

Who at NOLS decides what are harmful DEI behaviors and words?

NOLS DE&I Community Commitments, in its Boundaries Overview, makes clear that “weaponizing words by using them to label or attack someone’s identity” is ‘OUT’. What is left unexplained is which words are weaponizing words and what is harmful behavior relative to DEI at NOLS.

The ‘How We Engage’ section of Commitments explains “We can learn from stories and examples.” We hope this example, an exchange between a NOLS course leader and an HR assistant, will prompt the NOLS Board to answer one of our basic questions: **who at NOLS decides what are weaponizing words and harmful behavior?**

Word choice at NOLS

NOLS Course Leader: This is what I learned about word choice at NOLS.

Word Choice: During my conversation with a NOLS HR assistant about language and its impacts, I asked who at NOLS determines whether or not a word or phrase is harmful. To give a preposterous example, I asked if saying “burning beans smell bad”, which might be said during a cooking class on an expedition, would be interpreted as harmful. Instead of saying my question was an ridiculous example of what might be construed as a harmful word or phrase, the HR person thought for a moment and to my amazement answered “yes, burning beans smell bad is a micro-aggression.”

Word Boundary I asked her to please explain her reasoning, and she said: *“because the word ‘beaner’ is an epithet for LatinX people, and because LatinX people are subjected to higher rates of violence, and because they might get sunburned while attempting to immigrate to America through the deserts south of the border, and because they might have increased body odor during their trek through the desert, the statement ‘burning beans smell bad’ should be avoided as it might trigger an emotional response from under-privileged or under-represented LatinX students or coworkers who are either immigrants themselves or descendants of immigrants.”*

Word Lesson Although impressed by the HR person’s thoughtful and layered logic, this was logic brought to an absurd conclusion. At NOLS, any word can be a harmful word depending on subjective lived experience. As soon as a micro-aggression is identified, it is subject to being policed, controlled, used as the basis for “focused feedback” and must be avoided at all costs. I believe that it was at this point when any doubts I may have had regarding my decision to resign from NOLS were laid to rest.