

Peter Ratener public statement (April 19, 2006)

Members of the Board of Trustees, President Floten, Faculty and staff of Bellevue Community College, students – Chelsey Richardson in particular -- and members of the community:

I come before you now because you are owed an apology. I made a mistake. An egregious mistake. An exam I wrote contained a question that was deeply offensive and invoked an insulting racial stereotype.

To Chelsey Richardson, and other students, I'm very sorry I have offended you. That was not my intention. If you knew me, you'd believe me. You are valued and I want you in our campus community. I also value the wonderful diversity of students here. That is one of the things I like best about teaching at a community college.

To my colleagues at BCC—faculty, staff, and administration—I am sorry that my action has embarrassed you and caused you to become targets for harsh criticism. For more than ten years you have toiled to make BCC an institution that welcomes and values people of all colors. We have some work to do, but still you should be proud of what you've accomplished. You have pulled together despite the strains of all the unfavorable attention, and you've never abandoned me. I am indeed honored to be your colleague.

I also extend my sincere apologies to the African-American community and also to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. I sincerely regret insulting you.

I feel I must explain why it has taken this long to step forward and accept the responsibility for something that goes as much against my principles as yours. When I first heard of the complaint nine days ago at a hastily-called meeting of the full-time instructors of mathematics I immediately took ownership of the problem and offered to reveal myself. At the urging of all the members of the department I allowed them to treat the offensive question as the failing of the department, since the test was a department product. However, I offered several times to meet with Chelsey, the young woman who first made the complaint, and offer her my personal apology. An intermediary told me she felt that wasn't necessary, wanting the apology to be public. Chelsey, this is that apology to you and all students.

Two days later, the landscape had changed. Though the math department and President Floten had each issued their own apology, the outcry had grown enormously and had taken an angry turn. Threats began to arrive. I wanted to reveal myself, but my wife was adamant. We must not expose our children, innocent victims in this drama, to danger. I had to accede to her wishes. She was a potential victim, too.

It was distasteful to stay in the shadows, and went against my desire to face the rage and deal with it. Each passing day became more difficult as my anxiety and sleeplessness added weight to my humiliation. By Friday a math colleague received a death-threat. My resolve to

keep my family safe was firm.

Today, however, I feel I cannot wait any longer. All of you deserve my public apology, and I can no longer remain anonymous.

Though I never intended insult, I am judged for what I should have known. Educators are held to this higher standard.

Racial insensitivity is inconsistent with my upbringing. My grandparents were refugees from persecution in the former USSR; they arrived penniless after a daring nighttime escape. My parents were members of the Long Island Council for Integrated Housing, an organization dedicated to opening up whites-only communities to people of color. I remember the shock and horror during a road trip in Georgia where I first saw segregated bathrooms and drinking fountains.

My first teaching job when I arrived in Seattle in 1973, was working for Square Partee, a gifted instructor at the University of Washington's Economic Opportunities Program.

I also want to explain how the stereotype came to be on the test. I do not offer this description as an excuse. One thing I have learned is that if it could happen to me, it could happen to just about any of us. This was born of good intentions.

I try to use humor to relieve tension of test takers. Celebrities like Britney Spears, Madonna, Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, and Gallagher are among the celebrities who have appeared in test items building kennels, dropping watermelons, and designing gardens. This device works only if the reader is familiar with the celebrity. Students today no longer recognize the name Gallagher. Condoleezza had name recognition going for her; and it's a fascinating name to me. So I substituted that name in the question. Race had nothing to do with it, nor did politics. I should have caught it. And, the responsibility is ultimately mine alone.

I reach out to the African-American community. I have stumbled, and fallen, painfully. You are welcome at my table. Persons of all colors, you, too, are welcome. And conservatives, and liberals, and independents. There's room for all of us. We are richer for you being there.

Now we must all heal, and I hope my heartfelt apology will be the pivotal piece that will allow the college to move forward and heal.

Again, to Chelsey Richardson, and other students, I'm very sorry I have offended you. To everyone at BCC, I am sorry for the hurt and embarrassment I have caused.

I hope you will forgive me.

Thank you.
Peter Ratener