

# Thriving at the University Level: Student Maintains Her Sanity in a World of Chaos

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to explore the lived experiences of a woman from a non-dominant racial group in academia. It examined some of the obstacles to effective organizational socialization she encountered, which manifested as micro-aggressive behavior and other marginalizing activities. When the light at the end of the tunnel began to flicker, she found innovative strategies to attain her goals. This paper emphasized the tactics utilized by a woman to maintain her sanity in a world of chaos. It detailed some of her barriers to success from the perspective of organizational socialization, and it identified strategies that enabled her to thrive.

## INTRODUCTION

Many academic deans participate in the Midwestern Association of Graduate Schools (MAGS), an entity designed to help prepare university leaders to remain viable in dynamic markets. This association enables deans to ascertain insight to enhance the graduate-school experience of students and to develop tools to augment the educational skills and activities of campus leaders designed to increase their impact on universities and their respective communities. Some time ago, a paper titled, “Why we leave: A look at attrition from the perspective of students” was presented to over 100 academic deans at a national conference sponsored by MAGS (Gates, Butler, McLucas, & Wells, 2002). The audience was comprised predominately of academic deans, hoping to obtain greater insight about the lived experiences of graduate students, and that group is still in existence today.

More specifically, these academic leaders at the MAGS national conference wanted to know how to prevent attrition. They were compelled to determine what attracted students to graduate programs and what repelled them. At that time, many universities were struggling to attract and retain professors as well as graduate students from non-dominant racial groups such as African American, Native American, Latino/a, and Asian graduate students (Bell, 2018; Gates, Butler, McLucas, & Wells, 2002; Gates, 2021). The desire to retain students and to sustain academic programs that resonated with learners remains a prevalent goal among university leaders today as schools attempt to improve the learning outcomes for all students and to create equitable environments for learners in general (Cumming, Miller, & Leschinskaya, 2023; Gates, 2021). One way to attain this goal is to explore what attracts students to universities and what inspires them to stay. Retaining students is vital to the success of any university as leaders strive to meet the needs of students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As societies around the United States become more diverse, according to the United States Census Bureau (2021), scholars and practitioners will benefit from extending their comprehension of how students from non-dominant racial groups experience universities (Bell, 2020; Cummings, Miller, & Leshchinskaya, 2023). This insight might help college recruiters as well as department faculty understand how to help facilitate more collegial experiences on campuses for traditionally disenfranchised students. Perhaps efforts

to better socialize students, faculty, and staff will result in more rewarding encounters for all parties involved, particularly as populations become more diverse.

According to the United States Census Bureau (2021) as well as Whitford (2020), the 2020 population in the U.S. is more diverse than it was in 2010. Whitford (2020) maintained that data from the United States Census Bureau indicated that:

The most prevalent racial or ethnic group for the United States was the White alone non-Hispanic population at 57.8%...The Hispanic or Latino population was the second-largest racial or ethnic group, comprising 18.7% of the total population. The Black or African American alone non-Hispanic population was the third-largest group at 12.1%.

Moreover, Whitford (2020) asserted that African Americans account for approximately 13% of the student body of college campuses. However, fewer than 6% of faculty on college campus are African American/Black. African American/Black students, faculty members and staff members remain disproportionately underrepresented across the higher education workforce. Black/African American employees make up less than 10 percent of higher education professionals, according to the latest data from the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (Whitford, 2020). Similarly, Caucasian employees account for more than three-quarters of all higher education professionals. Among administrators and executive leadership, this disparity is even greater (Whitford, 2020).

Because African American/Black students and faculty tend to be outnumbered on university campuses relative to other races (Gates, 2021; Whitford, 2020), scholars and practitioners may benefit from a more profound understanding of their lived experiences, especially given the dearth of research on the coping strategies of African Americans/Blacks (Gates, Butler, McLucas, & Wells, 2002; Gates, 2001a; 2001b; 2019; Zimiles, 2017). This is particularly important as “Longstanding, deliberate, economic, social and legal policies have produced widespread discrimination which affects Blacks’ opportunities, experiences and outcomes” (Bell, 2020, p. 751). Bell said this reality included but was not limited to African American/Black students.

While the conversation about race relations in the United States may be exasperating to some people, many African Americans/Blacks continue to reflect on their lived experiences as they relate to race because marginalized others are forced to contend with the harsh reality of a world that treats them differently because of their race. Bell (2020) asserted that race was what people saw when they looked at people who were African American/Black.

It is what people see and use to make decisions about our quality of life and indeed about life itself for us. George Floyd’s blackness was the determinant in his murder by police. Ahmaud Arbery’s and Trayvon Martin’s blackness led their killers to assume they were criminals rather than simply out for a jog or walking home from the corner store. Arbery’s blackness (and their own whiteness) led authorities not to indict Arbery’s murderers until video surfaced of them stalking, surrounding and killing him in the street was released to the public, who made a loud outcry for their arrest. Trayvon Martin’s blackness also contributed to his killer being acquitted of murder, even though the killer had unjustifiably stalked and murdered the 17- year-old (Bell, 2020, p. 751).

