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June 30, 2020

Tammeil Y. Gilkerson, Ed.D.
Laney College President
900 Fallon Street
Oakland, CA 94607
tgilkerson@peralta.edu

Dear President Gilkerson,

We were outraged to learn that Laney College math professor Matthew Hubbard asked his Vietnamese American student to "Anglicize" her name because her "name is an offensive sound *in my language*." (Emphasis added). By characterizing English as his language and Vietnamese as her language he highlighted the perpetual foreigner stereotype Asian Americans continue to struggle against, even in the Bay Area. In making this request, he demonstrated his arrogance and ignorance by asking his student to change her core identity for his convenience. His request and chosen language were discriminatory, disrespectful and insensitive.

This occurrence reminds us of painful examples in our own histories as Japanese Americans. Many of us have family stories about how Japanese names given to American-born children were seen as foreign, hard to pronounce, and somehow un-American.

A Berkeley JACL Chapter Board member recalls that her mother, Nobuko, was in elementary school in Southern California when the white teacher told her that her name was too hard to pronounce, so she would call her "Bessie." Nobuko did not like the name but unfortunately, it stuck.

When someone takes away your name, that person is appropriating your identity, to exercise power over you. Nobuko experienced having her name changed for her. This is just one of many similar stories in the Japanese American community within the greater Asian American narrative.

When we are made to feel we don't belong because our birth name is considered unpronounceable and "un-American," it divides people between those who speak the implied "right" or "wrong" language. It also can create feelings of inadequacy and shame for being different. It is especially harmful when this message comes from an authority figure such as a teacher.

Fortunately, Phuc Bui Diem Nguyen stood up for her right to love the name her parents gave her, which means "happiness blessing." Her sister wrote, "I love that my parents want to keep my culture alive by keeping our Vietnamese name."

"If you can't say it, then ask." It is important to always be a learner when it comes to inclusivity. We understand that Asian Americans comprise nearly 30 percent of the student body at Laney. With this diversity, we all need to come with an open mind to learn about all parts of our community.

We appreciate Laney College's prompt action placing Mr. Hubbard on administrative leave and initiating an investigation. We call on Laney College to enact sensitivity training for all staff and take appropriate disciplinary actions against Mr. Hubbard.

Sincerely,

The Berkeley Japanese American Citizens League Board of Directors