

An Open Letter Calling for the Termination of Dr. Andrea Quenette for Racial Discrimination

What follows is a letter collectively written by the students currently enrolled in COMS 930 at the University of Kansas.

To Whom It May Concern:

On the morning of November 12, 2015, a question was posed by Communication Studies Masters student Abigail Kingsford in her COMS 930 class, a required seminar with the primary purpose of instilling best practices in graduate students teaching COMS 130 (public speaking) for the first time. She inquired, "In light of last night's university-wide town hall meeting about race and discrimination on campus, what is the best approach to talk about that event and these issues with our students?"

We students in the class began discussing possible ways to bring these issues up in our classes when COMS 930 instructor Dr. Andrea Quenette abruptly interjected with deeply disturbing remarks. Those remarks began with her admitted lack of knowledge of how to talk about racism with her students because she is white. "As a white woman I just never have seen the racism... It's not like I see 'Nigger' spray painted on walls..." she said.

As you can imagine, this utterance caused shock and disbelief. Her comments that followed were even more disparaging as they articulated not only her lack of awareness of racial discrimination and violence on this campus and elsewhere but an active denial of institutional, structural, and individual racism. This denial perpetuates racism in and of itself. After Ph.D. student Ian Beier presented strong evidence about low retention and graduation rates among Black students as being related to racism and a lack of institutional support, Dr. Quenette responded with, "Those students are not leaving school because they are physically threatened everyday but because of academic performance." This statement reinforces several negative ideas: that violence against students of color is only physical, that students of color are less academically inclined and able, and that structural and institutional cultures, policies, and support systems have no role in

shaping academic outcomes. Dr. Quenette's discourse was uncomfortable, unhelpful, and blatantly discriminatory.

The university has an obligation to address such behavior. We have met as a cohort and expressed our shock, anger, and pain that the discussion of race in COMS 930 on Thursday, November 12 caused us all. Below we have outlined the specific incidents/comments we found unacceptably offensive.

1. Use of the n-word.

This phraseology is inhospitable, anti-Black, and unacceptable. It has several negative implications. First, it has negative ramifications for our teaching pedagogy; it creates a model for teaching that is based on discrimination and outright oppression, which is antithetical and counterproductive to the goal of civic engagement crucial to the Basic Course. Second, it prohibits the creation of an inclusive and tolerant culture within the department that involves faculty, staff, and students. Third, it is unprofessional and based upon racially insensitive notions of how language is used and ignores research being produced by our very own department. Dr. Angela Gist gave a great colloquium on her research on the rhetoric of dignity and its implications for creating a positive, productive organizational environment. Furthermore, the usage of racially charged rhetoric ignores the plethora of phenomenological data we have about the way students of color experience the university. Most immediately concerning are the ways this terminology functions as terroristic and threatening to the cultivation of a safe learning environment.

2. The assertion that an inability to see racism means that it does not exist on this campus.

Dr. Quenette indicated that because she has not experienced or witnessed discrimination, it is not happening at KU. She asked for more evidence, and was dismissive of the multiple examples provided. These comments demonstrate not only an unwillingness to accept evidence contrary to her own ideas and experiences but also exemplify the dismissal and questioning of minority students' experiences that has reinforced the very structural discrimination they seek to destroy by speaking up.

These comments betray a lack of empathy and care for students of color who are facing academic struggles, which is particularly troubling for our incoming cohort of graduate teaching assistants as we are crafting our own teaching pedagogy. Furthermore, it denies the necessity for social and academic institutional programs in support of disenfranchised students.

3. The assumption that retention rates of African-American students is solely due to their lack of academic ability rather than discrimination, structural racism, or institutional barriers.

This discourse is academically irresponsible, morally abhorrent, and patently untrue. To deny the historical legacies of slavery, racial discrimination, and oppression is to perpetuate a space where students are discouraged to ask for access and support as needed. Our concern is that we are being taught that if a minority student approaches us for additional resources or support, we would have no obligation or compelling reason to do so. Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance.