Some African American/Black students and faculty are immediately cognizant of their race when they enter predominately Caucasian campuses because they stand out due to the relatively small number of them (Gates, 2021a). Harvard Professor Kanter (2010) said in the video “Tale of O,” that non-dominant group members are often placed in the spotlight because there are so few of them. Their otherness renders them marginalized. Everything they do gets emphasized, even their mistakes. Dominant group members make the same mistakes, but because they are not in the spotlight, fewer people notice. Moreover, Whitford (2020) maintained:

In their pursuit for tenure, promotions, administrative jobs and college presidencies, many Black

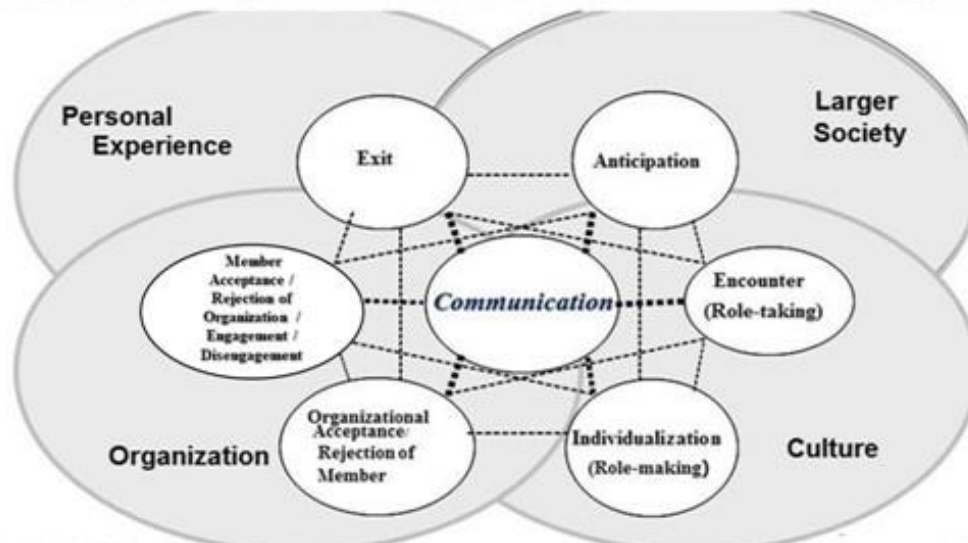
faculty and staff members face challenges and microaggressions largely unacknowledged by their white colleagues. Whether due to willful ignorance or outright hostility, this treatment complicates their relationships with their white employers and coworkers. If higher education is to rid itself of these unfair hurdles, experts say that colleges must work to recognize and unravel the many ways racism is baked into their institutions, traditions and practices.

These differences in lived experiences matter because they shape how African American/Black students and faculty experience universities. Which suggests that academic leaders must take more than merely a perfunctory view at the lived experiences of students from non-dominant groups. In addition to microaggressions that signify otherness, marginalization tends to manifest when it comes to academic projects as well as securing mentors. Whitford (2020) said, “White academics are sometimes less interested in research that centers on Black people and their experiences,” which reduces the level of support to African Americans/Blacks who desire related research topics. This means African American/Black faculty and students who pursue research related to their own racial group may encounter resistance from faculty and staff who do not value African American/Black culture. “The higher education sector has a ways to go before it can claim to be antiracist,” according to Whitford (2020). Because campuses have so few African American/Black faculty and staff, people have difficulty finding mentors who are African American/Black, and some require more assistance locating mentors off campus. Consequently, communicating across cultures with university bosses as well as academic advisors and/or program directors can be challenging (Gates, 2019; 2021a; 2021b).

With limited support on university campuses, some African American/Black students rely heavily on religious support (White-Goyzueta, Gates-Mayweathers, & Nance-West, 2023). Religion helps mitigate the negative effects of racism for African American biology students (Assari, 2013; Auerbach, Alonso, Axinn, Cuijpers, Ebert, Green, Bruffaerts, 2016; & Barnes, Supriya, Dunlop, Hendrix, Sinatra, Brownell, 2020). Franklin (2017) suggested that students depended on churches as a support mechanism. Church-based support groups could help college students gain knowledge about campus resources. Church support also may help students deal with test anxiety. African American/Black students reported higher levels of religious coping than Caucasian students. African Americans/Blacks also relied on religion to cope with stressful events and to combat depression. African Americans/Blacks have historically utilized specific internal and external coping strategies (i.e., spirituality, and religious involvement) in the face of challenges and difficulties (Franklin, 2017, 1001). Clearly when the light at the end of the tunnel began to flicker, innovative students found ways to reignite it.

