utmsu

UTM STUDENTS' UNION RECOMMENDATIONS FOR

IMPLEMENTING A SAFE AND INCLUSIVE ACADEMIC SPACE

UTMSU LOBBY WEEK

2023/2024

table of contents

introduction
Safety is a right, not a privilege.

Creating a safe and inclusive academic space is paramount in fostering an environment where both students and faculty can thrive intellectually, emotionally, and socially. The University of Toronto has stated its commitment to "achieving a working, teaching, and learning environment that is free of discrimination and harassment as defined in the Ontario Human Rights Code" **(1)**.

A key element of building an academic environment that considers and accommodates the diversity offered by the student body is to recognize the role played by racial microaggressions in shaping the setting of the classroom.

Though there is a general consensus that Canada is accepting and appreciative of cultural diversity— the government's adoption of the official Multiculturalism Act is an example of Canada's welcoming nature **(2)** — there are well researched and documented instances of racism that are "commonplace in Canada generally and within Canadian universities specifically **(3)**.

1 *ims.utoronto.ca/statement-equity-diversity-and-excellence*
2 *laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-18.7/page-1.html*
3 *Sara Houshmand, Lisa B. Spanierman, and Romin W. Tafarodi, "Excluded and Avoided: Racial Microaggressions Targeting Asian International Students in Canada" in Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology 20, no. 3 (2014): 378. doi.org/10.1037/a0035404.*
4 *Houshmand, Spanierman, and Tafarodi, "Excluded and Avoided," 378.*
5 *apa.org/monitor/2009/02/microaggression*
6 *Houshmand, Spanierman, and Tafarodi, "Excluded and Avoided," 378.*

Racial microaggressions present in many forms, and are can be categorized as microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. The first, defined by Houshmand et al. as "racial microaggressions that directly defame the target's racial background or identity" **(4),** include but are not limited to the use of slurs and racially motivated actions, the use of hateful symbols, or overt preferential treatment based on race **(5)**. The second relates to "subtle communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity towards a person's racial heritage or identity" **(6),** such as suggesting an employee/student was hired due to a quota system or diversity policy **(7)**. The third, defined as "subtle communications that negate or invalidate the target's thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality" includes actions such as mistaking people of the same race **(8)**.

This document aims to convey the magnitude of the concern demonstrated by UTMSU members regarding safety within the campus and within the classroom, and aims to address this by implementing an education and awareness campaign. Furthermore, we hope that the university will collaborate with the UTMSU in implementing a system whereby students can report microaggressions—anonymously , if they wish—directly to the university, and bypass the lengthy and oftentimes demoralizing process of complaining through the department.

7 apa.org/monitor/2009/02/microaggression
8 forbes.com/sites/rachelmontanez/2020/06/11/10-microinsults-and-5-microinvalidations-women-of-color-are-tired-of-are-you-guilty/?sh=19a53a936ea8

This report will draw on academic research, initiatives from other Ontario campuses, student testimonials, and faculty consultations to substantiate the UTMSU's effort to implement our recommendations to make the campus a safer and more inclusive space for the UTM community.

summary of recommendations

1 Establish a code of behaviour/conduct in the classroom

2 Establish a more direct complaint procedure

3 Implement an educational campaign about micro aggressions

4 Creating a space on campus specifically for members of marginalized communities

necessity

The Implementing A Safe and Inclusive Academic Space Campaign is necessary due to several pressing reasons:

As a Student Union, we strive to represent the interests of all our members, regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion, or any other identifying feature.

By promoting respect towards and acceptance of diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and identities, universities can foster a culture of belonging and empowerment where every member feels valued, respected, and supported in their pursuit of knowledge and academic excellence.

Through collaborative efforts between students, faculty, administrators, and support staff, universities can create a transformative academic space that celebrates diversity, promotes equity, and ensures the holistic development and success of all its members.

01

EMPOWERING VOICES

When creating an environment free from discrimination, bias, and harassment, universities uphold principles of fairness and respect, fostering an atmosphere where every individual has equal opportunities to learn, teach, and succeed.

By embracing diversity, valuing different perspectives, and promoting inclusivity, universities create a supportive community where individuals feel accepted, valued, and empowered to fully participate in academic and social activities.

