

What is *My Language. My Choice.*?

The *My Language. My Choice.* (MLMC) campaign addresses the use of hurtful and harmful language and the impact our words have on others. *MLMC* is a passive poster campaign that advocates individual responsibility and action in our language choice and usage. *MLMC* initially was funded by a generous grant from The Pride Foundation, a Queer philanthropy and advocacy organization in Seattle in 2012.

In the posters, Pacific Lutheran University students, faculty, staff and alumni are photographed tearing a word or phrase they personally choose not to use. Participants also provide context as to why they choose not to use that particular word or phrase, thus stressing the importance of taking responsibility for the impact our words have on others.

MLMC has focused on words and phrases such as *That's so Gay, No Homo, Retarded, Ghetto, What Are You?, Illegal and Bitch*. In some cases, participants chose a word or phrase to indicate they would not use it outside of its intended meaning (e.g. using “retarded” to describe something we dislike or do not understand).

In collaboration with Clear Channel Communications, *MLMC* will be featured on more than 100 billboards throughout Pierce, Thurston and King counties. The words and phrases of the campaign continue to expand— *Dumb Blonde, Lame, Passive, Angry, Exotic*—since at the heart of the campaign is each participant’s personal responsibility and choice.

Why *My Language. My Choice.*

Rankin and Reason (2005) found that students of color experience harassment based on their race at higher rates than white students and perceive the campus climate as less welcoming and hostile than white students do. At Pacific Lutheran University specifically, a top concern for students of color is a lack of enjoyment and sense of belonging on campus. For students of color, marginalization still exists at PLU, as it does nationally, in the form of microaggressions, “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, et al., 2007). PLU’s Diversity Center is committed to introducing microaggression language into the lexicon of the entire PLU community and developed *MLMC* to begin to address the pervasive nature of microaggressions on our campus.

According to White and Swenson, “the inability to respect individual differences is where a vast majority of bullying stems from” (p. 7). Thus, the purpose of the *My Language. My Choice.* campaign is to address microaggressions, aid in all students’ sense of belonging on campus and encourage all members of our community to take responsibility for the choices we make that affect others.

Campaign Impact

The *My Language. My Choice.* campaign resonates with a wide variety of constituents because it focuses on personal responsibility and choice and illustrates in a relatable way that our actions, whether intentional or not, may affect others.

- In Fall 2012, MLMC images were uploaded online to Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr and received wide support from students, staff and faculty. The images also struck a powerful chord with the community and went “viral” on Facebook with 200 shares and more than 6,000 notes on Tumblr.
- In Fall 2014, images of the MLMC billboards were uploaded to social media and again received enthusiastic support from online communities, this time receiving over 25,000 notes on Tumblr.
- Research conducted by White and Swenson (2012) found that MLMC was effective in altering the attitudes and behaviors of students on the Pacific Lutheran University campus.
- Participants at a senior Capstone conference commented on their experiences with bullying and were grateful that MLMC was addressing responsible language.
- Educators from middle schools, high schools and universities from across the nation asked for permission to use posters for their schools.
- A university from Australia asked to use MLMC and alter it to fit into its context, using *That’s So Gay, Slut, Spastic, Abo, No Homo, Frape* and *Retard*.
- The campaign also has produced a PLU Athletics Special Edition, and a “Women and Women of Color” edition.

Components of My Language. My Choice.

At the heart of the *My Language. My Choice.* campaign are individual responsibility; personal choice; and how our choices may impact others, regardless of our intent. There are three major components to the Campaign: NAME, CLAIM and DIALOGUE.

1. **Words Can Hurt.** We choose the words we use to communicate with others. Intentionally or unintentionally, those words can have a negative impact on others. We must have the courage to **NAME** when we are hurt and when we have hurt others.
2. **Know Your Impact.** We must be cognizant that our actions have positive and/or negative consequences. Our decisions and our language impact those in our communities. We must **CLAIM** ownership of the impact we have on others.
3. **Take Responsibility.** We must acknowledge the power of our words: Words can celebrate, praise, comfort and honor others. But they also can demean, offend, belittle and hurt others. It is our responsibility to **DIALOGUE** responsibly with others to continue our growth as more inclusive communities.

Discussion Questions

- What word or phrase is hurtful to you? Why do you wish others would stop using that word or phrase?
- What words or phrases resonate the most for you? Why?
- Are there words or phrases in the MLMC campaign that you don't believe are hurtful? Why? Why might these words or phrases negatively impact others?
- What can you do if you hear someone use one of these words or phrases?

Thank you,

Angie Hambrick
The Diversity Center
Pacific Lutheran University
253.535.8750
dcenter@plu.edu
www.plu.edu/dcenter

“To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity.” – Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of The Oppressed

References

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- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M. Holder, A. M., Nadal, K. L., et al. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist, 62*, 271-286).
- White, A., & Swenson, A. (2012). *Ending linguistic violence: A campus-wide campaign*. (Unpublished research paper). Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, Washington.