4. The lack of training or constructive strategies provided to better enable us 1) to teach and be inclusive of diverse students and 2) discuss sensitive issues like racism on campus, and *the dismissal of the need to add these trainings to COMS 930 and/or the orientation preceding it.*

This issue is particularly troubling given the nature of this class and the unique position we are in to foster dialogue and increase understanding. Dr. Quenette unequivocally failed in her official duties as a public employee of this university, director of the Communication Studies Basic Course, and as the instructor of the COMS 930 course when she failed to constructively engage in necessary conversations and provide us the vital tools for improving the inclusiveness of our classrooms.

Furthermore, we have found the comments made by Dr. Quenette actively violate the following policies by which she is bound by her role at the University of Kansas:

1. The official University of Kansas Racial and Ethnic Harassment policy and corresponding Board of Regents statement, which reads: “The University of Kansas, Lawrence, is committed to programs and activities that are free of racial or ethnic discrimination. To carry out the mission of this institution, the university community must provide and maintain a working and learning environment that fosters respect among all members of the community. ***The university’s goal is to provide an environment where individuals are free to develop*** intellectually, personally, professionally, and socially ***without intimidation or fear.*** Intimidation and harassment affect not only those who suffer the harassment but also the entire community. ***Racial and ethnic discrimination is a violation of federal and state law,*** including Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Kansas Acts Against Discrimination. The Kansas Board of Regents is particularly concerned

about the continuing societal problems of harassment. . . ***It is the policy of the Board that such conduct cannot and will not be tolerated at the institutions under its governance and control.*** Each Regents institution shall develop and maintain specific policies which seek to (i) identify prohibited conduct in these areas, (ii) educate campus constituencies with regard to these negative behaviors, (iii) eliminate such behaviors, and (iv) set forth the manner in which such behaviors or conduct are to be addressed” [emphasis added].

2. The University of Kansas mission statement, which reads: “The university is committed to excellence. ***It fosters a multicultural environment in which the dignity and rights of the individual are respected.*** Intellectual diversity, integrity, and disciplined inquiry in the search for knowledge are of paramount importance” [emphasis added].
3. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Mission Statement, which reads: “In the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at KU, we learn without boundaries. Through our innovative research and teaching, we emphasize interdisciplinary education, global awareness, and experiential learning. ***This ensures our graduates are engaged, socially responsible citizens who are empowered to build their futures in Kansas and the world***” [emphasis added].
4. Sentiments echoed in the Chancellor’s Letter issued November 13, 2015 which reinforces, “when it comes to racism and discrimination, change is unlikely to happen from the top down. ***Change has to happen from within our university, and it must involve all of us—administrators, students, faculty, staff and alumni—working together***” [emphasis added].
5. The Communication Graduate Studies handbook, which reads: “The enrollment in COMS 930: Each Graduate Teaching Assistant during the first semester of teaching is required to enroll in the section of 930 entitled “Seminar in Teaching Oral Communication.” The class meets weekly and carries two hours of credit. ***Its purpose is to provide the assistant instructor with additional insight and expertise in the teaching fundamentals of oral communication generally, and, in particular, the program as it is conducted at the University of Kansas***” [emphasis added].

Dr. Quenette’s deployment of racially violent rhetoric not only creates a non-inclusive environment in opposition to one of the University of Kansas’ core tenets, but actively destroys the very possibility of realizing those values and goals. We are frustrated and disappointed at Dr. Quenette’s lack of efficacious response to the repeated request to have any workshops on

reaching diverse students, creating an inclusive classroom space, or discussing sensitive issues. She actively and continually denied the necessity of these trainings.