9 *Kayla Lett, Andreea Tamaian, and Bridget Klest, "Impact of Ableist Microaggressions on University Students with Self-Identified Disabilities," Disability & Society 35, no. 9 (2020): 1443.*

02

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND SUCCESS

*Students that experience microaggressions often report feeling frustrated, discouraged, and exhausted," resulting in them having "little energy to strive academically" **(9)**. Likewise, students that feel they are at a disadvantage due to being in the minority in a classroom may be unlikely to engage fully in classroom discussion, thus encountering a "barrier to participation" **(10)**. Studies have also found a strong correlation between a sense of belonging and academic achievement, as well as in matriculation **(11)**.*

*Particularly in classrooms, where there is a clear imbalance of power between instructors and students, students may feel they are unable to challenge or address micro aggressions (intentional or not). This can lead to "racial battle fatigue," and can eventually negatively impact marginalized individuals' sense of belonging, leading to severe consequences on academic outcomes **(12)**. When individuals feel safe, respected, and supported, they are better able to focus on their studies, engage in meaningful academic discourse, and pursue their academic and professional goals with confidence and enthusiasm.*

03

MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

*There is a demonstrated positive correlation between experiences of racial micro aggressions and "depressive symptoms" including "chronic stress that could have a damaging effect on mental health" **(13)**. Studies find that it is important to "name and challenge micro aggressions" because of the potential harm, and "enduring and cumulative effect" it can have amongst marginalized groups. Victims of micro aggressions are left "powerless, invisible, and pushed to conform to the dominant culture that governs the institution" **(14)**.*

By establishing a safe and inclusive academic environment and fostering a culture of empathy and understanding, universities create spaces where individuals feel comfortable seeking help, coping with challenges, and maintaining overall well-being.

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10 *Kayla Lett, Andreea Tamaian, and Bridget Klest, "Impact of Ableist Microaggressions on University Students with Self-Identified Disabilities," 1443.*

11 *Vanessa Hunn, "African American Students, Retention, and Team-Based Learning: A Review of the Literature and Recommendations for Retention at Predominately White Institutions," Journal of Black Studies 45, no. 4 (2014): 304.*

12 *Zak Foste and Jennifer Ng, "'Didn't Mean to Mean It That Way': The Reduction of Microaggressions to Interpersonal Errors of Communication Among University Resident Assistants," Journal of Diversity in Higher Education 15, no. 5 (2022): 550.*

13 *Kayla Lett, Andreea Tamaian, and Bridget Klest, "Impact of Ableist Microaggressions on University Students with Self-Identified Disabilities," 1443.*

14 *Zak Foste and Jennifer Ng, "'Didn't Mean to Mean It That Way': The Reduction of Microaggressions to Interpersonal Errors of Communication Among University Resident Assistants," Journal of Diversity in Higher Education 15, no. 5 (2022): 550.*

STUDENT
testimonials

"Professors usually **tend to answer to people that are [thought] to be smart more nicely** then those that tend to ask more questions."

"Since teacher[s] are **people of authority and power**, it's difficult to complain about them for fear of creating problems, … and people will be on the teachers' side by **social standards**."

"[A] professor, due to their views, made [it] hard for me to go to their Office Hours or seek any support as they **[seem] to not like people that look like me** (ex. Muslim)."

"If I had to seek academic support from someone that I had been previously harassed by **I would not feel comfortable or safe at all**."

Coming from a high school with a large Black population, specifically from low-income neighbourhoods, to being able to count the number of Black students in my first-year chemistry class on my hands, I witnessed firsthand the systemic barriers placed against Black students. In my first year of university, I felt high levels of anxiety being a Black student in a STEM program. In my CHM121 class (Winter 2020), I was the only Black student in my tutorial/lab section. In the beginning of the semester, I had box braids—a common hairstyle worn by women of African descent.

I remember my TA, who was not Black identifying, say that she wanted to get her hair braided like mine while the class was in the middle of a laboratory. Box braids being worn by non Black individuals is seen as cultural appropriation. Additionally, mentioning this in the middle of a laboratory made me very uncomfortable.

