

A Chancellor's Remarks at a University Commencement Ceremony: An Analysis From the Perspective of Symbolic Management

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The controversial remarks of a university chancellor at a formal commencement ceremony are analyzed from a symbolic management perspective. The event was captured on YouTube and disseminated on social media, becoming viral in 70 minutes. Stories emerged in the local, national, and international press describing the remarks and their impact. The controversy resulted in an apology from the chancellor, calls for dismissal from the faculty senate, a reprimand from the university's Board of Trustees, and condemnation from the professional association of university professors. Language is a verbal symbol that is invested with meaning. When verbal symbols are used appropriately, they have tremendous power to inspire, mobilize, and motivate. When used inappropriately, they can hurt and irreparably damage relationships, reputation, and organizational cache. Four questions are addressed: (1) What does the chancellor's remarks mean? (2) Were the remarks appropriate? (3) Were the remarks hurtful or potentially dangerous? and (4) Was the ensuing apology genuine and sufficient? Conclusions, implications, and policy recommendations are discussed.

Keywords: symbolic management, commencement remarks, Thomas Keon, verbal symbols, mock Asian

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyzes the remarks of Thomas Keon, the chancellor of Purdue University Northwest, a regional campus of a major midwestern land grant university in the USA. The brief remarks were articulated at the university's December 10, 2022, commencement exercises. They will be described and analyzed from a symbolic management perspective. In brief, symbolic management refers to an action-oriented approach to managing that involves explaining, rationalizing, and legitimating the activities of organizations. It is accomplished by means of material, verbal, and action symbols to provide meaning to the workings of organizations (Dandridge, Mitroff, & Joyce, 1980). Symbols are the basic constituents of organizational culture. From this perspective, the chancellor's comments represent verbal symbols, the commencement exercises represent action symbols, and the academic regalia and paper diplomas represent material symbols. Universities are organizations whose members – faculty, students, and stakeholders – exhibit insight, use language, invest meaning in events, and seek meaning in their lives. In essence, they act symbolically. While the commencement exercises of university graduation are a richly symbolic event, the following analysis focuses on the verbal symbolism of the chancellor's remarks.

Organizationally, this paper is divided into three sections. The first describes the remarks made by the chancellor at the December 10 commencement exercises and highlights the event's social media, print, and TV coverage and opinions about it. The second focuses on four analytical questions related to the remarks' symbolic meaning and stakeholders' reactions. It also focuses on whether the remarks were (1) appropriate, (2) dangerous, and (3) mollified after the chancellor's apology. The third section provides a summary, details implications for what is likely to occur, and suggests several policy recommendations.

DESCRIPTION OF THE REMARKS AND MEDIA COVERAGE

As part of his December 10, 2022 address at the institution's commencement exercises honoring 833 graduates, the university chancellor uttered a remark – a gibberish aside – perceived by some students, parents, and faculty to be a mockery of Asian people. The chancellor characterized it as a joke. It came in response to the ceremony's keynote speaker, James Dedelow, who mentioned a made-up language he sometimes uses as a radio host on the air and with his family. Dedelow spoke in the made-up language, sounding somewhat Eastern European, which drew laughs from the audience. After Dedelow concluded his address, the chancellor took back the microphone and said, "Well, all I can say is..." before articulating a string of made-up words meant to sound like he was trying to speak Chinese. Afterward, he remarked, "That's sort of my Asian version," which drew mild laughter. A YouTube clip of the chancellor's remarks can be seen and heard at the following link: <https://youtu.be/ofbtRH8fRoQ>

Several media outlets covered the incident. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* featured the story and the chancellor's apology (Rodrigues-Sherley, 2022). In a statement released on December 15, the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum condemned the chancellor's remarks as "glaringly racist." The Forum also said the chancellor'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" (Rodrigues-Sherley, 2022). In the *Chronicle* article discussing his statement of apology, the chancellor asserted, "We are all human...I made a mistake, and I assure you I did not intend to be hurtful, and my comments do not reflect my personal or our institutional values" (Rodrigues-Sherley, 2022).

A December 15 article in *The Guardian* reported that the chancellor mocked Asian languages after which he apologized amid intense backlash (Yang, 2022). His statement said "I made a comment that was offensive and insensitive. I am truly sorry for my unplanned, off-the-cuff response to another speaker, as my words have caused confusion, pain and anger.... I will learn from this and assure you that Purdue Northwest and I will take action to prevent such missteps from occurring in the future." According to Yang (2022), not everyone believed the apology was authentic. Grace Meng, U.S. Representative and Vice-chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus said "This manufactured and fake apology for what he characterized as a 'mistake' is a farce. Further action should be taken" (Yang, 2022). One commentator reported by Yang (2022) thought that the apology was "utterly insufficient" and questioned why the Purdue Board of Trustees was satisfied with this apology to put an end to the matter. It was thought that the chancellor of Purdue Northwest disgraced the university.

