

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ADVICE

Stop Ignoring Microaggressions Against Your Staff

Three ways that professors and administrators, intentionally or not, put staff ‘in their place.’

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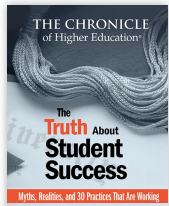
“You don’t behave enough like staff,” I was told derisively by the tenured professor who was then my supervisor. Despite my Ph.D., my years of experience at various levels of higher education, and my long list of successes as a faculty developer, this supervisor insisted on pointing out my place within the academic hierarchy. I sat there, in silence, swallowing my anger and shame.

That wasn’t the first time I was reminded of my rank in academe, nor would it be the last. There was the time I was teaching in an English department as a full-time, nontenure-track instructor — a designation held by more than half of its faculty. Those of us in the contingent ranks had always been treated enviably well in that department: We had voting rights in faculty meetings (except on tenure cases) and served on subcommittees. But on this day, the difference in status became overt: When tenured professors spoke up, the chair took great pains to address each of them

as either “Dr.” or “Professor.” When the chair called on me — the first adjunct to speak at the gathering — he used my first name.

Many noticed, shooting pointed glances my way. But no one said a word. Not even me.

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Nowadays there’s a name for such slights — they’re called microaggressions. I’ve been dealing with them for my entire academic career — first as a graduate student and an instructor and then when I shifted from a faculty role to an academic-staff member. In recent years *The Chronicle* has written about the microaggressions [experienced by contingent faculty members](#), particularly those who are women, members of racial and ethnic groups, or both.

But so far, little attention has been paid to the daily microaggressions directed at those of us who fall into the highly diverse yet nebulous category of staff members — that is, anyone who is not in the “prestige” ranks of faculty member or administrator. Outside of David M. Perry’s 2020 essay on “[Title Policing and Other Ways Professors Bully the Academic Staff](#),” I’ve seen little commentary on the treatment of staff members. And there is an appetite for that discussion. When [I asked](#) on Twitter what one of my next topics should be in [this series of essays](#) on campus staff, the most common answer was microaggressions.

Why? First, because out of all three labor categories — administration, faculty, staff — the staff is the most diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. And second, our status as staff members makes us a particular target. Within the structures of the

institution, we have neither the protection of tenure and academic freedom nor the power and authority of an administrator.

My aim in what follows is to describe three of the most common types of microaggressions directed at staff members, based on my own and other staff members' experiences.

Know your place. Staff members are constantly reminded of where we fall in the institutional hierarchy. Really, any sort of comment that emphasizes the difference in status, power, and/or title would fit under this type.

That includes events like when faculty members and administrators do not use our proper titles or treat us like “the help.” It also includes blaming “the staff” for things that aren't actually our fault — for example, the frequent faculty comments about our jobs as “the cause” of administrative bloat. Faculty members and administrators will cc our supervisors because of minor flaws (we did not address them by their proper title, for example) or major errors that we didn't cause (for instance, a grant-application deadline missed because requested materials weren't sent to us on time).

These microaggressions are particularly acute at institutions in small towns, where the staff is largely made up of locals (or, derisively, “townies”) while faculty members and administrators typically come from elsewhere. The condescending tone taken by some professors and administrators in talking to staff members, putting them in their place, is hurtful.

Unfortunately, many of us have heard a professor or an administrator publicly berate or aggressively belittle a staff member. Both when I was a faculty member and when I held hybrid faculty-staff positions, I have been privy to the closed-door comments made about the staff — comments that would quickly and awkwardly get laughed off as “just a joke” when my own staff status was revealed. “But you teach and you have a Ph.D., so you're different. You understand,” I was told. I did, and I still do, understand

that staff members are viewed as less-than by many faculty members, and are treated accordingly.

“But that’s not scholarship.” Another common microaggression directed at staff members is the dismissal or erasure of our expertise and experience. “You don’t *really* do research, do you?” is a common refrain that those of us in academic-staff roles hear from both faculty members and administrators. The implication is that somehow our research isn’t valid or rigorous. Another version of this microaggression is the surprise that some professors and administrators express when they find out that a staff member, in fact, does do research, “even though you don’t have to.” Some staff members do research because (a) we want to and (b) it is essential to be able to do our jobs, and do them well, whether or not that is explicitly stated in our job descriptions.

In my own fields of faculty development and instructional design, research on effectiveness in teaching and learning is key to being able to improve students’ learning outcomes, inform sound institutional-policy decisions, and provide an effective learning experience for students. Any campus office related to student success doesn’t trade on anecdotes to make its decisions, but instead relies on robust communities of practice, with our own journals, conferences, and research standards. Most staff members do that work without any external funding.

Of course, not every staff job requires research, but they all demand a level of knowledge and professionalism. Where would your department’s budget be without the knowledge and institutional memory that your administrative assistant possesses of campus structures and systems? How would your students persist and graduate without the specialized support of financial-aid officers and academic advisers?

Student success often is affected by things outside the classroom, but it is the staff that largely deals with those life issues — by working to support the students, allowing faculty members to focus on teaching, and, yes, doing research that contributes to

solutions. Our work, too, changes the lives of students. To take our efforts for granted or deny their importance is a microaggression.

No invitations, no awards. You quickly get the message that you don't belong when your institution focuses its ceremonies and awards on the faculty and the administration. The routine lack of recognition for staff work and our exclusion from campus events are systemic microaggressions — regular reminders that the institution doesn't view us as an integral part of the campus community.

Sometimes it's not intentional exclusion; it's just that no one ever thought to ask us. At one of the institutions where I worked as an academic-staff member, for example, I wanted to attend graduation with the faculty, to see and congratulate seniors with whom I had worked. There was no rule that explicitly excluded staff members from attending graduation, but no one had ever considered inviting us, either, assuming that we wouldn't be interested despite our close contact with students.

Colleges offer any number of internal awards for faculty excellence in research, teaching, mentorship, and service. For staff excellence, however, there is often only one award, even though many academic-staff members engage in almost all of the same activities as faculty members — service, mentorship, research, and even teaching. Our work with students doesn't always look the same as the work that professors do, but we deserve to be celebrated for our contribution to student success and to the overall campus community. That we make up the majority of the campus but receive a minority of the recognition is an outright erasure of our contributions.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, and I have tried to focus on microaggressions — and not on outright mistreatment and bullying, although those things happen, too. Administrators need to start seeing microaggressions toward staff members, and treating those incidents as seriously as they do microaggressions against faculty members and students. Name it, acknowledge it, and then work to alleviate it. Set the tone by being more inclusive of the staff at campus events. That is just the first step

toward showing us that we are, in fact, an integral part of the campus community — we are not less than.

Faculty members can do their part as well, by approaching staff members as colleagues and collaborators, with a shared goal of helping students succeed. If you see another faculty member committing microaggressions (or macro ones) toward a staff member, intervene. Take the time to get to know staff members, especially those who spend more time with students than you do. Even better, ask students for the names of staff members who have helped and supported them on the campus, and then reach out to those staff members.

Remember: Many people in staff positions could work in any labor sector, but we choose to work on a college campus because we have a shared goal of supporting and educating students. We're not just here for the paycheck. We're here because, like you, we value higher education.

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