Statement by AAPI Community Organizations
on the Commencement Remarks of Purdue Northwest Chancellor Thomas Keon

We collectively condemn the racist remarks of Purdue Northwest Chancellor Thomas Keon at the university's commencement ceremony on December 10, 2022.

As community organizations serving and advocating for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities in Indiana and the Midwest, we are committed to ensuring that AAPI Hoosiers are able to live in communities that are safe, inclusive, and free of racial prejudice.

Keon's gibberish—spoken in "Mock Asian"—was glaringly racist. In using Mock Asian for (failed) comedic effect, Keon ruined what was meant to be a joyful day focused on celebrating students' hard work and achievements. His insulting comments, delivered onstage during his public address, amounted to an abuse of his power as university chancellor.

Keon's "humor" must be understood as a manifestation of a broader problem of racism against AAPIs, who have been the target of an alarming rise in hate crimes and acts of discrimination and harassment in the past two years. Keon's remarks should not be dismissed as a harmless joke. Mock Asian is a common form of anti-Asian bullying and linguistic racism, which is psychologically damaging to students. It reinforces negative stereotypes and treatment of Asian Americans as outsiders and social inferiors. The use of Mock Asian has even been associated with numerous acts of anti-Asian violence and harassment during the past two years, including physical assaults and Zoom bombing attacks on schools and community events.

Earlier this week, Keon issued an apology for his remarks and described his actions as an innocent mistake. However, in his apology, Keon neither acknowledged the racist dimensions of his behavior, nor directly addressed or offered to meet with the AAPI community members harmed by his comments. Instead of truly taking responsibility for his actions, Keon hid behind a list of his diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. By directing these initiatives to address vague and unspecified "issues of importance to the Asian American Pacific Islander community at PNW" and shifting attention away from his own actions, Keon did not take genuine accountability for his own role.

Keon made his racist remarks at an important moment for AAPI Hoosiers. AAPIs are a growing presence in Indiana, including in our institutions of higher education. Beginning next month, Purdue University will even be led by a Chinese American president, Mung Chiang. Public institutions of higher education like Purdue play a critical role in training the future leaders of our

state. Universities and their leaders have a duty to model what it means to cultivate a diverse and inclusive society.

All Hoosiers–not just AAPI Hoosiers–need Keon and Purdue to do better. We urge Purdue to reconsider Keon's role as chancellor, as his behavior calls into question his judgment and wisdom to be in a position of leadership. We also urge Purdue's leaders to take action to address the problem of anti-Asian racism in its university community. We invite Purdue leaders to be in conversation with us so we may offer constructive feedback on how we can work together to make Indiana a place where members of the AAPI community are treated with genuine respect.

Signatories

National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum - Indiana Chapter
AAPI Pride of Indiana
Indiana Association of Chinese-Americans
OCA - Asian Pacific American Advocates, Greater Chicago
Asian Americans Advancing Justice | Chicago
Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community
Alliance of Filipinos for Immigrant Rights and Empowerment
Count US IN
Japanese American Citizens League, Chicago Chapter
South Asian American Policy & Research Institute
The Asian American Foundation
OPAWL – Building AAPI Feminist Leadership
Monroe County NOW

Linked Resources

1. "mock Asian":
   Ideologies of legitimate mockery: Margaret Cho's revoicings of mock Asian
   Elain W. Chun
   https://benjamins.com/online/prag/articles/prag.14.2-3.10chu

2. "hate crimes":
   Report to the Nation: Anti-Asian Prejudice & Hate Crime
   Center for Study of Hate and Extremism

https://www.csusb.edu/sites/default/files/Report%20to%20the%20Nation%20-%20Anti-Asian%20Hate%202020%20Final%20Draft%20-%20As%20of%20Apr%2030%202021%206%20PM%20corrected.pdf

3. "acts of discrimination and harassment":
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   National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF)
   https://www.napawf.org/our-work/march-2022/state-of-safety

4. "psychologically damaging":
   The psychological damages of linguistic racism and international students in Australia
   Sender Dovchin
   https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341187162_The_psychological_damages_of_linguistic_racism_and_international_students_in_Australia

5. "reinforces negative stereotypes and treatment":
   Language, Mockery and Racism: The Case of Mock Spanish
   Adam Schwartz, American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL)
   https://www.aaal.org/news/language-mockery-and-racism-the-case-of-mock-spanish

6. "physical assaults":
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   CBC News
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7. "schools":
   Racist ‘Zoom-bombing’ invades Chinese class at Newton South High
   Matt Berg, Boston Globe
   https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/04/16/metro/racist-zoom-bombing-startles-newton-south-high-school-community/

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   Asian Americans, Saving Lives Amid the Pandemic and Racism
   Jennie L. Ilustre, Asian Fortune News
   https://www.asianfortunenews.com/2020/08/asian-americans-saving-lives-amid-the-pandemic-and-racism/

9. "apology":

An Apology from Purdue University Northwest Chancellor Thomas L. Keon
https://www.pnw.edu/an-apology-from-purdue-university-northwest-chancellor-thomas-l-keon/

10. "growing presence":
    Asian Americans a fast-growing demographic, could affect elections
    Kayan Tara, Indiana Public Media
    https://indianapublicmedia.org/news/asian-americans-a-fast-growing-demographic,-could-affect-elections.php