In a December 16 story covered by *National Public Radio*, the chancellor's remarks were defended by the university's associate vice chancellor, Kris Falzone, who said that "Chancellor Keon was reacting to something that the speaker [Dedelow] had said, and it was taken out of context" (Heyward, 2022). However, others denounced the chancellor's remarks, and Meng said in a press release after the incident, "His racist imitation no doubt caused pain...We have to continue to call out instances like these so that they never become the norm in our schools, neighborhoods and nation" (Heyward, 2022).

The incident was covered by Sportskeeda, a sports and esports news website based in India. Its global content platform, *SK POP*, reported that the viral video of the Chancellor's remarks was seen 567.2k times, with what seemed like endless quote tweets. After the remarks, "Netizens have...taken to social media to express anger against the educational institution" (Rao, 2022). They were appalled by the blatant racism displayed by the chancellor. Many questioned why the educator was unaware of his prejudicial act. According to *SK POP*, "several netizens rallied for him to be terminated from his position (Rao, 2022). The

chancellor, however, defended his actions by claiming to be “inclusive to all people” (Rao, 2022). He has reportedly formed the PRIDE Team initiative, which aims to “promote an open, respectful and welcoming culture” (Rao, 2022). A spokesperson for the *Chicago Tribune* asked the university’s Board of Trustees for their response to the incident. The spokesperson stated “that the board was aware of the incident that took place during the commencement. They also added that they accept Keon’s apology” (Rao, 2022).

In its coverage of the Chancellor’s remarks, the *Tribune* published no less than nine articles from December 14 to December 25. Initially covering the chancellor’s apology for a culturally insensitive remark, the news outlet reported on December 16 that two petitions had urged Purdue University Northwest’s (PNW) Chancellor Thomas Keon to resign. One petition, written by “A Concerned PNW student”, captured 9,374 signatures to this point and urged the campus “to look at what he said and deeply recognize what effect this will have on the diverse communities at Purdue Northwest” (Quinn, 2022). On December 15, a second petition was posted online and signed by a group of Asian academics nationwide. It stated that the chancellor’s apology for the remark does not address their community’s concerns. The petition states that “Racism directed toward Asians and Asian Americans in the United States has a long, violent history that dates back to the 1800s and continues to impact the safety and health of this growing and heterogeneous population” (Quinn, 2022). According to Richard Lee, a professor of psychology at the University of Minnesota and author of the second petition, the chancellor’s remarks were not a mistake. “It would not have been OK for him to use an African American dialect, would it? Or Native American? People do not see us as oppressed, so we are often targets of widespread ridicule. And we know this because of “former President Donald Trump, who repeatedly mocked Asians and created the coronavirus nicknames ‘China flu’ and ‘Kung flu’” (Quinn, 2022). Lee contends that “it was an abuse of power to use (the commencement) stage to send the message that (making fun of the Asian community) is acceptable” (Quinn, 2022).

On December 22, the *Tribune* reported that the Purdue Board of Trustees reprimanded the chancellor in the wake of the fallout from graduation comments that mocked Asians. According to Purdue University West Lafayette spokesman Tim Doty, each member of the Board concluded, “In addition to its being extremely offensive and insensitive, this offhand attempt at humor was in poor taste, unbecoming of his role as chancellor, and unacceptable for an occasion that should be remembered solely for its celebratory and unifying atmosphere” (Quinn, 2022 b). Doty further wrote that “the Board has made clear to him [Chancellor Keon] that a repeat incident of a similar nature would provide grounds for further Board action, including possible dismissal. The news furthered Faculty Senate Chair Thomas Roach’s resolve to ensure that Chancellor Keon is removed from his position. The action of the Board of Trustees is not a fitting response, claimed Roach. “It is an insult to our AAPI [Asian American Pacific Islander] community, it’s an insult to our faculty, and it shows they don’t respect what we and the students stand for” (Quinn, 2022 b). According to Senate Chair Roach, “Seventy percent of the PNW Faculty believe he should be fired. How can they be our Board of Trustees if they are so incapable of representing us. It proves how out-of-touch they are with academia” (Quinn, 2022 b). The Board’s reprimand followed a vote of “no-confidence” by the faculty (135 to 20) after Chancellor Keon’s racist remarks at the December 10 commencement ceremony.

