

Xenophobia: Addressing the pandemic nature of a social virus

by Dominic J. Ledesma

The Division of Extension joins the [UW-Madison campus leadership](#), [Asian American Studies Program](#), the [Chican@ and Latin@ Studies Program Faculty](#), and other members of the [UW community](#) in publicly denouncing a wave of xenophobic and racist nativist acts prompted by the current COVID-19 pandemic. In a statement released on March 26, Chancellor Blank referenced an increase in biased incidents that have targeted “Asian, Pacific Islander, and Desi-American students and employees, particularly those from or perceived to be from China and East Asia.” Campus leadership has formally addressed at least two specific incidents, one involving bias against residents living in [University Apartments](#) and the other related to graffiti that appeared on campus in late March.

The Asian American Studies Program posted two pictures to their [Facebook page](#) of graffiti that was written the evening of March 24. Two different messages appeared in two separate, but close locations on campus that receive a high volume of pedestrian traffic. Similarities between the messages suggest that they were written by the same person(s). One message was chalked on the corner of State and Lake, less than a block away from the Extension building at 432 N. Lake. Both messages included content that perpetuate xenophobic and racist nativist sentiments.

In solidarity with the statements released by other campus units, the Office of Access, Inclusion, and Compliance formally expresses our support for all members of the UW community, whether housed on campus or in one of our Extension offices statewide. To persons affected by what we—and many others—consider to be inexcusable acts of symbolic violence, [we would like to reiterate the supports and resources that are available for students, staff, and faculty](#).

Xenophobia and racist nativism are not new concepts; they are not new to campus, the state of Wisconsin, or U.S. society in general. They represent a particular strain of virus that is social in nature. Xenophobia, in general terms, is described as the “fear and angst toward outsiders” while racist nativism is often characterized by dictating the terms of “who belongs here and who doesn’t belong here.” Xenophobic and racist nativist rhetoric, including more overt examples like the graffiti on campus, are rooted in ignorance and a baseless disdain toward “others.” Both are leveraged as tools to divide people and communities. The aim? To propagate attitudes that diminish and marginalize the existence of persons we perceive to be different from ourselves. **Expressions of xenophobia or racist nativism toward any group, whether during a pandemic or not, runs contrary to our values as a UW community and undermines our collective efforts to form a more welcoming and inclusive environment.**

While campus has made this point abundantly clear, perhaps Chancellor Blank put it best by stating “COVID-19 has affected all of us personally, academically and professionally, as well as physically, mentally, and socially. Even so, it’s important to remember: No one person, country, or ethnicity created this pandemic—disease does not discriminate.” Thus, as we contemplate our collective responsibility to each other during these challenging times, we must also consider ways to “flatten the curve” on the pandemic effects of xenophobia, racist nativism, and other menacing social viruses.