5. Aggressive, unprofessional behavior unacceptable of a university faculty member and public employee.

We have consistently been concerned throughout the semester with Dr. Quenette's frequent and extreme defensiveness, continued belittlement of graduate student feedback, and confrontational demeanor in response to anonymous evaluations of the orientation process. Comments that reflected an increased desire for diversity training, representation, and discussion during orientation were cast as irrelevant and unnecessary at multiple junctions in the COMS 930 course. Furthermore, in the COMS 930 course, Dr. Quenette consistently misrepresented and denied speech calling attention to sexist remarks, racially insensitive comments, inappropriate jokes, constant swearing, hostility to alternative teaching methods, and ridicule of incoming GTAs that were all made apparent in the evaluations of orientation and/or during COMS 930 class sessions. Further cause for concern is Dr. Quenette's multiple violations of anonymity and targeting individual student comments for direct confrontation in relation to these orientation evaluations and in-class comments.

6. A pattern of behavior that indicates recent issues are far from isolated and warrant Dr. Quenette's termination.

Aside from these most recent transgressions, there are a number of other concerns we have about Dr. Quenette's continued appointment and presence in the department. These concerns include, but are not limited to: jokes about suicide when asked how we should discuss a recent on-campus suicide with our students, disclosing personal information about other students that may pose external safety risks, and disdain and mockery for graduates in the COMS 930 course who request additional resources and support.

Dr. Quenette has created a culture of disrespect for all students by calling undergraduates "stupid" and doubting their intellectual abilities. Dr. Quenette has made it a habit to disparage the reputations of veteran GTAs in the Communication Studies department by naming them and mocking their classroom policies and procedures, and disclosing private information regarding research projects involving other GTAs. Dr. Quenette exposed information about the personal location of a former GTA in the midst of a domestic violence situation. Dr. Quenette breached FERPA regulations by showing the midterm grades of previous students during the new GTA

orientation, specifically, the grades of Cassandra Bird and Michael Eisenstadt.

Given the above concerns that demonstrate Dr. Quenette's inability to carry out key tenets and responsibilities as the Basic Course Director and COMS 930 instructor we request Dr. Quenette's immediate termination. Dr. Quenette's continued presence as department faculty creates an unsafe learning space and hostile work environment which puts at risk students' ability to complete their degree programs, teach the Basic Course, and fulfill the guiding principals of the department and university writ large.

A number of complaints have been filed with the Office of Institutional Opportunity and Access about this incident and others. The response that more dialogue is needed to resolve this problem is insufficient to redress our claim that the space of dialogue is coded through terror and hostility. The belief that democratic deliberation is neutral is wrong and dangerous. We appreciate the IOA's commitment to "students' ability to file complaints and have their voice heard without fear of retaliation." What is needed now is action upon those complaints. Do not allow the guise of free speech to be invoked and crowd out our demand—legal precedent indicates that Dr. Quenette's speech is not protected by the First Amendment.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Garcetti v. Ceballos* that: "when public employees make statements pursuant to their official duties, the employees are not speaking as citizens for First Amendment purposes, and the Constitution does not insulate their communications from employer discipline." Admittedly, the Court has not settled on the question of whether or not this analysis extends to "scholarship or teaching." The situation in which the analysis most consistency does not apply is when a professor communicates as a "citizen speaking on a matter of public concern." Dr. Quenette was speaking directly about discussing race in our classes while assuming her role as instructor of COMS 930, a course teaching new instructors how to teach well; she was thus speaking pursuant to her official duties and not as a citizen. In *Sheldon v. Dhillon*, *Garcetti* did not apply because it could not be determined that a professor was dismissed for "conduct [that] was reasonably related to a legitimate pedagogical concern." Dr. Quenette's comments in this specific class, though, clearly demonstrate a legitimate pedagogical concern. The goal of the course is to produce practitioners, so by imbuing racist language, remarks, and viewpoints into the pedagogy her students were meant to replicate, Dr. Quenette was training us to perpetrate acts and ideas violating the policies of the university. Therefore, her speech is not protected by the First Amendment

and employer discipline for her remarks is not only legal, but necessary based on her breach of contract.

We want to be absolutely clear that we will not attend this class, we will not accept being graded by Dr. Quenette, we will not recruit, and we will not feel safe to learn and grow as teachers and scholars while under the supervision of Dr. Quenette. Her relationship with the University of Kansas, the Department of Communication Studies, and the Basic Course should be terminated.

Sincerely,

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