The *Tribune* published a December 20 commentary arguing that the Purdue University Northwest chancellor should take responsibility for his racist remarks against the Asian community (Bui, 2022). Pretending to speak in an indistinguishable Asian language was seemingly amusing to the chancellor. Some in the platform party looked uncomfortable hearing his comments; others laughed in response. “How disturbing that there were those who appeared to think he was funny” (Bui, 2022). Supposedly, the chancellor’s intentions were not meant to be hurtful. Bui asserts that she does not care since the effect is the same. “The derogatory and ethnic slur of saying something like ‘ching chong, ling long’ is not new. Whenever someone makes fun of Asian languages, they communicate that AAPI communities are viewed as outsiders in America” (Bui, 2022). Instead of downplaying his actions, Bui asserts that the chancellor should take more responsibility for his remarks. She states that when the AAPI community is ostracized, it creates a hostile environment, which fosters fear. It also spurs racially motivated acts of hate. She hopes

that someday, people will think twice before making the AAPI community the pawns of their so-called jokes (Bui, 2022).

In its December 25 edition, the *Tribune* published letters suggesting Chancellor Keon should be judged for his comments. Clearly, some people were hurt or offended by the chancellor's off-the-cuff attempt at humor. Letters to the newspaper urged that when judging the chancellor, people should remember that we all are capable of moments of stupidity. They suggest that when tackling the racism and hatred that are systemic in our society, perhaps we should remember that "we sometimes have bouts of stupidity and fail to meet our standards for behavior. When these occur, we are often as horrified as others. But forgiveness is good for both the forgiver and the forgiven (Pastors, 2022).

In a January 6 *Tribune* article, Quinn (2023) reported that the Urban League of Northwest Indiana and its national counterpart called for embattled PNW Chancellor Keon to resign from its board. Marc Morial, the president and CEO of the National Urban League, stated the rationale for its resignation demand. "We are a group that has the highest standards, and we do not want to put our reputation on the line (for someone who doesn't appear willing to genuinely apologize)... I believe in redemption, but this is a high-level position. If he were honorable – and if the Purdue University Board of Trustees were courageous – they would remove him as Chancellor because he no longer has the credibility to lead a prestigious, diverse institution" (Quinn, 2023). Morial believes that leaders cannot effectively lead in this century if they continue to use racial stereotypes. When they make a slip of that magnitude – to mock a language they do not speak – their action is indefensible.

The uproar surrounding the PNW chancellor's remarks was also reported on December 15 in *NBC Chicago* news and *ABC 7 Chicago* news. His apology statement's excerpt was detailed (ABC7 Chicago Digital Team, 2022). The chancellor's remarks were also reported in the December 14 edition of the *New York Post*, highlighting portions of Keon's apology. In it he states, "I am truly sorry for my unplanned, off-the-cuff response to another speaker, as my words have caused confusion, pain, and anger" (Propper, 2022).

Retired Purdue University Calumet (now PNW) Chancellor James Yackel expressed concern about the image of Purdue – the institution – following Chancellor Keon's remarks. "What is at stake is the university's future," according to Yackel, quoted in an article appearing in the January 9, 2023, edition of the *Chicago Tribune* (Quinn, 2023). The former chancellor called on Keon to step down for the institution's good.

The negative impressions created after Chancellor Keon's remarks at the university's commencement ceremony appear to have resonated globally. The impact of a few seconds of gibberish, meant to sound like an Asian language, has been substantial. The simple, seconds-long remarks of a chancellor on December 10 have become cloaked in layers of symbolism that has mobilized communities and motivated constituents in a somewhat universal call for action. The symbolic interpretation of the commencement remarks and several questions will be analyzed in the next section of this paper.

ANALYSIS OF THE CHANCELLOR'S REMARKS FROM A SYMBOLIC MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

This section of the paper analyzes the chancellor's remarks – verbal symbols – from the perspective of symbolic management. Four questions will be addressed. The questions emanate from the theoretical framework of organizational symbolism and symbolic management (Barczyk, 1988; Pfeffer, 1981).

What Is the Meaning of the Chancellor's Remarks in the Context of Symbolic Management?

