

October 2020

## Microaggressions and the Marginalization of First-Generation Faculty: Professional Assimilation and Competency Development

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### Recommended Citation

Bechard, A., & Gragg, J. B. (2020). Microaggressions and the Marginalization of First-Generation Faculty: Professional Assimilation and Competency Development. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 19 (4). Retrieved from <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/taboo/vol19/iss4/8>

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# Microaggressions and the Marginalization of First-Generation Faculty

## Professional Assimilation and Competency Development

*Amber L. Bechard & Janee Both Gragg*

### Abstract

In very recent years, as institutions of higher education have been focusing substantial efforts and resources on empowering first-generation students, first-generation faculty are increasingly called upon to mentor and support these students. Given their own developmental experiences and struggles, such faculty often enthusiastically embrace this labor. Yet such faculty have received little to no professional training or institutional mentoring as first-generation undergraduate or graduate students or, most importantly for our purposes here, as first-generation faculty. Indeed, little has been written about first-generation students who have become faculty members in the often-elitist academy. This article explores the authors' experiences of marginalization as first-generation faculty, using personal narratives marked by microaggressions that highlight implicit bias related to (1) professional assimilation and (2) competency development. Contextual considerations are discussed as is the pressing need for future research on and mentoring programs for first-generation faculty.

### Introduction

In recent years, as higher education has produced research, programming, and other resources to empower first-generation students (Glass, et al., 2017),

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first-generation faculty are increasingly turned to a valuable resource for mentoring, support and diversity and inclusion initiatives. Yet these faculty did not benefit from similar theorizing and support in their path from undergraduate to graduate students to faculty members. Indeed, little has been written about first-generation faculty members in the academy.

Herein lies the irony of the ivory tower: publicly embracing first-generation students, yet still largely ascribing to a survival of the fittest, competitive academic culture where naiveté is weakness and historical academic privilege is the social and political capital that must be obtained for first-generation faculty to effectively navigate toward tenure, reputable scholarship, and professorial success. In this way, as Freire (1972) characterizes oppression, the rescuer (in this case, the academy) carries within it the potential to act simultaneously as the oppressor (Hiraldo, 2010). The well-intentioned establishment is liberating students through access to higher-education systems (Shor & Freire, 1987)—systems saturated with oppressive practices (Stockdill & Danico, 2012), including professional and relational faculty workplace dynamics marked by unconscious or implicit bias communicated through elitist, gendered, and racist microaggressions (Standlee, 2018). And as dimensions of difference—such as race, age, gender and social class—intersect, levels of oppression are magnified (Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012). This article explores the authors' experiences of marginalization as first-generation faculty, using personal narratives marked by microaggressions that highlight implicit bias related to 1) professional assimilation and 2) competency development.

### Theoretical Conceptualization

Several theories are utilized in the meaning making of our lived experiences, including Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory and General Systems Theory. First, Feminist Theory acknowledges the role gender, inequity, power, misogyny and silencing play in already corrupt systems (Hooks, 1984), represented here in our shared first-generation faculty experiences in the academy. Similarly, Critical Race Theory views education as shaping and reflecting the dominant discourse of a white elite whose racist, biased, gendered, classed practices and policies have contextualized our stories and represent a larger climate (Hiraldo, 2010). Finally, General Systems Theory acknowledges the complexities of human organizational systems with attention to redundant patterns of behavior within and across systems (Both Gragg, 2016). In this way, we understand that large-scale institutional change is both incredibly challenging and painful as the system seeks (through the individual actions of its members) to reward, both explicitly and (most insidiously) implicitly, behaviors that serve to maintain or strengthen the status quo.

### From First-Gen Student to First-Gen Faculty

Much scholarly research and writing exists about the recruitment and reten-

tion of first-generation students who are the first in the family to attend or to graduate from college. A population with valuable and diverse strengths and perspectives, perseverance and resourcefulness, these students are assumed to benefit from additional support for their unique needs (Inkelas et al., 2006; Lundberg et al., 2007). However, older cohorts of first-generation students did not benefit from such naming, theorizing, and support: the term only began to emerge in the literature in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These older cohorts have since grown up and accepted faculty appointments. The metamorphosis from first-generation student to faculty member represents large leaps (Gersick, 1991) for individuals and families in terms of power—the kind that comes from knowledge, education level, employment status, socioeconomic status and social class. Spanning this cultural chasm can leave first-generation faculty spread thin, feeling isolated and disconnected from institutional work. Indeed, first-generation faculty are often eager yet also subtly suppressed participants in an unspoken cultural hierarchy. The title “first-generation faculty”, even in the absence of a full-blown marketing campaign, can come with the often-invisible labor of unspoken responsibilities and expectations of student engagement, institutional service, and community outreach that are crucial to the success of first-generation students. While this can place additional time and resource constraints on faculty members, Baez (2000) suggests that the critical agency around how and why to serve is meaningful to first-generation faculty, albeit undervalued within higher education.

