

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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Shannon Gibney is both Caucasian and African-American.

But to a couple of white students at Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC), Gibney, a professor of English and African diaspora studies, is apparently not white enough – or maybe too Black.

Two white male students accused the professor of racism during a recent classroom lecture. Gibney strongly denies the accusation and says she was simply pointing out the ramifications of structural racism in the United States. The two students in the communications class not only disagreed with the professor, but they took it a step further and filed a formal racial harassment complaint against Gibney.

The 38-year-old professor was in fact reprimanded and is in the process of appealing the reprimand. In the reprimand, Lois Bollman, vice president of Academic Affairs, wrote, “Shannon, I find it troubling that the manner in which you led a discussion on the very important topic of structural racism alienated two students who may have been most in need of the learning about the subject.” The reprimand went on to read, “While I believe it was your intention to discuss structural racism generally, it was inappropriate for you to single out white male students in class. Your actions in tergeting (sic) select students based on their race and gender caused them embarrassment and created a hostile learning environment.”

The reprimand seems to contradict the Nov. 25 statement issued by MCTC.

“The college has taken no steps to prohibit faculty members from teaching about racism, including structural racism. MCTC has never disciplined a faculty member for teaching or discussing structural racism. Conversations about race, class and power are important and regular parts of many classes at MCTC and have been for years,” read the statement. The statement continued, “At MCTC, we believe it is essential for our faculty to actively engage students in respectful discussions in the classroom regardless of topic and to create an

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atmosphere in which students may ask questions as an important part of the classroom experience. Questions from students in classroom discussions are an essential part of the learning process. We expect that faculty will have the professional skills to lead difficult conversations in their classrooms and will teach in a way that helps students understand issues, even when students feel uncomfortable or disagree with particular ideas. We also expect that students act appropriately in the classroom; a student who does not do so may be subject to removal by the faculty member.

“We want to stress to all of our students, staff, faculty and community members that MCTC remains deeply committed to promoting an understanding of the important issue of racism in all its forms. We acknowledge that we must work hard to eradicate the effects of historical and institutional racism. We understand that privilege often shields members of the majority from the realities and experiences of people of color and that the college environment provides an opportunity to learn more deeply about all of these issues.”

In prior statements, Gibney insists she did not target the students and tried to make it clear she was not singling out anyone, but citing the appeals process, Gibney declined to comment further on the matter and referred inquires to her local union president, Barbara Hager. Though Gibney would not speak on the issue, Hager did not mince words and said the professor is not the perpetrator of racism – she is the victim.

“(Gibney) is just one of probably 100 cases of racism at MCTC and it’s endemic of institutional racism at the college,” said Hager. “In the last three to four years 15 administrators and faculty of color have left the college.”

Hager said the turnover of faculty of color is alarmingly high, especially for a two-year institution. The staff losses seem more glaring considering MCTC has a close to 60 percent non-white student population.

According to Hager, though Gibney’s case has gained the most attention, faculty of color have been subject to a less than welcoming work environment for quite some time. The environment became so hostile that the former vice president of student affairs and chief diversity officer, Dr. Joi Lewis, resigned in April due to the climate on campus. Hager said the union gave MCTC president Phil Davis a vote of no confidence due to a lack of racial and cultural understanding on the downtown Minneapolis campus. The union has called for Davis to resign.

“Faculty is constantly asking for leadership. We don’t have leadership at the presidential level to guide this conversation (of diversity),” said Hager. “At this time the president is incapable to do so.”

Hager, who is white, even likened the atmosphere at MCTC to the pre Civil War South.

“It’s like you can have a plantation that’s diverse, but all of the people of power are white,” said Hager. Speaking of the Gibney situation, Hager said, “There are white male faculty that have told me they’ve had the same conversation in their classrooms and nothing has been said.”