Theoretical Framework

Management as symbolic action is a critical aspect of organizational decision-making. It is an expressive mode of managing that relates to the justification, legitimation, and rationalization of organizational policies and decisions. In addition to understanding the observable, measurable, and social facts evident in organizations, it is important to understand the symbols in organizations – material, verbal, and action (Pfeffer, 1981). The argument being advanced is that while management has some discretionary impact on instrumental or substantive action and resource allocation, its primary effect is concerning

expressive or symbolic actions. This view is consistent with Weick (1979), who argues that managerial work involves managing symbols, myths, and images – suggesting that managers may be more evangelists than accountants. Central to the view that management is a symbolic activity is the notion that people use language, exhibit insight, invest meaning in events and behavior, and seek meaning in their lives. In short, they act symbolically. When discussing leadership, Pondy (1978) develops a similar argument. He suggests that managerial leadership involves a large component of symbolic activity. According to Pondy (1978), the manager’s task is to provide a label and an explanation for organizational activity. He states:

...the effectiveness of a leader lies in his ability to make activity meaningful for those in his role set – not to change behavior but to give others a sense of understanding what they are doing and especially to articulate it so they can communicate about the meaning of their behavior....If in addition the leader can put it into words, then the meaning of what the group is doing becomes a social fact....This dual capacity...to make sense of things and to put them into language meaningful to large numbers of people gives the person who has it enormous leverage (Pondy, 1978: 94).

The activity of management is to make what is going on in the organization and the community surrounding it meaningful and sensible to organizational participants and to develop a social definition and consensus around the activities being undertaken. Management, in this perspective, involves more than sense making or labeling. It involves the development of a social consensus around those labels and the definition of activity. If management is viewed as an activity to rationalize and make sense of activity, then language as a verbal symbol, is a vehicle through which such rationalization occurs (Edelman, 1964: Chapter 6). On a basic level, symbols are signs that are endowed with meaning and significance and embody a wider pattern of meaning. A sign becomes a symbol when it is interpreted – when patterns of suggestion and meaning are thrown on the sign. Any utterance, remark, concept, or event offers itself as material for creating a symbol.

Edelman (1964) makes a salient point about language being important to managerial action. He asserts that language is an important substitute for using raw power or brute force. “Force signals weakness in politics as rape does in sex. Talk, on the other hand, involves a competitive exchange of symbols, referential and evocative, through which values are shared and assigned, and coexistence attained” (Edelman, 1964:14). In the context of the PNW chancellor’s remarks, the indistinguishable Asian language that was articulated at the commencement ceremony, conveyed a certain meaning. It justified potentially violent behaviors that render them more likely to occur. In other words, the chancellor’s use of a fake Asian language was a verbal symbol, which to some would suggest that Asian people talk strangely, are not American, can be treated with disrespect, and are appropriate objects of laughter.

Interpretation of Remarks

Symbolic action, according to Pfeffer (1981) may serve to mobilize and motivate individuals both within and outside of an organization to act. The “Hawthorne effect” provides one illustration of this phenomenon. The effect refers to the idea that individuals when subjected to special treatment or observation, may respond with higher performance levels regardless of the content of the changes implemented. The chancellor’s use of a fake Asian language may have had the same effect but in a negative direction. The symbolic interpretation of his words and language was that it was acceptable to make fun of the Asian community in a public forum and at an official event. This interpretation is particularly problematic because it normalizes racist treatment of Asians, which has the potential to motivate individuals to commit hate crimes against them. Those crimes were exacerbated during the COVID pandemic when Asians were made the object of ridicule by then President Donald Trump, who repeatedly mocked them and created the coronavirus nicknames.

When the chancellor spoke in a fake language meant to be a joke, it could be argued that he was criticizing Asian culture as being bad, worthless, or unimportant. His use of the fake Asian-sounding

language was viewed by the audience and reported by journalists as mockery because the chancellor's remarks – the gibberish he articulated – seemed to make AAPI culture look stupid and without value.

Were the Chancellor's Remarks Appropriate Given the Time and Place at Which They Occurred?

The chancellor's fake language remarks evoked laughter in some people attending the graduation ceremony. Others were perhaps in a state of disbelief. It seems reasonable to conclude that the fake language used by the chancellor was meant to elicit laughs – ones that had the effect of being hurtful to Asians and Asian Americans. The chancellor himself thought it worthwhile to make his fake Asian language funny to get a laugh from the attendees at the graduation ceremony. He likely made the commencement remarks to be comedic and be as likeable as the previous speaker, James Dedelow. He mockingly used the fake language to evoke laughter. According to some journalists, the fake language mocked and demeaned the AAPI community to obtain a sort of "you're good" reaction from the audience at the graduation ceremony. This likely gave him a certain amount of satisfaction knowing that people liked his humor.