A salient part of the academic success of graduate students is their ability to become socialized into their respective universities. Organizational socialization has to do with learning the expectations and shared practices as well as the values espoused by a given organization or profession so that one can operate within that profession or industry in manners deemed acceptable (Gates, 2002; 2009; 2020; 2023a, 2023b; Jablin, 2001; Allen, 1995; 1996). Gates (2002; 2009; 2023a; 2023b) posits that organizational socialization has to do with the ongoing processes that members participate in, and perpetuate, as they make sense of their respective organizations and determine how to enact their organizational roles. Regardless of efforts to become integrated into organizations, some organizational members find that they are not fully embraced (Allen, 1995; 1996; Gates, 2002; 2009; 2023a; 2023b). Not everybody reaches metamorphosis (Allen 1995; 1996) during organizational socialization as Jablin (2001) presumes. The organizational socialization model devised by Gates (2002; 2009) as well as research stemming from that model (Gates, 2023a; 2023b) suggested that not all organizational members enjoy acceptance.

## ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION MODEL BY DR. DENISE GATES



Gates, D. (2009). The managerial communication process: Organizational socialization model. In S. Zhang, D. Gates, C. Nealy, & J. Stark (Eds), *Managerial communication: Theory and application* (pp. 26-58). Beijing: The Publishing House of South-China University of Technology.

An organizational socialization model devised by Gates (2002; 2009; 2023a; 2023b) emphasized the presence of cultural difference as Gates (2023a; 2023b) sought to explore how these differences tended to influence organizational socialization. Gates (2023a; 2023b) revealed that many organizational members encountered a variety of workplace betrayals that compromised their success. Some of these barriers to success manifested as sexism, sexual harassment, racism, pay disparities, fraudulent complaints, threats to safety, etc. Subsequent research needs to identify other stumbling blocks that impede the success of organizational members.

The purpose of the present paper was to address the communication climate from the perception of a student from a non-dominant racial group being socialized into a predominately Caucasian university (Jablin, 1982, 1984, 2001; Gates, 2009; Gates, 2023a; 2023b). This research may be meaningful because interactions between students and professors can shape the communication climate on university campuses as well as the ability of students to learn in those environments, according to a study on teacher immediacy (Hess, Smythe, Gates, et al, 2000) as well as subsequent research (Bell, 2018, 2020). Consequently, the current paper explored the lived experiences of a graduate student of African and Native American descent who attended a predominantly Caucasian university in the midwestern part of the United States, making sense of her socializing experiences and exploring the possible existence of microaggressions (Johnson & Johnson, 2019) as a strategy to marginalize her.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How did a student from a non-dominant racial group attending a predominantly Caucasian university experience organizational socialization and her university?
2. What role did microaggressions, as defined by Chester Pierce, play in the organizational socialization of the graduate student in this study?

### METHODS

This research utilized qualitative research methods (Cresswell, 2003) to conduct in-depth interviews with a female student who has served as both student and faculty at predominately Caucasian campuses comprised



of over 20,000 students. The goal was to examine the ways in which she enacted her role as graduate student and instructor based on their tactics to socialize her. The paper also explored the possibility that she encountered marginalization which manifested as microaggressions. In addition to being a student herself, this graduate-level student-instructor has worked with students and faculty. Several in-depth interviews about professional matters with this woman have been documented. Experiences were examined until no new themes emerged. Interviews are a helpful way for scholars to obtain thick descriptions about the lived experiences of others so that readers can ascertain if enough similarities exist for the experiences to be transferable (Cresswell, 2003; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). The author does not seek to generalize the experiences of one person to an entire population. However, some of the experiences identified in this paper may resonate with others and help shed light on strategies to enhance university experiences moving forward.

## FINDINGS

The woman depicted in this paper indicated that while many of her experiences at the university-level were positive and rewarding, the ones that caused undue stress were experiences with marginalization, which surfaced most frequently as microaggressions. Microaggressions, a term coined by Harvard University psychiatrist Chester Pierce, “describe the insults and dismissals he regularly witnessed non-Black Americans inflict upon those of African American descent” (Johnson & Johnson, 2019, p.2). Microaggressions can create a hostile work environment and leave organizational members feeling marginalized. The student in the present paper said a primary example of marginalization from her university setting was when a Caucasian professor repeatedly tried to abuse his power over her. The cumulative abuse she sustained adversely shaped her academic career. This same professor had made inappropriate comments about the personal life of another female student, but his ongoing harassment of the student from a non-dominant group was progressively worse. Zimilies (2017) suggested that marginalizing experiences caused the majority of stress for African American/Black students on college campuses.

The student explained, “Back when I was a student, this male professor who had been harassing me tried to force me to take a class with him.” The student wanted to take the class with another professor, a female professor, because the student preferred to work with that particular scholar. The male professor fraudulently told the female student that the female professor’s class was full. However, the student looked online and noticed several empty seats in the female professor’s class, so she enrolled herself. The male professor was livid when he discovered that in lieu of taking his class, the student had enrolled herself in the same class with a different professor, a female educator. He was trying to control the student and gain greater access to her after having previously abused her. Their acrimonious encounters from the past compelled the student to preclude the professor from engaging in unnecessary interactions, whenever possible.

