinguished Service Award the university gave her for the 50th anniversary of Title IX’s enactment.

“Chancellor Keon’s remarks are not incidental. Rather, they reflect the culture of PNW’s Senior Leadership Team and the deeply rooted, systemic bigotry that is endemic in our school and that permeated Purdue University Calumet prior to the creation of PNW,” Morrow wrote. “In fact, the only thing that is striking about the 2022 commencement is the public nature an egregiously racist statement. That it would be considered incidental only underscores the degree to which racism and other forms of hatred are normalized at PNW.”

Morrow added in her letter that students have protested the

school's conditions in the past, citing that in 2020, approximately 70 of them gathered on the Hammond campus and called for Chancellor Keon's resignation because of their concerns about systemic racism. Senior leadership, however, mischaracterized this protest as a response to George Floyd's murder, she wrote.

"As the petition signed by 2,174 people makes clear: Our purpose is to fight back against the long and continuous attack on Black, Latinx, and White working-class students at Purdue University Northwest through the firing of Black faculty and staff members as well as the stripping of resources that aid in the education of these students," Morrow said in her letter.

Morrow said Wednesday that she recognizes the vote won't necessarily force West Lafayette to get fire Keon — indeed, a Purdue spokesman indicated it wouldn't on Tuesday. A vote of no-confidence, however, is rare and significant, and the Board of Trustees should take heed.

"The Board of Trustees is the only entity that has the legal authority to hold Chancellor Keon accountable, and I have joined the many people who have asked the BOT to require his resignation," Morrow said. "(Keon's continued presence) harms student learning and limits the contributions that PNW could be making to the region's well-being."

Charissa Cheah, a professor of Psychology with the University of Maryland Baltimore County, said that PNW, and by extension the whole Purdue system, is missing an opportunity to do the right thing by its Asian American-Pacific Islander community. Research that she conducts shows that often, bearing witness to community disregard is often as harmful as being the object of it.

"We call it 'vicarious' or 'collective' trauma, and it happens through the experiences we have," Cheah said. "Asian bias is

through the experiences we have," Chean said. Asian bigotry is quite, quite common, and when we see things being treated in such a callous manner, it brings up trauma. Even if you're not the target, it's just as impactful because you feel the hurt is out of your control, and when a Chancellor does it, it reinforces the feeling that the hatred is all that more pervasive. There's such a helplessness.

"I don't understand why (the Purdue Administration) is digging their heels in on this. It doesn't have to be this way."

The vote appears to have left the school's governing body in West Lafayette unmoved.

"Our Board of Trustees, which oversees the entire Purdue system, including our regional campuses of Purdue Fort Wayne and Purdue Northwest, when made aware of the insensitive and unacceptable remarks made by Chancellor Keon at a Dec. 10 commencement ceremony, asked for an immediate apology," Purdue University spokesman Tim Doty told the Post-Tribune in an email Tuesday. "Chancellor Keon has provided that apology and his plan to ensure this does not happen again, which you have already seen. Trustees have accepted the apology."

Boilermakers also "must hold themselves to a high standard that begins with civility and respect for all," a point the university and its leaders "have stated many times over," Doty said, and they'll continue "to uphold those values and expect members of our community to do so as well."

The Post-Tribune then asked Doty to clarify if Purdue University was going to ignore PNW faculty's wishes and what message that sends to them and its current and potential students. Doty has yet to respond.

PNW spokesman Kale Wilk didn't respond Wednesday to a request for comment.

Roach, meanwhile, was defiant toward the university's response.

"If Keon ignores our vote, we will demand that he resign, and if he still doesn't, we will demand that the Board of Trustees fire him," Roach said.

Keon's comment was an off-the-cuff response after commencement keynote speaker Jim Dedelow finished his speech, where he talked about a made-up language he created to entertain his new granddaughter and at one point used it to calm the baby from the stage when she squawked during his speech.

As Dedelow sat down, Keon came back to the podium and said, "Well, all I can say is" and proceeded to speak in a crude impression that sounded as if he were trying to speak Chinese. He then said, "That's sort of my Asian version of his ..." trailing off before going back on-script.

Michelle L. Quinn is a freelance reporter for the Post-Tribune.



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