The mockery and ensuing laughter can be examined on a psychoanalytic level. Unconscious material is held in repression by specific amounts of psychic energy. When another person, like the chancellor, hits at this material by telling a joke or mocking a culture with a fake Asian language, the psychic energy diverted to the task of holding the material in repression becomes superfluous for a second and is transformed into laughter (Freud, 1938). In his provocative work on aggression, Konrad Lorenz theorized that laughter is an expression of, and motivation for, aggressive behavior. He felt that laughter is a controlled form of human aggression which "always remains obedient to reason" and "is never in danger of regressing and causing the primal aggressive behavior to break through. Barking dogs may occasionally bite, he contends, but laughing men rarely ever shoot (Lorenz, 1971: 205). This suggests that laughter is a healthy, functional, and necessary process. However, it can be pointed in the wrong direction or misused to serve unsavory purposes. When that occurs, man's dignity is lowered to baseness because laughter becomes corrupted. Three situations contribute to the corruption of laughter.

- (1) *Laughter at anything new* – This type of laughter is an initial reaction to innovation. The reaction involves anger mixed with laughter or laughter mixed with anger. When something is new, it is perceived as an impediment to progress. It makes the inventor feel stupid and the invention seem worthless. The new cannot be accepted with immediate enthusiasm, for everything new is inwardly frightening. The history of every invention, of every new idea, attests to the universality of laughter as an initial reaction.
- (2) *Directed laughter* – This type of laughter occurs when it is weaponized. When used for this purpose, the weapon can be focused to promote or demote a worthy cause. In political campaigns, for example, laughter can be used to further both worthy and unworthy causes. In democracies, the use and misuse of laughter is relatively harmless. In dictatorships, however, laughter can be used as an important propaganda arm of a regime. Irony, distortion, and caricature to debase a party or an individual, whether rightfully or wrongfully, should not be underestimated when used as weapons to attack external and internal political enemies.
- (3) *Prostituted laughter* – This type of laughter is created by people who would sell their souls to arouse a laugh. They are not exactly interested in hurting the object of their attack, even though that might be the effect of their action. Their choice is incidental rather than spiteful, and their main interest is to get a laugh. Prostituted laughter is used to satisfy the person telling the joke or engage in mockery to satisfy a need to form a real friendship (Lorenz, 1971). In that regard, "laughter (as the overt expression of humor) produces, simultaneously, a strong fellow feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders" (Lorenz, 1971: 284). When used in this fashion, laughter can be a cruel weapon, causing injury if it strikes a defenseless human being undeservedly.

The chancellor's fake Asian language can be viewed as an attempt to engage in prostituted laughter. It was meant to evoke laughter from the audience at the graduation ceremony. At the time, he likely did not mean to hurt anyone or demean any culture. However, his remarks had that effect. He simply used the fake language to get a laugh – an act he likely hoped would satisfy his need for social approval or acceptance.

Once he uttered the remarks that had the unintended effect of mocking Asian culture, it created an exclusionary atmosphere. It may have sown seeds of anti-Asian sentiment and possible aggression towards the AAPI community. The few words of gibberish he articulated resulted in laughter, which served as a weapon aimed at defenseless human beings.

The chancellor's remarks were inappropriate because they aimed to satisfy his need for approval or friendship. But any friendship relationship that might evolve from his attempt at prostituted laughter would be parasitical and selfish. Only the audience would be giving, and even then, the motivation would be to take something in return. The audience at the commencement ceremony and those who heard the remarks were simply the chancellor's objects of usefulness. Given the symbolic nature of the event, the chancellor's remarks are categorically inappropriate. Those remarks were not delivered at a local bar or on a golf course, but at an official and richly ceremonious event – where graduates and faculty dress in colorful centuries-old regalia and students who completed degrees receive diplomas as symbols of their accomplishment. It was an event filled with congratulatory speeches and a procession of the university hierarchy holding banners and solemnly walking to the music of “Pomp and Circumstance.” The chancellor's remarks were inappropriate.

Were the Chancellor's Remarks Hurtful or Potentially Dangerous?

The case has already been made that the chancellor's remarks – words in a fake language meant to sound Asian – were demeaning and perceived by some as a mockery of Asian culture. The Purdue University Northwest chapter of the AAUP condemned the remarks. They transformed the celebratory commencement event into one at which many Asian Americans felt ridiculed, their sense of belonging undermined, and their feelings hurt. The chancellor's gibberish meant to sound like an Asian language, symbolized a disregard and disrespect for members of the AAPI community. Language and verbal articulations serve as symbols that give form and coherence to organizations' experience and world view (Smircich, 1983; Evered, 1983; and Frost & Morgan, 1983). Language, these researchers contend, defines an organization's reality – it creates reality. With the chancellor's remarks, many people may now regard Purdue University with a new lens. The newly created reality is that Purdue is an organization that disrespects and devalues Asian people and their culture.

