

# Xenophobia is Never a “Normal” Reaction

By Don Sutherland

The spread of the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) has awakened ugly sentiments, even in places in one should reasonably expect they would not exist. On Saturday, CNN [reported](#):

*Anxiety. Feelings of helplessness. Social withdrawal. Anger.*

*Those are some "common" and "normal" reactions to coronavirus, according to a now-deleted infographic posted to Instagram by University Health Services at the University of California, Berkeley. All might sound understandable.*

*But then, rounding out the list, the school listed this:*

*"Xenophobia: fears about interacting with those who might be from Asia and guilt about these feelings."*

The posted infographic was incompatible with the practices of any institution that values diversity and respects individual human dignity. It had nothing to do with addressing a rising public health issue. It provided no positive value whatsoever. Instead, the commentary reflected the sentiments of a person or group of persons who had succumbed to a toxic combination of fear, pseudoscience, and prejudice.

Although the message was deleted, simple deletion is insufficient. Those responsible should be held to account, for a message that all but normalized hostility toward Asians. Worse that infographic was posted in the midst of a dark political environment in which immigrants and refugees have been demeaned and treated harshly on a repeated basis.

I am hopeful that an institution that has long been at the forefront of social justice issues will find the courage and decency to do the right thing. At a minimum, it owes decisive action to remedy the problem to its students, nearly one-third of whom are from various parts of Asia or are of Asian descent. If no meaningful action is taken, that inaction will call into question the credibility of its commitment to inclusiveness and it will erode the proud legacy that University has built in pursuit of human dignity.

Challenges such as those presented by the novel coronavirus should be occasions where people pull together and rise to occasion to overcome such adversity and set aside the temptations of fear-driven conduct that undermine the effort. They should never be used as excuses to divide and turn people against one another. Such conduct should never be seen on college and university campuses where the next generation of citizens and professionals are prepared for the roles they will play for the rest of their lives.

What happened was unacceptable and inappropriate. The incident should be treated with the gravity that it deserves. A public apology by the person or people responsible would be a good start.