

Racial Microaggressions at UMD

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“A friend from high school had similar SAT scores but didn’t get in. It’s a good thing you’re Latino.”

“You’re really smart! You don’t seem Black.”

“You speak really good English.”

“Where are you from?” “Southern Maryland.”

“No, I mean, where are you from originally?” “Southern Maryland.”

“You’re pretty for a dark-skinned girl.”

These are comments from students, staff and faculty to students of color on our campus. These are microaggressions – small, everyday invalidating comments or slights based on one’s group membership. Often they are verbal, but sometimes microaggressions are non-verbal or behavioral, for example, when a woman in an elevator grabs her bag more tightly when the Black male walks in or when the instructor fails to “see” the Asian student whose hand is raised.

Last week, at **#ITooAmMaryland: Responses to Racial Microaggressions**, dozens and dozens of students shared microaggressions that they’ve experienced on and off campus as well as their strategies for dealing with them. (See the page-long list in this issue of *The Diamondback*.)

Microaggressions are tricky. They’re not egregious acts of racism, like calling someone the “N” word. Instead their racially biased message is subtle, muted, understated. Sometimes microaggressions even take the form of presumed compliments (as in, “You’re pretty for a dark-skinned girl”). Microaggressions are almost always uttered or enacted by a person who has no prejudicial intent – someone who believes him/herself to be free of racial bias or stereotypes. Yet the impact can be quite different than the intent.

For the person of color, the impact is cumulative – the repeated subtle message that I’m not valued or that I don’t belong. Or the periodic gentle reminder that I’m not seen as an individual; instead, I represent a negatively stereotyped group or, conversely, the exception to the stereotyped group.

Individually, each microaggression does limited harm. But the steady drumbeat of them can be emotionally taxing and lead students to doubt themselves and their capacity, detach from University life, and/or question whether UMD is the place for them. Thus, the consequences can be far from “micro”.

Of course, microaggressions are not unique to our campus. They’re a manifestation of Racism 2.0. The old-fashioned, in-your-face, intentional bias and discrimination has morphed into a modern, less obvious form. And modern racism is challenging to rout out. Because we tend to believe that well-meaning people don’t have racial biases, that we’re better than that, that we’re post-racial, it can be particularly difficult for us to acknowledge our prejudicial assumptions, our areas of ignorance, our gaffes and missteps.

But the wonderful thing about a campus as diverse as ours is that we have a golden opportunity to forge relationships and communities where we can become aware of our microaggressions and learn how not to offend others, where we can give and receive honest feedback, and where we can strive to develop our cultural competence. A great place to start is to read through and reflect on the list of microaggressions on the page-long spread in this issue.

Racism is not all or none – with people divided into good guys and bad guys. Instead, we’re all in this together. People of color sometimes commit microaggressions against people from their own or other groups. And microaggressions aren’t only about race. They are often based on gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, nationality, religion, ability, or age.

My hope is that we will work collectively to “rise above” racial and other microaggressions in order to create a campus that is truly equitable, diverse and inclusive for all. As fearless Terps, we can do this! #TerpsRiseAbove