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Addressing New Forms of Racism Part II: Preventing Microaggressions

Victoria Peña-Parr

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RACISM:

AN EDUCATIONAL SERIES



Addressing new forms of racism Part II: Preventing Microaggressions

By Victoria Peña-Parr © July 21, 2020

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The challenge marginalized groups face is that many microaggressions are systemic. This means they are embedded in policies, programs, and practices at the federal, state and local levels. To combat microaggressions means that everyone has to be hypervigilant, and not just neutral in a situation.

“It requires every person to think about their role,” says Sonia Gipson Rankin, an assistant professor at The University of New Mexico’s School of Law. “The person who is experiencing some type of attack can also be perpetrating a different type of attack on someone else. Everyone has to be willing to be open and understand the impact of their actions.”

Doing this is especially difficult for perpetrators of microaggressions because it implies that their core held beliefs are harmful.

“So, what are some things you can do? Well, if someone tells you that they feel insulted, the first thing is to remember the conversation, and manage your feelings of defensiveness,” recommends Rankin. “Listen intently to what happened and reflect on what you heard. Take responsibility for the fact that your intent does not equate to the impact that it had.”

It is also essential that peers are also doing their due diligence and being an active ally instead of just a bystander.

“If you see someone being disrespected, how do you make yourself an advocate? Develop expertise. Slow down and understand what someone is experiencing, so when it occurs you are able to articulate exactly what happened. Establish trust and really understand how to make the invisible, visible,” explains Rankin.

Tips for Handling Microaggressions...

- **Listen intently to what happened.**
- **Reflect on what you heard.**
- **Take responsibility.**

Lastly, individuals who have experienced microaggressions are encouraged to have an open and frank dialogue about their experiences, if they feel comfortable. By doing this, it makes it a lot more difficult for microaggressions to be swept under the rug.

“If you are a person who experienced microaggressions, you can make an effort to talk about your experiences with colleagues, find a support network, and then start to ask your own self objective questions,” says Rankin. “Explain and elaborate and unpack why something occurred and the impact it had on you.”

“Not everyone is going to live in the dorms, not everyone is going to go to every party, not everyone eats in the SUB, but everyone is going to have to go to class. We are all going to have to be in a classroom. That is the one shared experience in academic life. Those classrooms take all kinds of forms, they are research labs, they’re experiential, and they’re in lecture formats. That is where the most complex, difficult conversations need to happen.” – Assistant Professor Sonia Gipson Rankin

There are specific steps that can be taken at a college campus to ensure that all students, staff and faculty feel respected. Some of these steps include administrators, faculty, staff and student leaders taking Safe Zone training and examining their own biases and prejudices. Other steps include empowering cross-functional teams that are committed to addressing inequitable educational environments and outcomes. Rankin further explains that the classroom is a universal aspect of a college education, and should be at the forefront in these discussions.

“Not everyone is going to live in the dorms, not everyone is going to go to every party, not everyone eats in the SUB. But everyone is going to have to go to class. We are all going to have to be in a classroom,” remarked Rankin. “That is the one shared experience in academic life. Those classrooms take all kinds of forms, they are research labs, they’re experiential, and they’re in lecture formats. That is where the most complex, difficult conversations need to happen.”



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A form of microaggression can be exclusion where a student will feel isolated because they are not an active part of a project for example.

Rankin goes on to explain that there are very simple steps that can be taken in the classroom to ensure that all students are being respected. The most prominent step is ensuring that professors are trained to facilitate conversations that pertain to marginalized groups.

“When professors are not trained on how to facilitate difficult conversations in a classroom, it can lead to very verbal students not being mindful with their thoughts,” states Rankin. “This includes people making blanket statements and repeating discriminatory things that are not based in evidence. It can lead to other people feeling silenced in the classroom. It is the professor’s responsibility to facilitate the discussions. If the professor does not properly facilitate the conversation, a student can feel unheard in that learning space.”

“Number one, know that the things they say about you are not true. I encourage people to be about excellence and do not let someone else’s low standards define you. An ounce of your excellence is going to outweigh a pound of their ignorance.” – Assistant Professor Sonia Gipson Rankin

Rankin also encourages faculty members to re-evaluate different aspects of their syllabus to create a more inclusive environment including the distribution of participation points.

“Sometimes the formats in which we do that can leave students voiceless or without a means to share,” states Rankin. “So, when a professor solely focuses participation on what they say in class it can discount those who better express their thoughts in writing.”

Rankin closes with powerful words for individuals—especially young individuals—who experience microaggressions. “Number one, know that the things they say about you are not true. I encourage people to be about excellence and do not let someone else’s low standards define you. An ounce of your excellence is going to outweigh a pound of their ignorance.”

If any student, staff, faculty or community member has experienced any form of discrimination on a UNM campus, they are encouraged to file a report through the Office of Equal Opportunity. (<https://oeo.unm.edu/>)

Special thank you to Associate Professor Sonia M. Gipson Rankin (<https://lawschool.unm.edu/faculty/gipson-rankin/index.html>) at the UNM School of Law (<https://lawschool.unm.edu/>), who teaches in the fields of Torts, Constitutional Law, Family Law, and Race and the Law. Gipson Rankin’s research is centered on the law and its impact on the Black American community, particularly in the areas of technology, family dynamics, and race.

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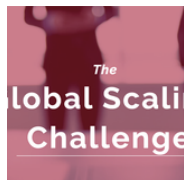
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505-277-1821
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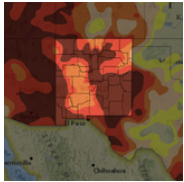


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