This paper will now assess whether the chancellor's joking use of a fake Asian-sounding language is potentially dangerous. Norman Chen, the chief executive of The Asian American Foundation, commented that the chancellor's display “normalizes the narrative that Asian Americans are perpetual foreigners” and further fuels “the current climate of anti-Asian hate” (AAUP Press Release, 2022). There is no doubt that anti-Asian hate is dangerous. It results in crimes against persons to the point of death. The hate is frequently motivated by words and ideas that denigrate Asians. According to Pfeffer (1981), symbolic action can have real consequences. People who hear speeches, jokes, or other verbal utterances respond based on perceptions, regardless of the veracity of those perceptions. If a leader makes a joke or fake language remark and that remark is symbolically laden with anti-Asian sentiment, people who hear it will react. This is the case because words in any language are symbols, which have power that can produce real consequences – both positive and negative. Consequences include the motivation and mobilization of support, the diversion or satisfaction of demands, and the facilitation of change. Relative to the question posed in this section of the paper, it is thought that the chancellor's remarks were dangerous because they represented an unintentional denigration of Asian culture. As such, they have the potential to fuel hate crimes.

Within 70 minutes of their utterance at Purdue Northwest's graduation ceremony, the chancellor's remarks were disseminated over social media and became viral. This almost instant response by a commencement ceremony audience member can also be viewed from a symbolic perspective. Sensing something inappropriate and being offended, the person was motivated by the power of the verbal symbols articulated by the chancellor. S/he immediately posted a clip of the graduation ceremony showing the hurtful remarks on social media. Thus, the chancellor's verbal symbols articulated at the graduation ceremony motivated an audience member to post the clip and express her/his dissatisfaction with the remarks.

U.S. Congressperson Meng is unequivocal when she says, “Over the past few years, we have seen evidence of harm that these stereotypical tropes and racist caricatures, even in so-called jest, can perpetuate among our communities. The comments made by Keon were offensive and dangerous. His racist imitation no doubt caused pain” (AAUP Press Release, 2022).

According to a national survey, anti-Asian hate crimes have increased since the start of the COVID pandemic. In 2020, approximately one in eight Asian American adults reported experiencing a hate crime. In 2021 it was one in six. The hate crimes continue to increase in 2022. It is not coincidental that in 2022, one in five Americans believe that Asian Americans are partially responsible for COVID-19, compared to one in ten in 2021 (Lee, 2022). Americans are now more likely to believe that calling the coronavirus as “Wuhan virus” or “Chinese virus” is correct and appropriate. Other beliefs further fuel the anti-Asian sentiment by Americans. One in three believe that Asian Americans are more loyal to the country in which they were born than to the U.S. This statistic is up from one in five in 2021 (STAATUS Index Report, 2022). In the two-year period following March 2020, more than 11,400 hate incidents against Asian Americans have been reported in the U.S. Physical assaults accounted for 17% of the incidents, with nearly one in 10 occurring on public transit (Rios, 2022). The AAPI communities across the U.S. have faced bigotry in the form of physical attacks and verbal harassment since the coronavirus was first reported in China. “Many blame Donald Trump for helping to stir anti-Asian sentiment by using racist terms when referring to the virus” (Yang, 2021). When hate is encouraged, according to Manjusha Kulkarni, co-founder of Stop AAPI Hate and executive director of the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, “it’s not like a genie in a bottle where you can pull it out and push it back in whenever you want....There’s too much perpetuating these belief systems to make them go away” (Yang, 2021). The gist here is that words – verbal symbols – motivate people to dangerous acts of hate. Somewhat similar to former President Trump’s words, the chancellor uttered gibberish, which had the unintended effect of demeaning or denigrating Asian culture. This has the potential to be dangerous.

Did the Chancellor’s Apology Following His Graduation Ceremony Remarks Serve to Satisfy Demand?

According to Pfeffer (1981), one of the consequences of symbolic action is the satisfaction of demands. Words in an apology, for example, may serve to mollify groups that are dissatisfied with a product, an organization, or a person connected with an organization. When the chancellor realized that his remarks at the commencement ceremony would not vanish or be quelled with time, he issued an apology. The statement came four days after the commencement ceremony. Perhaps the chancellor felt some remorse over his hurtful remarks, or perhaps he realized that the worsening of the negative press coverage might jeopardize his career. The motivation for his apology may never be known. For many, the apology fell short of expectations. Numerous faculty members, the University Senate, and the Purdue University Northwest chapter of the AAUP have condemned the chancellor’s remarks and called for his resignation. In his apology on December 14, 2022, the chancellor stated that he “made a mistake and I assure you I did not intend to be hurtful and my comments do not reflect my personal or our institutional values” (Afshar and Sottile, 2022).

