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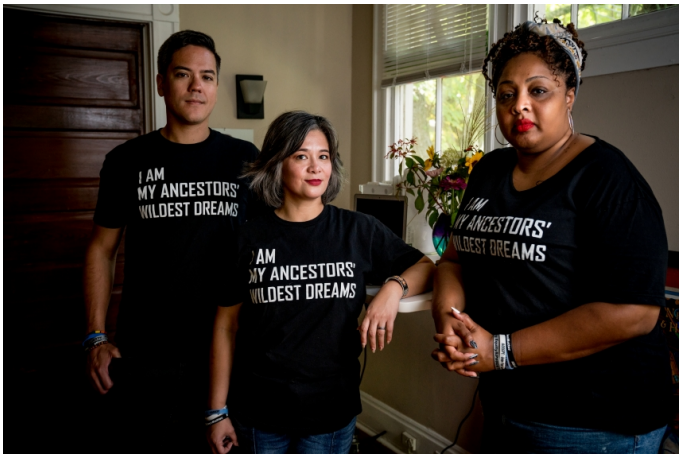
ADMISSIONS & STUDENT AID

The Admissions Activists Are Here to Make You Uncomfortable

An online group wants admissions leaders to confront racism and inequity. Yes, it's supposed to be awkward.

By Eric Hoover | AUGUST 11, 2019

✔ PREMIUM



Claire Bangser for The Chronicle

Marie Bigham (center) planted the seeds of ACCEPT, an online group for admissions professionals, three years ago in a moment of frustration and despair. Now she and her two co-leaders, Steve Frappier and Brandi Smith, hope to turn the 5,400-member group into an on-the-ground force.

Around 2 a.m. on July 8, 2016, Marie Bigham created a Facebook group and wrote a heartfelt post. "Why college admissions professionals should fight hate and inequity," it began. She added a few dozen people to the group, called Admissions People Sick of This Shit. She didn't know who might respond, or how her words would go over. But sometimes you just have to shout in the dark.

Bigham, then a college counselor at a private high school in New Orleans, had spent half the night sobbing on her couch. Why? Because a gunman had just shot and killed five police officers in Dallas, and wounded nine others. He was a black man who had expressed anger about the fatal police shootings of black men in two other cities that week. After a standoff, the Dallas police used a bomb to kill him.

For Bigham, the incident felt personal. She had lived and worked in Dallas for six years, serving as the unofficial adviser for students of color at her high school; sometimes she told them about her experiences as a multiracial woman in a country riven by racial hostilities. Dark-haired and outspoken, she wore her emotions everywhere, often letting loose online.

Born of despair, charged with frustration, the private Facebook group Bigham started drew a crowd. Eight hundred people (mostly admissions officers and college counselors) joined in the first few weeks. The group adopted a more-respectable name: ACCEPT, for Admissions Community Cultivating Equity & Peace Today. Month after month, users logged on to discuss troubling events in America and microaggressions in their offices. To share articles and professional advice. To vent.

Three years later, ACCEPT might seem like just another social-media sensation, but the forum's existence says something important about the admissions realm's hopeful yet troubled heart. A profession long dominated by white men is facing new scrutiny from within; a cast of racially diverse insiders wants colleges to think harder about the composition and well-being of admissions staffs. And the group's leaders seek to imbue the field with a stronger social-justice spirit, to dismantle admissions practices that promote racial and socioeconomic inequity.

"As educational gatekeepers, we have more responsibility than just about anyone else to remove barriers and oppose racism," Bigham says. "It's our job."

For anyone in this polite profession, ACCEPT's conversations can be uncomfortable, and that's kind of the point. Amid a painful national reckoning with racism, the diverse forum throws white and nonwhite people into discussions they otherwise might not seek out.

Experiences vary. For many participants, ACCEPT is an affirming community and safe space, a support system and wellspring of offline friendships. "It's helped me find my voice, personally and professionally," one Asian-American admissions officer says. But other participants describe the forum as an engine of divisiveness, fueled by negativity. Some weary members say they've signed off for good.

Online activism plants questions in any skeptic's mind. Can Facebook fulmination solve small problems, let alone big ones? Can members of a private forum type their way to more-inclusive campuses? In a land of 1,000 grievances, how do you remedy even one?

Bigham, 46, has wrestled with those questions. In June she quit her job to devote herself full time to ACCEPT, which recently became an incorporated nonprofit organization. There are plans to host a national conference this fall, hire a small staff, and offer consulting services (including "bias and equity assessments") to admissions offices.

Turning an online entity into an on-the-ground force is hard, but Bigham is hopeful. She's hopeful because when she shouted in the dark three years ago, many people answered. And they haven't stopped.