### Marginalization of First-Generation Faculty

The traits of intelligence, ambition and tenacity that drive first-generation faculty to complete college and earn post-graduate degrees are not always as highly valued in academia as is language fluency and material resources acquired through multigenerational access to higher education. Thus, those familiar and comfortable with the nuances of navigating institutions of higher education have substantial advantages that perpetuate historical academic privilege (Housel and Harvey, 2009). First-generation faculty who work hard, engage in meaningful research, service and teaching and are certainly of equal value as academics remain subtly and consistently at a disadvantage. They find themselves marginalized, which, as per Weisberger (1992), is the process of positioning a group of people below or outside of society and its norms. Some faculty report being “bullied” by peers within the academy: peers who may have an unacknowledged bias or agenda to replicate the historical privilege of academe through what De la Riva-Holly (2012) terms “secret social norms and behaviors” (p. 292).

Implicit bias is the unconscious mental beliefs held about various groups, often based on past experiences and leading to demonstrated preference of one group over another (Hohman, Gaffney, Hogg, 2017). Implicit bias likely plays a role in how first-generation faculty are viewed in an environment grappling with

its own cultural identity even while efforts to embrace and embody diversity fall short in an increasingly anti-racist climate. So, for example, our voices are often rendered inaudible until restated by a faculty member able to crank the volume, articulating our ideas using more traditionally academic language. Ideas shared in meetings are met with lukewarm placating and then repackaged into initiatives rolled out successfully under a more privileged colleague's leadership—usually an established male scholar having greater higher-education fluency and standing to benefit directly from maintaining the existing power structures. Conversations that begin with us being told to “lean in”—in a superficial nod to gender and class justice—end in exclusion.

In this way, role expectations can become ascribed, influenced by implicit and explicit rules (Both Gragg & Wilson, 2006) about how business in the academy should be conducted and who is best suited to oversee which tasks. Contextualized within a unique sociopolitical and economic institutional climate and further nestled within specific departmental or program sub-cultures, both implicit and explicit professional role expectations can magnify first-generation faculty burdens and marginalization. Institutions risk undermining the very essence of diversity with an only superficial appreciation of the label *first-generation faculty* and appropriation of labor that ignores group differences, lived experiences and personal narratives and provides little or no support for success.

The slights and subtleties in communication and behavior toward others can signal unconscious biases, which are often barely visible to the perpetrator or recipient (Sue et al., 2007 and 2009). Indeed, microaggressions perpetuate the very oppression the academy purports to expose and eradicate and are also increasingly a topic of study, protest, and news. Most recently, Black, Indigenous, and people of color from the ranks of students, alumni, staff, and faculty nationwide are demanding academic institutions acknowledge, challenge, and dismantle the previously unquestioned, culturally imbedded, rarely recognized racial microaggressions that are the status quo.

### Professional Assimilation: Being Socialized to the Academy

After a full career as an educational practitioner in K-12, I accepted an initial Visiting Assistant Professor appointment, officially entering academia. Immediately I was in an unfamiliar space, where one “accepts an appointment” versus getting a job. I remember researching various professor ranks that many of my colleagues knew about since their childhoods, confidently navigating the complex cultural terrain of the academy. My limited background knowledge became more and more apparent as my experience in academia progressed. Comments from privileged academics were delivered with a sometimes subtle, always condescending, entitled tone.

My exasperation at complex and undefined systems—such as creating a study abroad course, compiling a tenure and promotion dossier, navigating the institutional review board and mastering the scholarly publication culture—were met with: “That’s what the academy is about.” The survival of the fittest attitude demanded that I figure it out myself or fail. Colleagues smugly told me: “I guess you’re learning what it means to be in the academy.” A dean once directly stated (and thereby reinforced my outsider status), “You’re being socialized to the academy.” When I proposed an autoethnographic article, an established scholar discouraged me: “That’s not like any article I’ve ever written.” Offers of mentoring and support were rare in that first experience as a faculty member. Though I wasn’t mentored in systems or navigating research and scholarship requirements, I was given explicit advice on how to “behave” more like an academic. After an in-house interview for a tenure-track position, I was cautioned: “Be aware of how you are perceived. The impressions you leave are important.” “Academics want those who came before them to be honored. Mention the names of relevant scholars often.” “The way you present yourself needs a more scholarly lens.” I felt hazed more than mentored. In actuality, I experienced the perpetuation of institutionalized oppression.