The male professor’s conduct was so egregious that the student had been trying to avoid him and not cause a scene. During a meeting with the offending professor, he brought a colleague. The student was alone in a conference room with two male professors towering over her tiny frame. One professor kept slamming his fist as well as the palm of his hand down on the table in front of the student, jarring the entire room. They were trying to intimidate the student. She was afraid, but she maintained her composure and quickly formulated an exit strategy. As she left the third-floor conference room, one of the male professors angrily followed her, yelling as he walked. She could feel the adrenaline flowing as she swiftly tried to make her way to her office. Her office was closer than the nearest exit, but would she make it to her desk before the disgruntled professor caught up to her? Unconvinced that she could get to her office, get her office key out, and open her office door all before the professor caught up to her, she grabbed the receiver of a public telephone that was in the hallway. She picked it up and pretended to be talking to someone. The professor walked up to her screaming, but when he realized he might have an audience, he stopped yelling. He stood

by her trying to intimidate her for several more seconds while she was “on the phone.” He eventually gave up and left. Then she hung up the phone. The professor had not realized that the student was not actually talking to anybody. She knew he didn’t want anyone to witness his abuse. Therefore, she created the illusion of a witness. That was enough to make him leave her alone, at least temporarily. allusion

After that incident, the student started bringing the Director of the Multi-Cultural Affairs Center to meetings with her for reinforcement, but that support was short-lived because the director soon became the target of retaliatory abuse. The offending professor was believed to be behind a series of false allegations made against the director which resulted in his untimely resignation. Research by Gates (2023) talked about fraudulent complaints as a strategy to impede the progress of professionals in the workplace. Harassment can be utilized as a strategy to compel people to resign (Gates, 2023).

The student needed the class she had enrolled in with the female professor to graduate, and she was well within her rights to take the class with anyone she wanted. As long as the student took the class, it did not matter who taught it. Other students in the same program were permitted to make similar choices with no resistance. Attempting to thwart a female student’s efforts to advance within her program without provocation was another act of marginalization. Treating her like she could not make basic decisions for herself, choices other students freely made, was regarded as an abuse of power. The professor continued to try to force the student to interact with him, even following her into the women’s restroom once, asking her about her dating life. This wasn’t the professor’s first offense. She recalled the riveting details of another unfortunate encounter with this scholar.

During a previous class with this professor, I was the only African American student in a class of about 15 to 20 students. The professor called me by name and referred to me as well as to my family as ‘dogs and monkeys’ in front of the entire class. The other students may have found this comical, but I was appalled.

The professor claims he was making a comparison, but he did not refer to any of the Caucasian students as dogs or monkeys. Given his animosity toward the student prior to the comment, it was reasonable for her to take offense. His comment wasn’t intended to merely be a comparison. It was a derogatory remark designed to inflict harm.

That same professor followed up with another disparaging and pejorative comment to the student. She said he called her by name and asked her “What do we call students who challenge authority?” The professor told her they call them BITCHES. The professor was angry with the student for seeking support when he attempted to abuse his power over her, and he took his frustrations out on her in class. (That’s some serious multi-tasking. To simultaneously be a dog, a monkey, and a BITCH requires skill.) While the other students feared retaliation if they overtly defended the African American woman, sometimes they privately came to her and offered support. These gestures of conciliation from other students did not alleviate the stress caused by the professor (Gates, 2023a; 2023b). He had done irrevocable damage. Any shred of respect the student had for the offending professor dissipated with each disparaging remark he made to her. The professor never apologized, and support from other students was curbed by a fear of the professor seeking revenge against them. The other students didn’t want to risk not graduating, and the African American student didn’t blame them. A Jewish woman privately came to the student’s defense a few times. However, that well-intended support, while appreciated, was insufficient. The other students lacked the skill, will, or power to do much. It was evident to the African American student that she needed to devise a strategy to succeed in that program.

Another alarming encounter the student had was when a pickup truck, matching the description of a truck driven by the offending professor who had previously pulled in beside her at a gas station, was later seen ramming the student’s parked car at her private residence in the middle of the night. The student received a call from her landlord to inform her that a pickup truck was in the parking lot intentionally ramming her mid-sized car. The landlord called the police for the student, but in the middle of the night, the tiny student-

teacher was hesitant to go outside alone.

The student has always believed the offending professor had something to do with the vandalism of her vehicle within a day or so of Martin Luther King Jr. Day. She was certain that she was being targeted because of her caramel-colored skin, the kind of skin you wouldn't want to be in at night in a community with antiquated views about race. The student was aware that the professor knew where she lived from a previous situation on campus. She had been using a post office box for campus mail, but the offending professor looked up her physical address and began to place it on campus mail unnecessarily, an act of aggression. He went through the trouble of finding her private, physical address, and he utilized it against her wishes. The professor knew where the student lived, and he had motive and opportunity. He was agitated because she restricted his power over her by standing up for her rights.