Have you ever felt as if you were in the right place and the wrong place at the same time? As if you belonged, but not really? There's a good chance that two or three — or dozens — of your colleagues feel that way right now.

The story of ACCEPT is, in part, the story of three friends who have known that feeling. It has shaped their understanding of how the admissions process often rewards privilege and perpetuates socioeconomic disparities. It has attuned them to the experiences of students and admissions officers of color who feel out of place at predominantly white institutions.

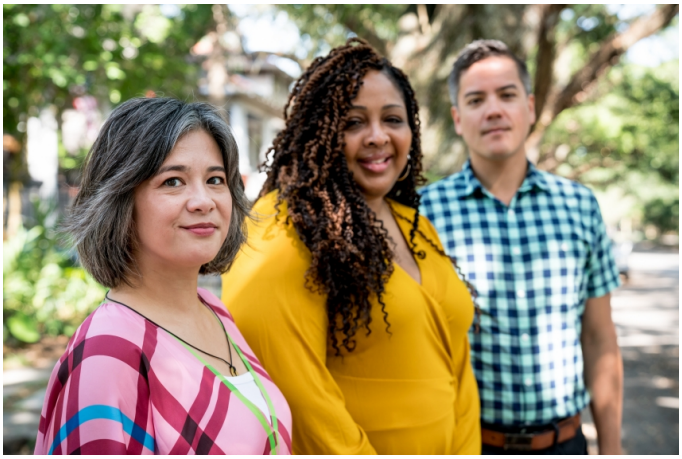
Bigham, the daughter of a white father and a Vietnamese mother, grew up in Pinckneyville, Ill., a small town where no one outside her home looked like her. At a Fourth of July parade when she was 3 or 4, she heard people shouting at her family: "Go back to where you came from! Go back to the rice paddies!"

What do they mean? she remembers thinking. I live right down the street.

For years Bigham played up her whiteness and tried to hide her Asian roots. She used makeup to make her eyes look rounder, like those of her classmates. Things changed after she and her family moved to a suburb of St. Louis; she found herself in a progressive

school where many students were minorities. Eventually, she embraced what she calls her "otherness," graduated from Washington University in St. Louis, and ended up working in admissions.

Bigham later worked at a handful of well-resourced independent high schools. She was glad to be a respected member of that "rare air" club, but she didn't always feel comfortable there. "Having feet in two worlds has driven what I do," she says. "It's shaped my awareness of what it means to be in and out at the same time."



Claire Bangser for The Chronicle

Marie Bigham (left) invited her friends Brandi Smith and Steve Frappier to join her three years ago as co-leaders of ACCEPT, a forum where admissions officers and college counselors call out practices that promote racial and socioeconomic inequity. The group recently incorporated as a nonprofit organization and plans to host a national conference this fall.

Four years ago, Bigham settled in New Orleans, becoming director of college counseling at the Isidore Newman School, which has long educated children of the city's old-money families. She liked working there, but she didn't like that the school was much less diverse than New Orleans was. Driving to and from work each day, she passed the Orleans Parish Prison; nearly all the prisoners she ever saw in the yard were black. Surrounded by reminders of inequity, she questioned her role in perpetuating privilege.

Bigham's friend Brandi Smith can relate to that. Born and raised in Los Angeles, she grew up in an upper-middle-class black neighborhood and attended a diverse middle school. Then, at 14, she moved with her grandparents to a mostly white suburb of Atlanta. "Huge culture shock," she says.

For the first time, she became aware of how some white people viewed black people. "Either as Rodney King or the Huxtables," she says. She attended Reinhardt University, in Georgia, where many white students told her she was the first black person they had ever met.

Smith's first admissions job was at Reinhardt. She saw the wide gap between applicants who had everything — money, college know-how, parental support — and those who had little or nothing. She moved on to Samford University, and then Vanderbilt University, where she became acutely aware of the large role that privilege plays in admissions outcomes.

Eventually, she left admissions to become a college counselor at a diverse public high school in Atlanta. "I wanted to help families who didn't know what they didn't know," she says.

Bigham and Smith's friend Steve Frappier grew up in the South, often feeling that he was different. His father was a white Catholic from Michigan, and his mother was a Buddhist from Taiwan. "I was always being told I was going to hell," he says. Growing up, he knew he was gay, but he didn't feel comfortable telling anyone.

Frappier, a former admissions officer, draws on those experiences when advising students at Atlanta's Westminster Schools, where he is director of college counseling. He thinks a lot about how various aspects of a student's identity intersect. Too often, he says, schools and colleges don't do enough to nurture those complex identities — among their employees, either. Admissions offices that don't affirm the identities of staffers from diverse backgrounds, he says, risk driving them out of the field for good.