First-gen faculty report much effective support within the academy comes from other first-generation professionals, including administrative assistants and facilities staff who offer entirely different comments. “You are one of the most accessible faculty members here.” “You work so well with people.” “You are effective, yet still friendly.” These collegial interactions with those who have another first-generation academy role reveal invisible relational work of first-gen faculty, repairing damage done by the aggressive, dismissive actions of privileged, connected colleagues. Such work includes seeing, asking, listening, bearing witness, and/or taking action.

### Competency Development: Language Fluency and Cultural Nuance

As I moved into the professional culture of higher education, I had hoped for something like assimilation: where I could be who I am also be viewed as a valuable contributor. However, climbing the hierarchical ranks toward scholar status felt more like cultural eradication. For example, the word scholar itself feels pretentious, serving to separate me from my cultural history, social experiences and familial relationships. My colleagues frequently refer to themselves as scholars and compare themselves to one another through historically privileged ways of knowing and using traditional status measurements, such as number of scholarly publications and official impact data. While I understand the term’s importance and centrality, adopting such a self-identity serves only to separate me from the working-class communities where I grew up and the alternative measures of suc-

cess I learned babysitting and waiting tables there. Similarly, self-identifying as scholar creates an air of pretense and thus a problematic distance in the communities in which my research is imbedded and designed to benefit.

My colleagues frequently make assumptions about the nature and extent of my scholarship, perhaps because it is community based, and often express surprise when I share information about publications and conference presentations. They frequently mischaracterize my research as service rather than scholarship thus undermining my contributions and my path forward in academia. So I am left striving to be perceived as scholarly enough to have credibility in the academy and while working not to alienate the community allies and partners central to my work.

My voice, by nature of word choice, prevents my ideas from being heard with the same credibility as those around me who are more fluent in higher educationese. Put simply, I am a first-generation scholarly language learner, with all the associated stigma and bias that comes with not speaking the dominant language. For example, I have been explicitly told that tenured faculty have a responsibility to speak up, share ideas and challenge ideologies as a contribution to academic discourse. However, these contributions are expected to come with a specific tone and delivered with a form of academic fluency that I lack. Lacking explicit rules on how, what and when to speak up, I experienced multiple pitfalls and consequences, being told I was coming off as “resentful” and “emotional.” I was dismissed and not mentored on how to make these contributions or affirmed regarding their importance, regardless of their delivery.

Over time, I have become more nimble at using long-standing formal structures to exert my voice but this box checking, typically devoid of relational processes, does not come easily. I rarely move forward without consulting allies more familiar with navigating higher education process and procedure and keen to cultural subtleties and nuances. Mine is a collaborative relational process that looks starkly different from that of many colleagues who are more adept at navigating the terrain of traditional academic processes and procedures that often diminishes and silences alternative, relational voices like mine.

### Contextual Considerations

Given the often unacknowledged challenges of navigating professional assimilation and competency development processes, the implicit bias first-generation faculty face and resulting microaggressions can leave them feeling marginalized and unsupported even while trying to mentor first-generation students. Successful academic identity development for first-generation faculty has direct implications for institutional navigability, scholarly vocabulary and achievement required for tenure and promotion. With implicit, coded expectations of acculturation linked to academic success, first-generation faculty must learn the cultural

traditions and nuances of higher education (De la Riva-Holly, 2012).

Much like first-generation students unfamiliar with the college environment (Jehangir, 2010), first-generation faculty would benefit from re-envisioned mentoring and specialized programming designed to clarify the cultural nuances of higher education and stave off social, emotional and intellectual isolation (Baez, 2000). Like the token minority student expected to speak on behalf of the collective cultural experience (Niemann, 1999), first-generation faculty run the risk of being tokenized as easily accessible resources to the campus community and its many strategic initiatives to the detriment of their own work and professional priorities. Most notably, though, first-generation faculty must actively engage in their own liberation from the institutional status quo, drawing attention to the implicit biases undergirding the microaggressions that contextualize their professional assimilation and competency development processes.

### Conclusion

This article explored first-generation faculty members' marginalization by long-standing higher education infrastructure, marked by microaggressions, with a focus upon the problems around professional assimilation and competency development. Successfully navigating the ivory tower as a first-generation faculty member remains challenging, as academia remains a bastion for the historically academically privileged, a demographic that, not coincidentally, aligns with the historically White and wealthy. In a climate where institutions are working to embrace first-generation students both because it is the right thing to do and because it is financially necessary, first-generation faculty continue to live the irony of the ivory tower, seeking a place among the academic elite who are intent on maintaining their fortress. Yet, first-generation faculty provide crucial, diverse perspectives and experiences reflected in our teaching, research, and service that enrich the institution in so many ways, including the support and insight we provide to first-generation students. Additional exploration of the lived experiences of first-generation faculty is warranted and will support the development of scholarship and mentoring programs designed to enhance the successful hiring and retention of first-generation faculty.

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