What are Microaggressions? by Amy Fountain, Secretary of the Faculty

This term is defined within the context of the University culture in Jessica’s report in this newsletter, but of course it can be applied to a range of subtle, perhaps unconscious, slights or insults experienced by members of marginalized groups. I have recently had the privilege of learning more about this term from several of my colleagues at the University of Arizona. I take three primary insights away from these discussions.

The first is that microaggressions are ‘micro’ only when (mis-)understood as isolated incidents. The erosive effects of microaggressions on those who suffer them, and on the community at large, comes in part from their frequency – creating a ‘death by 10,000 paper cuts’.

The second is what distinguishes microaggressions from (macro?)aggressions is that the former are not delivered in a way that anthropological linguists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson would call ‘bald on record’. ‘Bald on record utterances are those in which the speaker takes no action that would mitigate potential harm or embarrassment for the listener. Aggression that is bald on record is, therefore, easily recognized by its target(s) as well as by bystanders.

When an insult or slight is hidden in a habitual turn of phrase, or presupposed in a statement whose overt structure is complimentary of the individual, while contrasting the individual’s goodness against low expectations about the group that the individual identifies with, or expressed as a matter-of-fact about the world, it becomes wearying pernicious. Confronting the embedded insult risks derailing communication, offending others, and exposing oneself to criticisms about being ‘too sensitive’ or ‘imagining things’. The path of least resistance for members of targeted groups is to just internalize the negative judgments they experience in this way. Sadly, many people do just that.

The third insight is that all of us are capable of microaggressions, and that the more power we have over others, and the less our daily lives and work involve close interactions with members of targeted groups, the more likely it is that we’ll habitually, if unintentionally, commit them. Learning that you’ve committed a microaggression is a terrible feeling, and, as a result, becoming an author of a nontrivial number of those 10,000 paper cuts.

1 Thanks to Drs. Celeste Gonzalez de Bustamante and Nolan Cabrera, and the participants and organizers of the Diverse Faculty Career Discussion on dealing with microaggressions in the classroom. All errors here are my own.

2 This term came into general use in the late 70s based on a cross-cultural study of politeness strategies undertaken by Brown and Levinson. The terminology and framework proposed at that time have, of course, undergone significant development and modification – but I find this concept to be particularly useful in this context.

Indigenous Peoples’ Day by Amy Fountain, Secretary of the Faculty

October 8, 2018, is the first Indigenous People’s Day since the Faculty Senate unanimously endorsed a student-led proposal for our institution to recognize this holiday.

The proposal, which came to a Senate vote last March, was introduced by a group of student leaders who represented several of the many Native American Nations, and who spoke in the languages of those Nations. It was supported by 15 UA clubs and organizations. It included a statement of these shared values and principles:

Acknowledgement: That the University of Arizona acknowledges Tohono O’odham lands as the foundation on which our education is based on from which it is informed;

Respect: That the University of Arizona recognizes the contributions of Indigenous Peoples and their respective lands to the advancement of knowledge and understanding worldwide;

Reciprocity: That the University of Arizona recognizes the central role of education in Indigenous communities. As such, the University of Arizona values and assures the maintenance of active relations with the communities of Indigenous Wildcats;

Tradition: That the University of Arizona celebrates a tradition of diverse Indigenous People’s on campus and supports appropriate representations of their respective histories and practices; and

Sustainable Inclusiveness: that the University of Arizona affirms the crucial role of Inclusive Excellence on campus and includes focus on the support and retention of Indigenous Peoples who look to the UA as another home, of which they can be proud, as Wildcats for life.

In recent years, the University of Arizona lost its Federal designation as a Native American Serving Institution. Perhaps we can use the celebration of Indigenous People’s Day to start a concerted effort to regain that designation. The University of Arizona is a Federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native-Serving Institution, and I hope we continue to live up to the promise reflected in these shared values and principles. (error was Amy’s, corrected 10/12/2018)
The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) survey was administered to the University of Arizona Faculty in March of 2018 and the results are in. The last time COACHE was administered (2013-2014) questions about shared governance were not included. This year, a series of questions about governance trust, shared sense of purpose, understanding the issue at hand, adaptability, and productivity were administered. Of the 42% of faculty who participated, the summary of results indicate the following:

- Areas of concern for all faculty (n = 886) include productivity and trust in governance (bottom 30% as compared with cohort* and peer** institutions)
- Tenured faculty (n = 456) are more concerned than pre-tenured (n = 192) and career-track faculty (n = 238) on areas of shared sense of purpose, adaptability, and productivity in governance.
- Underrepresented minority faculty (Hispanic, Indigenous, African-American; n = 133) are more concerned than white faculty (n = 651) on all issues of faculty governance.