Later in the semester, I removed my box braids and had my natural hair out. During a tutorial session, we were instructed to drop off our lab reports at the front of the classroom. As I came to the front of the classroom, the TA said "Ruth did you cut your hair," in front of the whole class. A fellow student, a white male, seated at the front of the classroom snickered at the comment. This experience made me feel like I didn't deserve a space in that classroom, and that Black students didn't deserve a space in our academic community. I believe, wholeheartedly, that marginalized students' deserve safer spaces, a welcoming environment, and their own social space.

Ruth
UTM Student

"Sometimes it's **hard to ask for clarification**."

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"I had once [been] **disrespected, [...] and been called racial names by a female instructor/ professor**. Another [occasion it] was a female [who] called me racial names and [asked] for money for [tutoring] me in a manipulative and aggressive [manner]. [...] I am not sure if this is a break of her teaching contract."

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"Sometimes, [my] professor [makes] **weird jokes that can feel like an attack**, or make me feel uncomfortable. But overall, majority of them are very respectful."

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"If I was with an instructor who is previously know to be a questionable, **I would still approach the professor but in a more public space out of precaution**, for example asking questions at the end of lecture when other students are present."

In my last 2 years of University, I have experienced many instances of microaggressive comments that were said to myself or a friend. The most compelling one was when I was in my biology tutorial talking to my TA. She was sharing her journey to medical school. I was in a group, listening to the conversation. My TA looked at me and said, " If I were you I would look for those pathways for minorities, it makes the process easier for you, you know." The fact that she singled me out of the group of students that she was talking to, and also ridiculed, and implied the process to med school would be easier for me because I was black, to me was very microaggressive, because she failed to take into account the barriers that exists for black pre-med students in Canada.

Kamsy
UTM Student

When I was getting dinner in OPH, I was stopped by one of the OPH staff that made it a priority at that time to stop and comment about my hair. I had worn my hair out in an afro that day, and she touched my hair and commented about how soft it is and how much she liked it. I said thank you. Then she said that it reminds her of a bunch of animals. I believe I was compared to a sheep, and cotton. I felt very uncomfortable during the entire exchange.

Anonymous
UTM Student

FACULTY
consultations

UTMSU executives met with various departments to present the recommendations and ideas mentioned in this document and discuss implementation.

We were met with positive responses to our recommendation of an education and awareness campaign about microaggressions by some departments. Furthermore, we were advised to include faculty in our recommendation to establish guidelines for classroom behavior since both students and instructors can potentially be subjected to microaggressions.

The UTMSU values the input of the university departments and has taken into consideration the input and feedback provided by a member of the departments we consulted.

current state
OF AFFAIRS

While the university has implemented several initiatives to address racial inequalities and race-related issues on campus, the UTMSU believes there is always room to create more awareness and opportunities to build a more safe and inclusive academic space on campus. As the representatives of the student body, the UTMSU has been made aware of several instances where students belonging to racial minorities were subjected to significant microaggressions relating to ethnicity, religion, and gender.

Likewise, in conversation with various academic departments, we were made aware of the necessity to address racial microaggressions against faculty and staff as well as students. Therefore, the UTMSU recommends the implementation of an education campaign to bring awareness to students, faculty, and staff about the various forms in which racial microaggressions may manifest, regardless of intention.

the state of affairs
IN OTHER INSTITUTIONS

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Harvard has implemented various initiatives to promote inclusivity and combat racism on campus. Their "Inclusion and Belonging Task Force'' focuses on fostering a culture of belonging for all members of the Harvard community. Additionally, they offer training programs and workshops aimed at raising awareness about unconscious bias and addressing microaggressions **(9)**.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

UC Berkeley has launched the "UC Berkeley Initiative for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity" to address issues of discrimination and promote inclusivity across campus. They offer resources for reporting incidents of bias and discrimination, as well as programs focused on bystander intervention and creating inclusive classrooms.

This includes the Bias Incident Support Services, which provides support and resources for individuals who have experienced or witnessed incidents of bias, racism, or discrimination, contributing to a safer and more inclusive academic environment **(10)**.

YORK UNIVERSITY

York University has implemented various initiatives to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus. The Centre for Human Rights, Equity & Inclusion offers workshops, training programs, and resources to address issues of stigma, racism, and micro aggressions.

York's Anti-Racism Task Force works to develop strategies and recommendations to address systemic racism and promote racial equity within the university community **(11)**.