The female student concluded that she needed to devise a plan to combat marginalization, so she could graduate. (This same male professor continued to harass and try to manipulate the student's career after she left that campus. He'd contact current as well as prospective employers trying to stir up strife.) Most students take for granted the option to simply enroll in a class. For others, however, a woman has to be strategic just to matriculate. This student relied heavily on her faith. She got help from a few African American faculty members on campus, but they were so engrossed in their own battles with the campus that help from them often fell short.

For example, the student went to an African American dean on campus for help. This man was in a different school on the same campus, and he was perturbed after being unfairly passed over for promotions. He'd been interim dean for nearly 10 years, but academic leaders would never assign him the permanent role. He was probably thinking: "If I'm good enough to be interim dean for almost a decade, why am I not good enough to be appointed to the permanent position." Perhaps he didn't prevail in a national search for a dean, which was protocol at many universities. He implied that he too was subjected to discrimination, so he understood the arduous task of trying to combat negative differential treatment. However, he didn't have enough power to do much to help the student other than to listen and to inform her of the strategies being employed by the offending professor. The trouble-making professor had come to the dean and tried to turn him against the student. The crooked professor had the audacity to ask the dean to file a fraudulent complaint against the student to justify getting her unfairly removed from campus (Gates, 2023). The plan didn't gain any traction because the African American dean refused to sabotage the African American student. Not only did the dean refuse to go along with the idea, but the dean foiled the offending professor's plan by telling the student about the unethical tactics to undermine her.

Moreover, this African American dean happened to be friends with an African American male student who had encountered that same offending professor prior to the African American female student, and that male student left the campus without graduating. That male student had shared with others that this same offending professor was trying to thwart his efforts to graduate. After a conversation with the dean as well as the African American male student who left the program without graduating, the African American female student modified her strategy for success based on the new information. She was adamant about curtailing the influence the offending professor had on her academic career given that other African Americans/Blacks had informed her that the professor exhibited conduct that was consistent with people who are racist. (The campus leaders taught the student not to call people racist, because that would be rude. She was taught by the campus attorney to say that the professor displayed conduct that was consistent with people who are racist. This means that it's possible that something else could account for the professor's actions. Maybe the professor was just sexist or maybe he was harassing the student for reasons unknown to her.)

The student surmised that the professor's actions were based on her race because the offending professor specifically commented about the color of her skin during a meeting in his office. "You're dark" she said he

told her. The student said she was curious about the relevance of her skin color to the meeting. Perhaps he was noticing her tan because she was wearing short sleeves on a hot summer day. The professor had made the comment about the student's skin color so early in her tenure at the university that she had not had enough interaction with him to conclude that he intended for it to be a racially charged comment. Within that context alone, the professor could have just been noticing her complexion for reasons unknown to her. The student initially gave the professor the benefit of the doubt. However, what infuriated the student was that the offending professor also informed the student that he had previously worked in Chicago with African American/Black high school students who desired to have lighter skin and who tended to be attracted to men with lighter skin. The student didn't fully comprehend why her professor was sharing this unsolicited information with her. She couldn't fathom why this professor had the audacity to comment on African American/Black people wanting lighter skin when billions of dollars from his own race have been allocated for tanning products and services. Many Caucasian people have risked skin cancer to darken their skin, so he was in no position to broach the topic of skin color. The professor did not have a strong enough rapport with the student to make the kinds of comments he so casually made to her. Perhaps his callous disregard for this student's rights was a function of his power.

The student noticed the professor's inadequacies as an educator, but at that point she was still so naïve that it had not yet registered in her mind that she might be dealing with a professor who appeared to be racist. Students don't always immediately recognize racism, especially when initial interactions with scholars are pleasant. It took several more encounters with the offending professor for her to conclude that this educator was marginalizing her on the basis of what appeared to be her race. She never called the professor racist to his face, but she experienced the effects of racism and/or sexism as a result of having to work with him. Had she known prior to enrolling in the university that he was going to treat her this way, she would have elected to attend a university where her culture was embraced, not merely tolerated.

The adverse influence the offending professor was having on the student's academic career compelled her to seek support from two African American professors on campus in different departments. They had their own appalling stories of abuse, but they tended not to confront offenders on campus. One professor providing support was from the continent of Africa. When asked for help, she'd tell the student: "This is not my country." She feared the social and perhaps professional penalties that might stem from being seen on campus helping a student against one of her colleagues. Therefore, all of their meetings were strategically held off campus to conceal the female mentor's involvement. The woman from Africa coached the student on how to manage interactions with the problematic Caucasian professor. She helped implement plans to stop the offending professor from trying to intimidate the student and to curtail his threats to undermine her academic work. The student was grateful for this educator's help, but because this particular mentor had undergone painstaking efforts to mask her support of the student, the student could never publicly thank this particular mentor.

