



African American Knowledge Community

SUPPORTING AFRICAN-AMERICAN FACULTY, STAFF, AND STUDENTS IN THE FACE OF RACIALIZED POLITICAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

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Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion



The integration of equity, diversity, and inclusion in NASPA's guiding principles conveys an imperative for higher education professionals. Through support, engagement, and advocacy for underrepresented populations, an inclusive campus environment can be created and nurtured. Moreover, by recognizing the internal and external factors of oppression that impact a particular identity group's experience, practitioners can pinpoint mechanisms to counteract these marginalizing realities. In particular, for African American faculty, staff, and students, this awareness is crucial to understanding how they negotiate racially microaggressive acts that intertwine their personal and campus lives. Wing Sue et al. (2007) described microaggressions as "brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights

and insults to the target person or group" (p. 273). These aggressive acts perpetuate stereotype threat, devalue social identity groups, and create a hostile and invalidating work and campus environment (Wing Sue & Rivera, 2010). Over the past several months, African Americans experienced painful reminders of racial microaggressions through the Trayvon Martin verdict and the Supreme Court decisions regarding Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin and Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act. These outcomes have had an undeniable impact on the national consciousness, and they have more acute implications for African Americans. Looking at the African American experience in the university environment, this article will focus on three forms of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations; their connections to the recent judicial rulings; and their impact on the university experience.

Microassaults are characterized by explicit racial, verbal, and nonverbal attacks intended to hurt via name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory interactions and often occur through systemic and environmentally aggressive acts (Wing Sue et al., 2007). The Trayvon Martin outcome served as another reminder for African Americans that race is inexplicably tied to a decreased sense of belonging and right to occupy space. African American males routinely report similar experiences of being assumed an “outsider” and subsequently followed and harassed on predominately White campuses. McCabe (2009) noted that African American men described numerous occasions where they felt others perceived them as a threat, leading campus staff and police to act on that perception and control African American men’s bodies and activities. As African American community members process the verdict, it is important to remember they may have faced experiences similar to Trayvon Martin’s. It is likely they have experienced purposeful discriminatory behavior by colleagues, student peers, faculty, or campus police, thus making it important to listen to and validate their stories.

Too often higher education professionals advocate for diverse groups yet continue to promote unconscious biases against those groups. Microinsults are communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage and identity (Wing Sue et al., 2007). The aftermath of the Fisher v. University of Texas ruling continues to reinforce stereotypes and assumptions regarding diversity in admissions and hiring practices. With this decision, the Supreme Court not only left the door open for future debate over the merit of diverse admissions processes, it also reinforced the message that there is no definitive place for African Americans in higher education. Without a definitive stance on the value that diversity adds to the environment, microinsults will continue to persist. Admitted qualified students must continue to defend their place at the college against peers who assume race was the deciding factor in their admission. African American faculty and staff contend with the same microinsults in their work environments. Collectively, this exhaustive process erodes the sense of belonging for African American university members and lessens an institution as a whole.

In the majority opinion issued following the Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act decision, the chief justice asserted, “...voting discrimination still exists; no one doubts that,” but then goes on to offer justification for the removal of a strict scrutiny measure that aimed to prevent that precise occurrence. This decision illuminates the racial bias that African Americans fought to overcome that is now resurging in a more subtle manner in the form of microinvalidation. As it is defined, a microinvalidation is a communication that subtly excludes, negates, or nullifies the feelings or experienced reality of a person of color (Wing Sue et al., 2007). While the Supreme Court argued that the provision regulated states too tightly, in

its aftermath a number of states changed their voting I.D. requirements, many of which have disparate negative impacts on African Americans and other minorities. One of these practices restricts the use of college I.D.s to vote. Rules such as these will present challenges to out-of state and first-year college students. With many African American students attending historically African American colleges across state lines and voting for the first time, voter turnout will be impacted. In essence, this decision rescinded some of the agency and protections African Americans held within the American voting system. Unfortunately, what results is that African Americans and students of all races must become more vigilant about changing their I.D.s and understanding voting laws across states.

As higher education reacts to public policy changes, it becomes important for professionals to adopt action strategies to best support the impacted populations. The microaggressions African American faculty, students, and staff face in light of these national outcomes is inadequately addressed on college campuses. As such, institutions must consider a number of best practices to support their affected populations during these times. First, creating a culture where vulnerability is encouraged will allow African American community members to have an environment of support and open dialogue. Doing so allows for trust and understanding to be reinforced and deepened. Next, critically examine institutionalized practices and norms that reinforce aggressive and marginalizing behavior on both the micro and macro levels across identity groups. Audit the institution and make improvements. Finally, recognize the emotional impact of unconscious bias on the individual and the university, and maximize opportunities for social justice trainings to occur on a daily basis. These small acts will engender a culture of inclusion that proactively addresses microaggressions and seeks to lessen the sting they render to underrepresented populations on campus.

References

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