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

MIT has implemented the "MindHandHeart Initiative" to promote mental health and well-being on campus and reduce stigma surrounding mental health issues. They offer resources such as mental health screenings, support groups, and awareness campaigns to create a supportive and inclusive environment for all students and faculty.

This includes the Bias Response Team, which addresses incidents of bias, discrimination, and micro aggressions on campus, and the Diversity & Inclusion Summit, which brings together students, faculty, and staff to discuss strategies for creating a more inclusive academic environment. **(12)**

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO SCARBOROUGH (UTSC)

UTSC has a "Navigating Micro aggressions in the Classroom" document to provide instructors and TAs training to manage micro aggressions in academic spaces. It provides them with information and steps on how to recognize microaggressions, how to navigate a complaint, and how to react when criticized on a complaint. Additionally, the UTSC Black Student Engagement hosts weekly spaces for Black students.

9 *inclusionandbelongingtaskforce.harvard.edu/initiatives*
10 *diversity.berkeley.edu/initiatives*
11 *rights.info.yorku.ca*
12 *mindhandheart.mit.edu*
13 *utsc.utoronto.ca/studentlife/black-student-engagement*
14 *temertymedicine.utoronto.ca/sites/default/files/2020_12_21_-_navigating_microaggressions_in_the_classroom_copy.pdf*

RECOMMENDATIONS &
implementation

Based on research, discussions with students and faculty, the following suggestions would improve inclusivity and safety for students.

01 ESTABLISH A CODE OF BEHAVIOUR/ CONDUCT IN THE CLASSROOM

Refine and implement clear guidelines outlining expected behaviour and conduct in the classroom environment. These guidelines should address issues such as discrimination, harassment, and micro aggressions, and provide clear guidelines for appropriate conduct for and between both students and faculty. For example, Stanford University's Code of Conduct emphasizes the importance of treating all members of the university community with dignity and respect, and outlines the steps for addressing allegations of discrimination or harassment. This code should promote respect, inclusivity, and professionalism among students and faculty, and outline consequences for violations.

02 IMPLEMENT AN EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGN ABOUT MICRO AGGRESSIONS

An education and awareness campaign can increase awareness and understanding among staff and faculty about the subtle, yet harmful, nature of microaggressions, which are often experienced by minority students. The campaign could include posters across campus with QR codes linking to a site with more information and contacts for direct complaints, workshops, lectures, etc.

This heightened awareness can lead to a more inclusive and respectful campus culture where all individuals feel valued, respected, and supported.

03 ESTABLISH A MORE DIRECT COMPLAINT PROCEDURE

The continuation of certain negative behaviours by an institution towards individuals—also called institutional betrayal—can result in "greater psychological harm" among victims of micro aggressions **(15)**. Thus, institutional participation in anti-racism policy and initiatives (in this case, anti-micro aggression initiatives) is essential in combating racism on campus. The University of Toronto Anti-Black Racism Task Force notes in their 2021 report that micro aggressions should be "appropriately addressed in the policy and complaints process" **(16)**. The UTMSU recommends that the University implement a system whereby students can bypass the stressful and often unwelcoming system of going through the departments and the instructors themselves, to go to someone who will be able to help them directly. This could include establishing a complaint system/hotline, QR code to directly access a website or email, and re-evaluating the process of investigating accusations to ensure transparency.

04 CREATING A SPACE ON CAMPUS SPECIFICALLY FOR MEMBERS OF MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

According to a survey done by the Office of the Vice-President and Principal (OVPP), more than 25% of Black students do not feel accepted at UTM **(17)**. Having an inclusive space for members of marginalized communities will allow them to connect with members of the community, and build a sense of belonging at UTM. It will also serve as a primary resource, an initial point of contact, and a space to keep informed about community-based initiatives and events.

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15 Kayla Lett, Andreea Tamaian, and Bridget Klest, "Impact of Ableist Microaggressions on University Students with Self-Identified Disabilities," *Disability & Society* 35, no. 9 (2020): 1444.

16 people.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Anti-Black-Racism-Task-Force-Report_Web.pdf

17 Martin Kengo, Office of the Vice President and Principle, "Prioritizing Black Student Space at the University of Toronto Mississauga (survey)," 2023.

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