

CASE STUDY

Professor X teaches a large (300-person) undergraduate course. At the outset of class yesterday, a student in the course indicated in Zoom that they had a comment. When unmuted, the student stated, “Professor, it’s been 5 weeks since the murder of George Floyd and not once have you discussed anti-Black racism in this class. Some of us live this reality each day. The institution’s silence bewilders us. To be honest, it suggests complicity.”

Professor X is taken by surprise. Looking across the screen, it is apparent that some students agree with the student as they are nodding. A few other students look trepidatious. For the most part, though, Professor X can’t read student reactions since most have their video function in Zoom turned off.

After a few seconds, Professor X says, “I’m sorry you feel this way. I know this topic is hard to talk about so I have not raised it. But just because I have not said anything publicly does not mean I don’t find what is happening troubling, Of course I stand against discrimination and racism.” Professor X then resumed class as planned.

That evening, Professor X received the following email, copied to the Department Chair and various members of McGill’s Equity Team:

Dear Professor X,

We write on behalf of some of your concerned students. Like you, we stand in solidarity against all forms of discrimination. Yet we disagree with our classmate calling upon you to speak out on this topic. We appreciate you were put on the spot in class today and did the best you could in the circumstances. But, with all due respect, we attend class to learn about content related to our programs of study. Professors should not be using this space and the power they occupy within it to pontificate or share political views. Doing so could create unsafe learning environments and be detrimental to our learning.

Respectfully,

Students A and B

Professor X is distraught. They had thought they’d navigated the situation that arose in class yesterday well, and they were planning on saying more about the issue next class, now that they have had more time to reflect and gather some thoughts. Having read this email, however, they have second thoughts and wonder if they made a misstep in class. Professor X does not know how to plan for the next class(es) in this course.

How would we advise Professor X?