



did they really just say that?!

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Pronouns: they/them/theirs

Tenney presented on Implicit Bias to more than 100 attendees at NASFAA's June 2018 Austin Conference.

Have you ever been in a conversation with a student or a colleague when they've suddenly said something biased that made you uncomfortable? How did you respond, if at all? Most of us struggle to address these all-too-common situations. We might feel shocked, confused, awkward, and/or horrified. We might ask ourselves if the person really just said what we thought they did or if we somehow imagined it, misheard, or are being overly sensitive. We might wonder whether it is appropriate for us to say something in response. We might even completely freeze until it's too late to speak up because the conversation has already moved along. Even though we want to do what is right and speak up for equality, we do not always know how to take action in that difficult moment—especially if we are not sure whether the person making the comment meant to cause harm.

These types of situations are all too common and have been on the rise in recent years,¹ as ever-present but now increasingly bold voices of bias, discrimination, and hate seek to further marginalize our students and colleagues through overt and covert bias. Even in this time of heightened urgency around questions regarding who belongs on our campuses² and what it means to create an equitable and just institution of higher education,³ you are not alone in feeling at a loss for how to respond to these normalized, mundane manifestations of bias in addition to blatant instances of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia, etc.

As financial aid professionals, it is imperative to take action in these moments when bias manifests in order to create a welcoming, inclusive, and affirming environment for all people who enter our space and rely upon our expertise. Students should be able to expect a positive, culturally competent experience when they address financial aid concerns. Colleagues should be able to expect that they can bring their full selves to work and be treated respectfully by their peers. That is not possible if we allow bias to go unchecked, and if we meet microaggressions with a silence that often speaks loudly to others, telling them we are willing to be complicit in their dehumanization because it is too difficult for us to speak up.

But how do we actually speak up, much less in ways that are effective? What are our goals in speaking up, and how do we accomplish them? While certainly no single approach is guaranteed to work every time, when we decide ahead of time that we are committed to being an active bystander in moments when bias emerges through implicit bias⁴ and microaggressions⁵ we have already done some of the foundational work necessary to challenge everyday oppression. We can then proactively consider what strengths we already possess⁶—such as humor, direct communication, stating discomfort, asking questions, etc.—and utilize them to empower ourselves to speak up. We can tailor our approach based on the context of the situation at hand to create educational conversations in response to bias, rather than eliciting a defensive reaction from the person who has (perhaps unintentionally) caused harm. Even if we do not succeed in speaking up in the moment, we can have follow-up conversations that address the issue.

While these situations are often challenging and complex, we can commit to learning about and practicing being an active bystander so we are able to create inclusive financial aid offices. In the words of Audre Lorde: “When we speak, we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed, but when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.”⁷

Creating inclusive financial aid offices goes beyond reacting to biased comments, however. We have the opportunity—indeed, the responsibility—to be proactive in shaping what kind of space we want our department to be for students and staff. Intentionally crafting inclusive spaces can even preempt manifestations of bias and thereby reduce the frequency with which we are called on to be an active bystander. To do this, we must examine our society, institutions, policies, procedures, and practices to identify where inequity has been built into the system itself.

How can we do this challenging yet necessary work in practical ways that make an everyday difference for our students and colleagues? We can learn about implicit biases⁸ and work to mitigate our own biases. We can educate ourselves about using inclusive language.⁹ We can update our standard forms to be more inclusive by incorporating the opportunity to provide a preferred name and expecting staff to use preferred names instead of legal names; including the opportunity to provide pronouns¹⁰ and expecting staff to use those pronouns instead of assuming students’ gender; utilizing up-to-date, expansive options for demographic self-disclosure when we need such information; and having forms available in multiple languages.

We can seek to make our buildings not only compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), but truly accessible. We can request the implementation of gender-inclusive restroom options, as well as changing stations in all restrooms regardless of how they are gendered. We can evaluate our current office decorations to determine if students of all identities can see themselves represented in the space. We can examine whether our hiring, retention, and promotion practices are truly equitable and then implement best practices to create more just employment pipelines.¹¹

We can use student satisfaction surveys to identify gaps in service, including any disparities in student experience that may be related to identities. We can listen to students and colleagues when they speak up about their experiences, and then we can work to make amends for any harm that has been done, whether accidentally or intentionally. We can commit to continually learn about issues of diversity, inclusion, equity, and justice while putting that theory into everyday practice.

When we do our most inclusive work, we are doing not only good work but our very best work. When we embrace the opportunity to create inclusive spaces—by not only empowering ourselves to respond to the, “Did they really just say that?!” moments but also to strategize proactively around making our financial aid offices truly affirming for all students and colleagues—we are doing our very best work. And that is precisely why we do financial aid work in the first place: to make a real difference, one person at a time.



Read More, Learn More

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- ³ Stewart, D-L. (2017, March 30). Language of appeasement. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/03/30/colleges-need-language-shift-not-one-you-think-essay>
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- ⁶ Tenney, L. (2017). *Being an active bystander. Strategies for challenging the emergence of bias*. Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. Retrieved from <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Being-an-Active-Bystander-2017.pdf>
- ⁷ Lorde, A. (1978). *A litany for survival. The collected poems of Audre Lorde*. Retrieved from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147275/a-litany-for-survival>.
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- ¹¹ Jackson, V.W. (2018, April 30). *Combating implicit bias in the workplace. Institutional interventions to prevent implicit bias from undermining organizational diversity*. Retrieved from <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Combating-Implicit-Bias-in-the-workplace.pdf>

