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Using Sensitive Language in the Classroom

By Evelyn Summers, Staff Writer

Trigger warning: Mentions of racism and homophobia

The *Meredith Herald* recently received a report of a professor using a slur in the classroom. After receiving this tip, *The Herald* investigated similar student experiences and reached out to college administration to hear about what the college's procedures are for such scenarios.

"In my class, we were having a discussion about sex ed in schools," Kate Polaski, '23, explained. Polaski said that after reading an article, their "teacher was listing advancements that had been made for queer students over time, one of which was the fact that we 'don't say the f-slur anymore.'"

In what she called "a moment of terrifying irony," Polaski said that their professor said the full slur. "[The professor's use of the slur] made me and several other students in the class very uncomfortable," Polaski added.

Bliss Wells, '23, who is in the same class as Polaski, pointed out that the student in front of them "jumped back in their seat." Wells added that she "looked around to see if anyone else noticed...it felt like a few people did, but nothing was addressed."

Polaski noted that not even 10 minutes later, the professor "told [them] that one of her fundamental classroom rules when she'd been a [high school] teacher was that there would be no use of slurs." Polaski explained this made the whole situation increasingly confusing and that "it made [her] wonder if [the professor] didn't consider the f-slur a real slur or if she genuinely hadn't noticed what she'd said."

Polaski said, "As an openly queer student, it was an incredibly

unsettling moment, with how casual the use of the slur was." They also explained that it "felt like a complete ignorance of [their] experiences as a queer student and the experiences of all historically queer people who have had that slur used against them."

"Given who the professor was, I felt disappointed and shocked," Wells said. "This professor preaches about safe and equitable classroom environments, so it was quite jarring [when] she said the slur with no hesitation."

Wells also pointed out that "any safety that may have been established previously turned into a feeling of unease, not only for myself but [for] the students who may be hurt by the slur or didn't feel comfortable calling it out." Both Polaski and Wells agreed that after the slur was said, it was difficult to focus on learning for the rest of the class period.

When elaborating on the professor's efforts to make the class an inclusive space before the incident, Polaski noted that "she's made a lot of efforts at creating an inclusive classroom, or at least said a lot of things like that...after this experience, that all just comes off as really performative and insincere." Wells said the fact that the professor had previously set up a system called "ouch moments," and the agreement was to call out community members when hurt by an experience.

"At the moment, I didn't feel comfortable enough to call it out because [the slur] just came out and the professor and my peers moved on," Wells said. She also added that it felt like she was the only one who noticed what had happened, which made it "harder to speak up."

In a similar scenario, Molly Perry, '22, witnessed a student saying a slur in the classroom. "My

freshman year, the class was discussing one of our assigned readings when the slur was said by a student," Perry explained.

She said that the class was having a student-led discussion when "the student was making a comment on the reading and said something like, 'When this character called this other character the n-word...,' but instead of saying 'the n-word,' the student actually said the racial slur."

Perry noted that immediately after the slur she felt "extremely uncomfortable" and that she was unsure of how "situations like that were supposed to be addressed in college" or "how lenient colleges were with harmful language being used in the classroom if the language was in reference to an academic work."

"The general vibe that I felt in the classroom after the slur...was that everyone was uncomfortable and didn't know what to do," Perry said. "At the very least...the student should have been reprimanded by the professor." She noted that she doesn't quite remember how the situation played out because of how long ago it was and because the professor made no mention of it.

When asked about the reporting process for incidents where either a professor or student says a slur in the classroom, Dr. Jean Jackson, Vice President for College Programs, said that her first advice would be to "talk with the speaker to let them know how you felt when you heard the slur and ask them never to use the word or words again."

According to Dr. Jackson, if a student is uncomfortable speaking with the professor, there



Photo by Ally Cefalu

are several other options, including speaking with the professor's department head.

"If you are uncomfortable talking with the department head, or if the person in question is the department head, then you should consult the academic dean for that department, and, finally, if needed, the Provost," Dr. Jackson said. "At any point that you feel satisfied with the response, you can stop—you need not proceed through all the academic resources, unless you want or need to do so."

For students, using a slur in the classroom could result in a meeting with the Honor Council, but Dr. Jackson noted that "the steps the College would take would depend on the situation." For a faculty member, academic resources would "determine a course of action," and Human Resources may become involved.

When asked about their opinion on possible repercussions, Polaski and Wells both mentioned that if anything, an apology is deserved.

"I really just want an apology from the professor and an acknowledgment that she understands that what she did was wrong," Polaski said. Wells added that an apology is also important so that her "fellow classmates and future educators see that when teachers make mistakes or say hurtful things, they should apologize."

What to Know About Meredith's Counseling Center and Disability Services

By Elinor Shelp-Peck, Co-Editor in Chief, and Cady Stanley, Copy Editor

Trigger warning: Discussion of mental health and resources

In light of the COVID-19 and mental health pandemics, colleges have had to prioritize student mental health in ways they haven't previously. However, with only six staff members listed on their website, it is unclear if Meredith College's Counseling Center and Disability Services (CC&DS) can meet the demand for mental health services. Meredith's undergraduate and graduate student population totals to approximately 2,100,

meaning each counselor is theoretically responsible for 350 students. In a previously published *Meredith Herald* article, Assistant Director for Disability Services Carolyn Koning stated that there are "too many projects and not enough money." To investigate further, *The Herald* spoke with Alston Tyndall, '22, who has utilized CC&DS, about their experiences and with representatives from CC&DS to discuss their funding and resources.

Tyndall said their "experience with the Meredith Counseling Center and Disability Services have

been positive overall." However, they said that it can be unclear how to contact CC&DS. Tyndall said she has been asked by many students how to connect with CC&DS, but that originally she "was unsure of how to contact [CC&DS]."

"I don't think this information is explicitly shared with students," Tyndall said. "If it were, I definitely feel that more students would take advantage of these services on campus."

When asked about budgeting for CC&DS, Director of

the Counseling Center Beth Meier stated, "CC&DS share the same general supply account, payroll accounts and student worker account. Outside of our payroll accounts, the largest account in the department is the Interpreter and Disability Assistance Account." The Interpreter and Disability Assistance Account is "dedicated to student-related disability expenditures" and is separate from the CC&DS account.

See CC&DS
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