AAUP Chapter Statement on Recent Racist Comments by President Daniels

President Mitch Daniels’ recent use of “rare creature” or “rare bird” as a figure of speech to describe students and faculty of color is not simply an unfortunate, and hurtful, turn of phrase. It is another example in a series of examples that reflect the tone-deaf nature of Daniels and the Purdue administration toward the concerns raised by marginalized groups and their allies.

The problem is not merely that Daniels has solely focused on the unintended meaning of his comment. What is of greater consequence is his willingness to ignore the primary point made by students: that by asserting Black scholars are rare, Daniels diminishes the work of Black scholars and students currently at Purdue.

Daniels did not choose the wrong metaphor; his assertions belong to a set of ideas about historically underrepresented groups that Daniels has expressed broadly and in a myriad of ways over the course of his tenure as president. It is his intentional meaning, and not his ‘gaffe,’ that speaks far more to the reason why certain groups remain underrepresented at Purdue. Students, faculty, and staff have repeatedly voiced their concerns and frustrations about the micro- and macro-aggressions they experience on campus. Having the president of their university indicate their location on campus is due to “rarity” is one such experience in the course of many.

The conversation on recruitment and retention of historically marginalized groups often emphasizes that to achieve these goals, what is needed is an increased understanding in the importance of diversity and inclusion. However, we must remain open to the idea that universities already know this but choose to engage in superficial actions—then when nothing changes, the university can claim it “tried to increase representation” while simultaneously claiming that this problem exists because successful scholars and students of color are “rare.”

As the university president, Daniels sets the tone for racial equity and inclusion on campus. His tone, defensiveness and choice of words makes it clear that Purdue remains an unsafe space for underrepresented groups. Until Daniels changes his underlying ideas about race and underrepresented groups, Purdue will not be the welcoming and diverse place he claims he wants it to be.

AAUP-Purdue stands with students, faculty and staff across campus who seek to work and study in an environment free of bigotry, intimidation, sexual harassment, gender inequality, homophobia or racism. AAUP-Purdue stands with Purdue NAACP in its demand that President Daniels’s formally apologize to the Purdue students who were offended by his language, especially the African-American community. It also asks that Purdue commit new, increased resources to the hiring, recruitment and retention of underrepresented and historically marginalized faculty. We also request that the President dedicate the same increase in resources to the recruitment and retention of underrepresented and historically marginalized students.

This chapter statement was signed Dec 3, 2019.
Chapter statements must be approved by 50% or more of the chapter members.
Respectfully submitted by Alice Pawley, chapter secretary/treasurer.