The chancellor’s apology is analogous to firing a manager in professional sports (Gamson and Scotch, 1964). It is a ritual activity that has consequences for public perceptions. In the case of a sports team, the perceptions of poor performance on the field are symbolically addressed with the manager’s dismissal. The fans’ demands for change require this action, which does not guarantee better performance in the future if the players lack the ability or funding for their training. In the case of the chancellor’s remarks, the perceptions of global stakeholders that Purdue is a university that denigrates Asian culture required attention. It was hoped that those negative perceptions could be symbolically addressed with a ritual activity – issuing a statement of apology. But for many individuals, the apology fell short and did not achieve its intended effect, except with the Purdue University Board of Trustees. The Board accepted the chancellor’s apology and issued a formal reprimand. Many Purdue stakeholders await satisfaction. They remain hurt and dissatisfied with the chancellor’s insincere apology.

DISCUSSION

This paper details the aftermath of the remarks articulated by Thomas Keon, Chancellor of Purdue University Northwest. Those remarks lasted a few seconds after he took the microphone from another speaker to deliver his address at the university's December 2022 commencement ceremony. In those few seconds, an entire community was offended because those remarks meant to sound like a fake Asian language, were interpreted by many as an insult and denigration of Asian culture. The chancellor's remarks and a few awkward seconds following them were captured on YouTube and posted to social media. The video went viral in 70 minutes. The almost universal reaction to the post was condemnation. Those few seconds of so-called remarks – gibberish – in the words of some journalists, were deemed inappropriate, hurtful, and potentially dangerous.

This paper analyzes the meaning of the seemingly innocuous jest made during a commencement speech. We advanced the argument that because a university's commencement ceremony is laden with powerful symbols – verbal, material, and action – that celebrate the academic achievements and intellectual endeavors of its graduates, the “off-the-cuff” remarks of the head of the institution, its' chancellor, took on a special meaning. From a symbolic perspective, words can energize and inspire, but they also have the power to debase and humiliate. In extreme circumstances, words can incite others to engage in hurtful and violent acts of racism.

U.S. Representative Grace Meng condemned the chancellor's verbal behavior at Purdue University Northwest's December 10, 2022 commencement ceremony, characterizing his remarks as “offensive and dangerous.” The student bodies at PNW and Purdue University West Lafayette took to social media and sites such as Reddit and Snapchat to express anger, dismay, and disappointment that a chancellor of a regional campus would impugn the highly regarded name of Purdue University.

Many voices asked for the chancellor to resign. The change.org petition by an anonymous student garnered well over nine thousand votes in support of its demands that the chancellor step down. The petition characterizes his behavior as an embarrassment to the institution. The alumni called on each other to stop supporting their alma mater. The faculty debated the particulars associated with the December 10 commencement exercises. Through an anonymous ballot, they voted “no-confidence” in the chancellor because of his remarks. Purdue University trustees reprimanded the chancellor and stated that there would be no further comment on this personnel matter but stopped short of asking him to step down.

Reputable news sources, including *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *CNN*, *Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, featured articles on what they characterized as racist and inappropriate remarks by Chancellor Keon. Several editorials denounced his remarks and called on him to resign. More than 100 stories about the fake language uttered by Chancellor Keon appeared on the web. The outrage over his remarks was echoed in news outlets published in China, India, Asian-Pacific countries, and the UK. The chancellor's fake language was layered with meaning. The language became a powerful symbol, the meaning of which was not arbitrary (Rafaeli & Worline, 2000). It was understood almost universally. The embarrassing media coverage of the commencement ceremony remarks casts a pall on the reputation of Purdue University as an institution that fosters respect for people from all cultures.

Lastly, this work analyzed the meaning and sufficiency of the language in the chancellor's statement of apology. The language in his statement seemed superficial and lacked the tone necessary for a genuine apology. Absent were heartfelt expressions that a personal communication of remorse requires. The chancellor's statement of apology focused on the fact that his words had a hurtful effect. It did not humbly ask for forgiveness.

One cannot overlook the irony of Purdue's appointment of a person of Asian-American heritage as president of the university only weeks after the commencement ceremony remarks of PNW Chancellor Thomas Keon captured media attention. Dr. Mung Chiang's impeccable publishing record, humility, and focus on operational excellence are symbols of leadership and pride that should be associated with an institution of higher learning (Burt, 2022). As symbols, they reflect that Purdue University is operating in changing times and its leadership must be responsive to the diversity of its students, faculty, and the global community.

