**Can Colleges Train Professors to Steer Clear of Micro-aggressions?**

By Fernanda Zamudio-Suaréz November 03, 2016



Claire Bangser

Terri Coleman, an adjunct professor at Dillard University, says evaluating students’ writing while respecting their backgrounds and not belittling their efforts can be tricky.

Tiffany C. Martínez, a sociology major at Suffolk University, made waves last week when she [blogged about an experience](https://vivatiffany.wordpress.com/2016/10/27/academia-love-me-back/) in which she said her professor had called her out in front of her classmates and accused her of copying parts of an assignment. Ms. Martínez said she was particularly upset that her professor had circled the word "hence" and written in the margin, ["This is not your language."](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Not-Your-Language-How-a/238239)

Though she said she understood that her professor was questioning whether the paper was plagiarized and probably didn’t intend for the comment to carry a racial tone, the words still hurt.

The incident is a clear example of a perceived [microaggression](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Campaigns-Against/231459), and prompts a question: How can institutions ensure instructors enjoy academic freedom while also pushing them to be mindful of students’ racial backgrounds and experiences?

For Suffolk and other colleges, Ms. Martínez’s experience can be turned into a teaching tool, said Sylvia Hurtado, a professor of education at the University of California at Los Angeles. "Our responsibility as professors is to know our students," she said. "We can’t be using things that work for a student body that no longer exists," Ms. Hurtado said.

Student demographics are changing and instructors need to change with them, altering their assumptions of what their classes look like and where their students come from, said Samuel D. Museus, an associate professor of higher education and student affairs at Indiana University at Bloomington. (Between the academic years 1999-2000 to 2009-10, the number of bachelor’s degrees earned by black students rose by 53 percent, and the number of degrees earned by Hispanic students rose by 87 percent, according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=72).)

To prevent incidents like the one at Suffolk from reoccurring, Mr. Museus said, professors need instruction on teaching diverse student populations. Most faculty aren’t being trained how to combat and understand implicit bias, said Mr. Museus, who is also director of Indiana’s Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Project.

"I view this issue as a systemic one," he said. "In order for it really to be addressed, institutions need to take responsibility and provide opportunities for professional development."

In a response to Ms. Martínez’s blog, Marisa J. Kelly, Suffolk’s interim president, [said the college](https://president.suffolk.edu) will have mandatory microaggression training for faculty. And at [Pomona College,](http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/06/when-diversity-and-inclusion-are-tenure-requirements/485057/) in California, faculty members voted overwhelmingly for tenure candidates to be evaluated on whether their teaching creates an inclusive classroom and whether they are attentive to the student body’s diversity.

Terri Coleman, an adjunct professor at Dillard University in New Orleans, said she was fortunate to have received this type of responsive diversity training in practice during her master’s program at Eastern Illinois University. At the university’s writing center, Ms. Coleman and her classmates provided help to students who either spoke no English or spoke dialects of it, like her South Asian students who sometimes had learned to speak English but not to write it proficiently.

Ms. Coleman said that she figured out how to respond to students’ sensitivities while she was learning to teach, and that she understands it can be tricky to evaluate students’ writing while respecting their backgrounds and not belittling their efforts. "It becomes, in a lot of rhetoric and composition classrooms, up to the teacher to do the kind of responsible pedagogical work that can protect students from teachers," Ms. Coleman said.

Part of that groundwork, she said, is understanding why students are using words like "hence." Sometimes they are simply trying out new writing styles or following writing models that professors give them, she said.

Sometimes using a transitional word like hence may not be the student’s direct idea, Ms. Coleman said. Students often spot words in other readings and then use them in their own writing. Additional training about recognizing these patterns and how to respond to them can help professors.

Faculty members may worry that additional institutional oversight of their classroom could impede their academic freedom, and colleges need to handle this delicately, Mr. Museus said. And colleges have to make sure that training doesn’t alter the content professors teach in the classroom, he said. "I recognize that some faculty and some people will see it as a violation of their freedom to do whatever they want in the classroom," Mr. Museus said.

But with academic freedom comes a lot of responsibility, Ms. Hurtado said. Instructors now have more information than ever about the racial makeup of their student bodies. As students reveal more about their backgrounds and academic struggles on social-media channels like Snapchat, Twitter, and Tumblr, professors can easily turn to online resources to better understand what microaggressions are, and use that information to create a more-inclusive classroom.

Still, better training doesn’t yield results quickly and ideal classrooms aren’t created after a few sessions, Mr. Museus said. "When I talk to campuses about this topic, I often say you can’t expect faculty to change overnight either," he said. "It’s a problem that actually takes quite a lot of energy to address on an individual level."

*Fernanda Zamudio-Suaréz is a web writer. Follow her on Twitter* [*@FernandaZamudio,*](https://twitter.com/FernandaZamudio) *or email her at fzamudiosuarez@chronicle.com.*

A version of this article appeared in the  [November 11, 2016 issue](http://www.chronicle.com/issue/2016/11-11).