

July 24, 2020

We live in an extraordinary moment when this nation is reappraising what must be done to overcome racism. The same is true at Columbia University; President Bollinger, in an important message to the community, outlined his own and Columbia's deep commitment to anti-racism. In our SIPA community, one important expression of the desire to seize this moment and drive change has been a set of proposals put forward by student leaders to advance diversity, equity and inclusion. I have welcomed this effort and already convened meetings with the student leaders and interested faculty to give the suggestions the serious consideration they deserve. As I explained in a letter to our community earlier this week, these discussions have informed several recent initiatives, and more will come. These student demands speak to issues SIPA has long valued and engaged and need to advance.

In contrast to the institutional requests made by the student group on curriculum, financial support, and other areas, one of the demands was that SIPA take the extraordinary step of firing a long-serving adjunct faculty member whom they accuse of racism and Islamophobia. I am writing both to share with you our handling of this particular allegation and to provide my thoughts more generally about how our community can most productively pursue change.

The allegations prompted a careful review, and I asked Vice Dean of SIPA, Professor Scott Barrett, to convene an ad hoc committee of faculty members and report to me. The committee reviewed the record: the allegations; the instructor's teaching record of more than a decade; his syllabi; all course evaluations; and letters from former students. They did not find any evidence—whether in the approach to the course or any specific incidents directed at students in the classroom – that supported the allegations against the faculty member, nor any basis for disciplinary action. Their assessment and recommendations are summarized in the attached report.

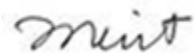
If we are to be a community that actively rejects racism, Islamophobia and all other bigoted and pernicious attitudes, which we must, then specific complaints and general concerns must be able to come to the fore and be considered. At the same time, we also must preserve open discussion, and the vigorous intellectual debate that defines SIPA—and Columbia. Our community includes scholars, practitioners who bring their lived experiences into the classroom, and students from the US and typically more than 60 nations. We think about some of the most intractable, sensitive and difficult problems in the world and we must approach complex and controversial topics from many different perspectives. It is vitally important that we maintain an open intellectual climate and engage in open debate. We should never arrive at a place where it is forbidden to discuss certain ideas or, even worse, entire subjects of scholarly inquiry.

Finally, I want to say a word about the importance of the work ahead of us. The journey we are on to make SIPA more diverse, to expand our intellectual study of social justice, race and policy issues, to more robustly contribute to the local community and advance ideas in the world, to further support our students—all of these actions require a shared sense of purpose. Unity, not division, is needed to bring us forward to the destination we seek. And so, even as we are all experiencing in different ways this prolonged and unprecedented period of stress and anguish, it

is especially crucial that we keep in the front of our minds our responsibility to treat each other with respect and tolerance.

I am grateful for the careful, thoughtful work of Vice Dean Barrett and the faculty committee, and accept their recommendations. I urge our students to review their assessment carefully and take to heart its important message.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "merit".

Merit E. Janow
Dean, School of International and Public Affairs
Professor of Practice, International Economic Law and International Affairs

JEWISHINSIDER