Penn Law Professor Removed from Teaching 1L Classes

Summary: After a Penn Law professor made inappropriate racial comments, the school removed her from teaching required classes.

In response to a public outcry about the comments a Penn Law professor made on a video about the academic performance of black students, the school removed the professor from required first-year courses. According to an email from the University of Pennsylvania School of Law Dean Theodore Ruger obtained by Philly Mag, professor Amy Wax will still teach upper level courses in her expertise.

The email states: "In light of Professor Wax's statements, black students assigned to her class in their first week at Penn Law may reasonably wonder whether their professor has already come to a conclusion about their presence, performance, and potential for success in law school and thereafter. They may legitimately question whether the inaccurate and belittling statements she has made may adversely affect their learning environment and career prospects. These students may also reasonably feel an additional and unwarranted burden to perform well, so that their performance not be used or misused by their professor in public discourse about racial inequality in academic success. More broadly, this dynamic may negatively affect the classroom experience for all students regardless of race or background."

The email continued, "After consulting faculty, alumni/ae, Overseers, and University officials, I have decided that Professor Wax will continue to teach elective courses in her areas of expertise, but that are outside of the mandatory first-year curriculum. This curricular decision entails no sanction or diminution of Professor Wax's status on the faculty, which remains secure. Normally, this decision would be private, but because Professor Wax made these inaccurate public statements, and students and alumni raised their concerns publicly, sharing it with our community is important."

In a video titled "The Downside to Social Uplift" by Brown University professor Glenn Loury, who happens to be Black, Wax claimed, "I don't think I've ever seen a black student graduate in the top quarter of the class and rarely, rarely in the top half. I can think of one or two students who've graduated in the top half of my required first-year courses." The interview was done last September but recently surfaced online. Loury asked Wax to explain further, in which she explains "I haven't done a survey, I haven't done a systematic study" but uses the "89 to 95 students" she teaches each year as the basis of her claims.

Ruger addressed the claims Wax made, "It is imperative for me as dean to state that these claims are false: black students have graduated in the top of the class at Penn Law, and the Law Review does not have a diversity mandate. Rather, its editors are selected based on a competitive process. And contrary to any suggestion otherwise, black students at Penn Law are extremely successful, both inside and outside the classroom, in the job market, and in their careers."

The school's Black Law Students Association (BLSA) created a petition after seeing the video, calling for "a strong, explicit response addressing and rebutting such deleterious and false claims." They contend that her comments "compromise" the school's grade confidentiality policy and puts into question if the law school does actually collect data on their Black students. They also asked for Wax to be removed from the first-year classes and stripped of leadership roles at the school. They got most of what they asked for.

Do you think Wax is a racist professor or did her comments get taken wrong? Share your thoughts with us in the comments below.

To learn more about some of the successes Black law students have seen, read these articles:

- Stetson's Black Law Students Association honored for community activism as Chapter of the Year for the Southern Region
- UVA Law Celebrates Legacy of Its First Black Student
- Michigan Law Review Names Their First African-American Editor

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