

Law School Addresses Racism Claims Against Visiting Professor

Seattle University School of Law has launched an investigation into allegations of racial discrimination made against Bernard Burk, a visiting law professor at the school. The allegations were made in an article in the undergraduate student newspaper, The Seattle Spectator, which details anonymous accusations of a hostile learning environment in Burk's classroom. The students alleged that Burk designated Brown students as terrorists, called Native Americans savages on the first day of class, and failed to include students of color in his classroom recognition and awards. They also reported sexism, ableism, and a joke about gun violence that frightened some students. They claimed that Burk did not treat female-identifying students equally, did not give adequate disability accommodations, and made comments patronizing students struggling with mental illness.

In response to the allegations, Dean Anthony Varona is communicating with the law school community that an internal probe is underway. Varona noted that while complaints had been made about Burk throughout the semester, "[s]ome of the most serious allegations reported by the Spectator, however, had not been shared with us during the fall semester." He also added, "Our Office of Academic Affairs worked directly with Professor Burk throughout the fall semester to address and resolve various students' concerns." In late October, the University's Campus Climate Incident Reporting & Response Team received various reports from students in the course. The team responded and engaged the Seattle University Office of Institutional Equity as appropriate.

Varona also reported that the Office of Institutional Equity conducted an expedited inquiry to determine the accuracy of two of the most severe allegations reported in the Spectator. The inquiry concluded that the alleged statements were nowhere in the reviewed recordings or transcripts. Professor Burk neither called Native Americans "savages" nor "Brown students...terrorists."

Even though the allegations were unsubstantiated, Varona acknowledged that the school needs to undertake vital work with the 1L class to address the additional concerns expressed by the community members in the Spectator and elsewhere. He stated that the school would continue to work hard to protect and grow its richly diverse community and ensure that all its students have a welcoming and empowering educational experience at Seattle U Law.

It is worth noting that the original Spectator article alleges that students that complained about Professor Burk, along with the Student Bar Association, "received threatening responses," indicating potential defamation lawsuits if they pursued their complaints. However, Andrew Siegel, the school's vice dean for academic affairs, said, "Obviously, there is no chance that we would be bringing legal action against anyone. Several people spoke to students about the importance of sourcing their comments, appropriately phrasing their comments [and] making comments that were not gross generalizations because, across the country, there have been a small number of incidents where students have been sued for defamation in situations like this."

Student groups at the law school, including Outlaws and BLSA, have offered the following statements of solidarity.