How did specific groups respond to items within each subscale? I wanted to dig deeper, particularly on the low ratings of governance for underrepresented minority (urm) faculty. However, the COACHE directors were not informed in advance that I or any faculty member would want to access data, and responded that releasing the data to anyone but staff violates the spirit of confidentiality that participants were guaranteed before taking the survey. Upon the recommendation of Tom Miller and Laura Hunter, I was able to work with Jessica Hamar Martinez, an Associate Research Scientist, to look at differences between groups on specific items. Here is what we found when comparing urm with non-urm*** using chi square analyses on item response sets (findings are reported if p < .05).

**Peer institutions represent those most similar to UA in the faculty labor market (NC State, University of Missouri–Columbia; UNC Chapel Hill; UT Austin).
***Non-urm faculty include those who identify as white, Asian-American, or non-Hispanic.

These disparities are serious problems and need to be addressed. So what do we do? COACHE researchers suggest we follow guidelines in their white paper: https://coache.gse.harvard.edu/files/gse/coache_effectiveacademicgovernance_2015.pdf

Although, this white paper does not address the issues that are apparent in these data. Specifically, that microaggressions, defined as “the everyday slights found in higher education that communicate systematic values and power differences” (Kratwijk, 2015, p. 6), continue to be endemic for underrepresented faculty in governance (top 30% as compared with cohort* and peer** institutions). However, even with the best intentions to increase a sense of inclusiveness, the damaging effects of microaggressions are cumulative, and occur because they are both very common and as “the everyday slights found in higher education that communicate systematic values and power differences” (Kratwijk, 2015, p. 6), continue to be endemic for underrepresented faculty in governance (top 30% as compared with cohort* and peer** institutions). However, even with the best intentions to increase a sense of inclusiveness, the damaging effects of microaggressions are cumulative, and occur because they are both very common and severe enough to harm. To reduce microaggressions, the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) survey was administered to the University of Arizona Faculty in March of 2018 and the results are in. The last time COACHE was administered (2013-2014) questions about shared governance were not included. This year, a series of questions about governance trust, shared sense of purpose, understanding the issue at hand, adaptability, and productivity were administered. Of the 42% of faculty who participated, the summary of results indicate the following:

- Areas of concern for all faculty (n = 886) include productivity and trust in governance (bottom 30% as compared with cohort* and peer** institutions)
- Tenured faculty (n = 456) are more concerned than pre-tenured (n = 192) and career-track faculty (n = 238) on areas of shared sense of purpose, adaptability, and productivity in governance.
- Underrepresented minority faculty (Hispanic, Indigenous, African-American; n = 133) are more concerned than white faculty (n = 651) on all issues of faculty governance.

How did specific groups respond to items within each subscale? I wanted to dig deeper, particularly on the low ratings of governance for underrepresented minority (urm) faculty. However, the COACHE directors were not informed in advance that I or any faculty member would want to access data, and responded that releasing the data to anyone but staff violates the spirit of confidentiality that participants were guaranteed before taking the survey. Upon the recommendation of Tom Miller and Laura Hunter, I was able to work with Jessica Hamar Martinez, an Associate Research Scientist, to look at differences between groups on specific items. Here is what we found when comparing urm with non-urm*** using chi square analyses on item response sets (findings are reported if p < .05).

**Peer institutions represent those most similar to UA in the faculty labor market (NC State, University of Missouri–Columbia; UNC Chapel Hill; UT Austin).
***Non-urm faculty include those who identify as white, Asian-American, or non-Hispanic.
The UA Faculty Center invites you to attend a

TOWN HALL ON FACULTY INITIATIVES
FOR HSI AND DIVERSITY

October 26 * Haury Lecture Hall * ENR2 * 8:30-12:00

Meet others who are conducting similar work with diverse groups

Your contribution plays an important role on our campus, and the recent recognition of UA as a Hispanic Serving Institution brings even more attention to the work that needs to be done.

Goals for the town hall
1. To learn more about your efforts
2. To discover possible connections between efforts lead by faculty across campus
3. To generate themes of interest moving forward

Questions? Want to RSVP?
Please contact Jessica Summers, Chair of the Faculty at jsummers@email.arizona.edu

OR

Include your name on the sign-up sheet and Jessica will contact you

“My hope is that HSI status will help our students recognize that we see them; at the same time, I also think the UA can do much more to help students; particularly students who face financial challenges. HSI status is recognition that we are doing a good job with our students, but we can do better. …”

-Dr. Frans Tax