Endeavors to obtain help sometimes seemed futile. On campus support was at times limited because the few African American/Black professors in other departments feared losing their jobs if they got too entangled with a case against another professor. Therefore, their guidance was cloaked in efforts to appear politically correct and maintain their jobs while simultaneously confronting marginalization. The frustration in their voices was evident, but their hands were tied if they wanted to remain employed. They too were trying to enact their organizational roles in hostile environments that didn't particularly celebrate who they were as people. The student was amenable to working with Caucasian mentors, but many of them felt obligated to be loyal to their own race. Some of them blatantly refused to help her while others privately coached her to avoid offending parties.

Therefore, the student turned to her church community. She relied heavily on her church as a support mechanism, and sometimes she would see professors from her school at church. The student treasured the



support of a local pastor who also was functioning in the capacity as an attorney and a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The pastor's support immensely helped the student. Their covert meetings appeared to outsiders as a student devoted to her faith, worshipping the Lord. Well, she did praise God while she was there. However, the dual purpose of her visits would soon be illuminated.

During the most chaotic times on campus, the student shared some of her more salient concerns with trusted church leaders. They conversed about a variety of topics. Sometimes her attraction to the church had more to do with surviving graduate school than it did with immediate opportunities to worship. While her faith was a prominent part of her journey in life, her church assisted her with practical needs as well. The pastor tended to extend his services as her legal counsel. He offered invaluable guidance on how to deal with blatant discrimination, revealing strategies on how to meticulously collect evidence to substantiate her claims. He helped her combat microaggressions and manage hostile work environments. Sometimes he utilized scriptures from the Bible to make his points, but other times his advice was rooted in the laws governing workplace interactions. Consequently, when the student sought pastoral counseling, the pastor who was familiar with her campus having graduated from its law school, also informed her of her rights and advised her of the option to get help from the NAACP. He also enlisted the services of other organizations committed to helping. The pastor had a plethora of suggestions designed to address the fundamental problem with the way she was being treated on campus. Her work with the pastor-lawyer enabled her to augment her skills by developing greater emotional intelligence and a more profound understanding of the law, so she could overcome plans to impede her success.

At one point the student was ready to give up, but the pastor shared pivotal advice that changed the trajectory of her tenure at that campus. Not only did he remind her of who she was in Christ, but he prompted her to see herself as Christ saw her. He celebrated the legacy of those African Americans/Blacks who had gone before her in their respective professions, and he reminded her of her value as a member of her own culture. He told her, "We don't care if the people at that campus don't like us. We don't care if they prefer White people," the pastor said. "They have a right to their preferences. It's OK if they happen to prefer Caucasian people," she said the pastor told her. The pastor went on to say, "I happen to prefer Black people, so let them have their preferences." From that moment on, the energy shifted.

The student stopped focusing on the microaggressions and the pettiness of her offending professor. She took her power back by setting her own objectives and focusing on them. She considered whether her rights were being violated. It no longer mattered if the professor thought she was a dog, monkey, BITCH, or anything else. The questions now were whether her rights were being upheld and what needed to be done to graduate. The student said she learned, "People have the right to not like you. That's not a crime. It only becomes problematic when their dislikes preclude you from advancing in your academic program." The pastor told the student he had to toughen her up. He often asked her, "Are you ready to FIGHT?!!" The pastor changed the student's perspective about her lived experiences. He reframed her reality so that it was more palatable for her. He helped empower her to succeed in her academic program.

The student joined church programs at a few different congregations in her community. Being miles away from actual family members, those church members became substitute family members for her. She was appointed as a greeter at a predominantly Caucasian church that had a school. She took a few of their Bible classes just to be among other people who shared her Christian faith. She welcomed the positive communication climate as people from church treated her with dignity and respect, and they had a more positive outlook on life in general. Prior to the pastor's intervention, the hostile environment on campus was taking a toll on the student psychologically, but her Christian community helped revitalize her.

Encounters with church people also showed the student that not all Caucasian people are evil. In the famous

words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, “There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us.

When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.” The student came to accept her imperfect world, realizing that her interactions with her offending professor were not indicative of how she would experience all Caucasian people, particularly given that she hails from a diverse family comprised of Caucasians, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and African Americans. The offending professor’s conduct was a reflection of his flawed personality, not necessarily all the people of his race.