Implications

This paper analyzed the remarks of a regional university's chancellor, whose utterances at a graduation ceremony were interpreted as a mockery of the Asian community. The remarks were interpreted to elucidate their meaning and analyzed to determine their impact. In the following paragraphs, implications for what is likely to occur concerning the chancellor and the university are detailed. The discussion will move from the theoretical world of symbols into the pragmatic world of decision-making.

In 2014, almost nine years ago, Purdue University President Mitch Daniels embarked on a merger designed to unify two satellite campuses, one in Hammond and one in Westville, Indiana. Those campuses were situated 38 miles apart. The unification was abruptly conceived by Daniels "after he took an eight-minute helicopter ride between campuses (rather than a 45-minute drive) and judged them [to be] too close" (Fritz, 2022: 9). In a move to reduce operating costs, he decided that one regional university would be created – ultimately named Purdue University Northwest – consisting of one administrative unit overseeing programs on two campuses. Redundant positions and duplicated programs would be eliminated. The unification effort took almost three years, during which time it was opposed by faculty, resented by students, and criticized in the local press. After months of discussion and vocal opposition by task forces, senate subcommittees, and student organizations, readers may wonder what happened? Nothing – the unification decision was not changed. The unification occurred because the decision to unify was made at the top level of the organization – by President Mitch Daniels and the Board of Trustees. Those that opposed the unification gradually became worn out and accepted what they could not thwart.

The unification event can be used as an exemplar to understand the aftermath of Chancellor Keon's inappropriate remarks at the university's December 10th graduation ceremony. Despite the Asian community's hurt feelings, the negative coverage of the fake language utterances in the media and on the web, the faculty's vote of no-confidence in the chancellor, and the student petitions calling for his resignation – no action was undertaken. The chancellor of Purdue University will continue in his position until his administrative contract expires on June 30, 2024.

At the risk of being cynical, these authors believe that people will be unwilling to pursue the fight to oppose the decision of the Board of Trustees – the decision to simply reprimand the chancellor and issue some cautionary admonitions. Students at the university will forget or consciously choose to reallocate their time to pursue their own educational objectives; faculty will realize that pursuing a dispute against the chancellor and PNW takes time that could otherwise be devoted to their research or teaching; the chancellor will complete the last year of his non-renewed contract and organizational life at Purdue and PNW will go on.

Faculty members who were initially upset at the chancellor's commencement ceremony remarks will realize that pursuing the fight to achieve a resignation and leadership change will cost them time, potential raises, and financial grant support for their pet programs. In essence, nothing will be done to ameliorate the pain of the aggrieved Asian community. Nothing will be done to protect the university's reputation and brand. Nothing will be done to change the decision that has already been made. What will happen is that the people who condemned the chancellor's remarks will take the path of least resistance. They will do nothing – similar to what the affected people did in the case of the campus unification. They will learn to accept what they resented and criticized in the interest of self-preservation. To do otherwise, would upset the applecart and contravene the decision of the Board of Trustees. According to some in the campus community, members of the Board may have decided to reprimand Chancellor Keon rather than summarily terminate his administrative appointment because they wanted to appear strong and powerful. They may have reasoned that agreement with, or even acquiescence to, the will of faculty, students, and the media would convey a position of weakness. To the contrary, their image of strength, in the eyes of many faculty members at PNW, has become symbolically interpreted as a callous indifference to the concept of shared governance and an affront to the values of diversity and inclusion.

Policy Recommendations

With a proactive management perspective, these authors advance several recommendations to prevent the disgraceful situation that occurred during the commencement address at Purdue University Northwest. Calling for the chancellor's resignation may placate those who were offended and seek retribution. It may even have a desirable effect. But it does not address the cause. Four policy recommendations are suggested to ensure that university leaders who engage in highly symbolic roles do not repeat the blunders detailed in this paper.

1. Engage a public communications expert to review the content of commencement speeches and the planned transition remarks when following an earlier speaker to ensure the language is appropriate.
2. Develop strict guidelines, cognizant of the symbolism associated with words, for the scripting of commencement and other important addresses; and advance a strong suggestion to eliminate extemporaneous ad-lib comments within those addresses.
3. Consider how to best use humor to evoke laughter at formal ceremonial addresses while ensuring that the humor's subject matter is not interpreted as offensive.
4. Encourage cultural sensitivity training for everyone, including presidents and chancellors delivering addresses at commencement ceremonies – events that should celebrate accomplishment, community, diversity, and inclusivity.

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