The student cultivated professional friendships with people at several of the churches in her city. She didn’t rely solely on her campus for emotional support, nor guidance. She became more resilient. She developed a thick skin, and the name-calling stopped hurting her. That professor’s comments were merely a reflection on him, not the student. As a result, the student didn’t internalize the professor’s ignorance. She could see that the professor had normalized abusive behavior and didn’t try to conceal his discriminatory business practices. Prior to getting support from her church, the student spent time trying to make sense of nonsense. Meta-communication or communication about communication resulted in the student realizing that the professor did not define her. He does not control her destiny. His limiting beliefs about her were his problem. Once her pastor encouraged her to accept that her professor might be racist, she stopped focusing on his conduct and started making plans for her future. She wanted a future that did not entail interactions with, or subsequent infractions from, the offending professor, so she considered leaving that school. She only stayed because she was well into her program, and she did not want to incur the expense and the daunting task of starting over at another school. She settled for not taking classes with him and not working closely with him on academic projects. She limited his influence. In the past, he’d subjected her to inappropriate comments sexual in nature that made her uncomfortable. She restructured her schedule, so she’d barely see him in passing. Therefore, when his colleagues tried to place him on a committee with her, she covertly devised strategies that allowed her to refrain from interacting with him, strategies that did not embarrass anyone. She finessed the situation and continued to treat everybody with dignity long after she graduated.

She was respectful to the offending professor but also assertive. When he tried to sabotage her, she promptly formulated plans to achieve her goals. His colleagues tried to manipulate her at times, but they didn’t prevail. For example, she was instructed by a different mean and evil professor, who attributed her mood swings and rude behavior to menopause, which only seemed to flare up when African American/Black people were in the room, to invite the offending professor to be on her committee. (The student noticed that the menopausal professor would shake hands with Caucasian students and professors but not with African Americans/Blacks.) In lieu of putting a suspected racist on her committee, the student assertively explored her alternatives. Other students got to pick who they wanted to work with, so why couldn’t she. The student wasn’t rude or disrespectful about it. She merely focused on outcomes and goals, never mentioning the offending professor’s name to his colleagues while they were on her committee. She knew she was working with the friends of this offending professor. She needed to maintain healthy, professional relationships with them so she could graduate.

During a much-needed break from school, the student traveled back to her hometown. She got to visit people with whom she’d grown up. One conversation that resonated with her was with a restaurant owner from a metropolitan area. She had a conversation with this man and his wife about college life. She told him about the challenges she’d faced and how she’d spoken at the MAGS conference about what to do in college when the light at the end of the tunnel begins to flicker. She said the African American restaurant owner, who had never attended college, asserted: “When the light at the end of the tunnel begins to flicker, light [it] back up.” He joked with her about life being unfair to everybody from time to time and how other people had also faced hardships. He essentially reminded her that she wasn’t the first to encounter adversity on the road to success. You don’t whine about your problems, the owner maintained. “You figure out a way to fight back.” That was his way of telling her to be strategic.

Overall, the student of African and Native American descent in this study relied heavily on her church as a support mechanism to survive university life at a predominately Caucasian school. However, she did not attend her last graduation because she didn't think she should risk her life for that cap and gown experience. By the time she graduated, the climate was still so hostile toward certain non-dominant groups that supportive professors who were Caucasian warned her to avoid certain locations and events. She adhered to plans to keep herself safe. She has even seen on the national news in recent years that students from her alma mater have held protests due to ongoing negative differential treatment of students from non-dominant racial groups, suggesting that the struggle to cultivate healthy communication climates for all students remains a prevalent goal. Ultimately, the student learned how to maintain her sanity in a world of chaos with the support of her church and a plethora of mentors.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

While experiences from the student portrayed in this paper can't be generalized to other students, the context and details the student articulated may supply enough depth of analysis for others to determine if her experiences are transferable. This traditionally disenfranchised student ultimately had to overcome barriers to being effectively socialized into her university. Some of the salient themes which made organizational socialization challenging for her resulted because she was subjected to pejorative remarks and derogatory name calling as well as other forms of negative differential treatment. While some organizational members enjoy welcoming atmospheres, countless others encounter hostile environments, often without provocation.

In the organizational socialization model devised by Gates (2002; 2009; 2023a; 2023b), the following components were included: 1) anticipation, 2) encounter, 3) individualization, 4) organizational acceptance/rejection of member, 5) member acceptance/rejection of organization (encompasses engagement and/or disengagement), 6) exit, 7) communication, 8) culture (simultaneous influence of personal experiences, larger society, culture, and organization). The model suggested that not all organizational members encounter organizations in the same fashion. Not all organizational members enjoy acceptance, at least not initially. Some organizational members have to contend with resistance from dominant group members.

### ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION MODEL BY DR. DENISE GATES

- **PHASES**
  - Anticipation
    - People anticipate how they will experience organizations based on messages from their environment such as community members, other organizational members, school, media, friends, family, church, colleagues, etc. These messages can shape perceptions about an organization.
  - Encounter
    - When organizational members first enter an organization, their expectations are tested. They experience culture shock when expectations are vastly different from what they anticipated. Realistic job previews can reduce chances of culture shock.
  - Individualization
    - Employees/members can influence organizations. They make their unique marks on organizations.
  - Organizational Acceptance/Rejection of Member/Employee
    - Organizations can embrace or reject employees/members. This is experienced via inclusion, exclusion, gossip, negative experiences, positive experiences, etc.
  - Member/Employee Rejection/Acceptance of Organization/ Engagement and Disengagement
    - Employees/members can accept or reject organizations. Regular/poor attendance, sabotage/assist programs. Praise behavior that is appreciated or complain about unwanted behavior.
  - Exit
    - Pre-exit (planning the separation), announcement (giving notice that separation is upcoming), exit (organizations have to adjust to absence of employee/member). Employees can be fired or voluntarily leave organizations.
- **CONTEXT**
  - Interactions within organizations are shaped by the context of interactants.
    - Personal experience
    - Organization
    - Larger Society
    - Culture
- **COMMUNICATION**
  - Influences all aspects of the process
- **DOTTED LINES**
  - Indirect connection between phases. People experience socialization differently as in-group and out-group members

The offending professor exposed in the present paper created barriers designed to impede the progress of a

graduate student. The professor didn't appear to want the student to gain the acceptance of organizational members at her university. He did this by employing disparaging remarks and trying to manipulate her plans for success. If professors are to be leaders on campuses, what messages are they sending when they utilize pejorative remarks to describe students and their families. Moreover, efforts to stop a student from taking a class she was well within her rights to take, a class that had already been approved on her academic program for her to take, was problematic. This professor's negative differential treatment did not appear to extend to Caucasian students, which compelled the African American student to conclude that her professor exhibited conduct consist with people who are racist. The microaggressions and the utilization of other marginalizing activities in the present study support the findings of work by Harvard University psychiatrist Chester Pierce who maintained that some Caucasian people exhibit conduct to perpetually insult, dismiss, disregard, and undermine people from non-dominant racial groups (Johnson & Johnson, 2019). Efforts to diminish the worth, value, and contributions of people in the workplace from non-dominant groups can adversely shape how these individuals are socialized into organizations and industries.

The organizational socialization model devised by Gates (2002; 2009; 2023a; 2023b) depicted how some people experience organizations. When the communication climate got hostile, the student was less engaged with the professor and sought support from her community, especially her church. This finding was echoed in research by Gates (2023a; 2023b). Participants spoke of a variety of disturbing experiences or traumatic workplace betrayals such as: 1) racism, 2) sexism, 3) sexual harassment, 4) pay disparities, 5) harassment via false accusations or unjustified disciplinary actions, and 6) threats to safety (Gates, 2023). When organizations devise strategies to help organizational members overcome traumatic workplace betrayals, organizational members from non-dominant groups may enjoy more effective socialization tactics and more rewarding interactions within organizations.

Healthy organizational cultures (Gates, 1998; 1999; 2001; 2002b; 2003; 2008; 2009; 2023a; 2023b) as well as positive experiences with organizational socialization (Gates, 2003; 2020; 2023a; 2023b) may help organizations, especially the university depicted in the present study, combat problems stemming from the enrollment crisis on university campuses. When organizations become known for having toxic professors that marginalize students, it might be difficult to attract subsequent learners. Students may attempt to tackle the problem by either trying to enhance their current existence on campuses, or they may find new schools. Ideally, universities should inspire students to disseminate favorable messages about their university experiences. Consequently, when the light at the end of the tunnel begins to flicker for students, they may find a university with brighter lights or look for ways to ignite a lasting flame on their current campuses.

## CONCLUSION

Rooted in organizational socialization, this paper offered insight on the micro-aggressive behavior and marginalizing conduct endured by a student from a non-dominant racial group during graduate school. The student identified several microaggressions displayed by university employees. She was subjected to derogatory name-calling and efforts to preclude her from taking classes she needed to graduate. However, she did not allow marginalization to impede her progress. When she encountered abuse, she simply devised strategies to overcome it. She relied heavily on her community and church support to survive graduate school. That meant being innovative about achieving her goals. Leveraging strategic partnerships, the student graduated and went on to earn subsequent degrees. Overall, when the light at the end of the tunnel started to flicker, the student reignited it.

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**Dr. Denise Gates-Mayweathers** is a business professor, prolific author, and talent optimization consultant, specializing in organizational socialization and strategic management. She has held leadership roles at multiple organizations in education and consultancy. Dr. Gates has an earned doctoral degree as well as a post-doctorate in organizational communication and management. A graduate of the University of Missouri-Columbia, Dr. Gates is known for her organizational socialization model, which was published in a textbook by the Publishing House of South China University of Technology and utilized by MBA students. A 2023 publication about her organizational socialization model offered the salient themes that emerged from the examination of the lived experiences of nearly 150 professionals from various industries. That empirical research supported Dr. Gates' existing framework on organizational socialization, and it illuminated a variety of workplace betrayals designed to impede career success. Dr. Gates has authored and co-authored a plethora of academic publications over the years, and her research has been presented at national and international conferences. Ultimately, Dr. Gates is inspired to help organizations draw the greatest value out of people with her research, instruction, and consulting.