Three years ago, Smith, a straight-talker with a bracing wit, and Frappier, a soft-spoken deep-thinker, joined Bigham as co-leaders of ACCEPT. At first they all thought the group would remain fairly obscure.

Then, two months later, ACCEPT lodged itself in the profession's ear. It happened just as admissions officers and college counselors, like many Americans in a divisive election year, were wading into difficult conversations about race.

A Push for Diversity

Admissions and enrollment offices have long been dominated by white men. Now colleges are feeling pressure from within to make their staffs more closely resemble the increasingly diverse populations they serve.

	2017	2(
Admissions Counselors		
Hispanic, any race	9.3%	5
White	71.3%	75
Black	10.6%	10
Asian*	4.2%	2
Multiracial	3.7%	4
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.5%	0
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander*	0.0%	
Other	0.5%	0
Chief Enrollment Officers		
Hispanic, any race	5.3%	3
White	82.2%	85
Black	9.9%	6
Asian*	0.7%	2
Multiracial	2.0%	2
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.0%	0
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander*	0.0%	
Other	0.0%	0

** The 2011 survey listed a combined 'Asian/Pacific Islander' race/ethnicity option. 'Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander' was not include the 2011 survey.*

Source: National Association for College Admission Counseling • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

The moment caused some people to gasp. In September 2016 thousands of people gathered in Columbus, Ohio, for the annual conference of the National Association for College Admission Counseling. During the opening session, Phil Trout, NACAC's departing president, gave a speech urging the audience to reflect on "a time of profound anxiety and distress in our country."

Trout then referred to the death of Tyre King, a black teenager who had been shot by a white police officer in Columbus days earlier. Expressing support for the local community, he read a statement that the association had prepared: "This tragedy challenges us once again to remember that all lives matter." Shocked and furious, several people got up and walked out.

Trout, a white college counselor at a high school in Minnesota, told *The Chronicle* two days later that he hadn't known the phrase "all lives matter" was widely understood as a rejection of Black Lives Matter. He said that he had meant to express sympathy and solidarity. And he said that, yes, he should've known better.

Within minutes of Trout's speech, ACCEPT boiled over. Bigham wrote a post asking the group how she and Smith should respond. At the time, both women served on NACAC's Board of Directors, which made them insiders, even though, as women of color in a mostly white field, they saw themselves as outsiders, too.

Bigham's question yielded many forceful responses. "Hit the angry button to show your outrage," one person said. "This was AWFUL."

One commenter suggested that Trout's comment wasn't malicious, just "old white man cluelessness." Another, who said she had known Trout for years, agreed: "I would be surprised if he realizes what was said and the impact."

"Old white man cluelessness is exactly why we are saying BLM, and I am totally uninterested in the justifications," said another. "We have to demand better from our leaders, or they shouldn't lead."

Trout, then a member of ACCEPT, posted an apology; he said that in Minnesota the phrase had a benevolent meaning. "If the words caused offense … I'm really sorry," he wrote. "I did not intend to offend anyone. I did not intend to disappoint so many."

Some people found that apology insincere. "Salt has officially been rubbed in the wound," one person replied in ACCEPT. "An apology defending your actions is NOT an apology." Another lamented "empty defenses for colluding with white hegemony." A third, addressing Trout directly, wrote: "You need to say it to us all, in public. #BlackLivesMatter. If you can't say it, you still don't get it."

Minutes later, Trout typed "black lives matter" and apologized for the hurt he had caused. At a membership meeting on the last day of the conference, he said "black lives matter" into a microphone and apologized once more.

No one, it seemed, went home feeling good about what had happened. Either because the president of a big-tent organization had uttered words that hurt many people and made them feel unwelcome. Or because the same man, a widely respected counselor with 35 years of experience, was then called a racist by people he had never met, via messages composed in seconds. Or both.

After the incident, ACCEPT's membership surged, and the group's stature grew. Just when NACAC appeared out of touch with its diverse constituents, fans of the new Facebook group saw the forum as the profession's emerging conscience.

Come for the activism, stay for the discomfort. That's ACCEPT's unofficial slogan. The group encourages difficult conversations. "Stand in your discomfort," Bigham tells people. By that, she means: Stop, listen to others, and if you start to feel defensive, ask yourself, "What within me is making me feel that way?" And then, maybe, you'll learn something and grow.

Discomfort might seem like a jarring concept in the profession's collegial confines, where debate is typically restrained and conducted with a smile. In ACCEPT, things get real, real fast.

"We've gotten lectures about that," Smith says. "I've gotten private messages saying, 'I wish that you guys could calm things down,' or 'Everybody who's white is not a terrible person.' But if our goal is to have more open and honest conversations, we can't get stuck in 'I'm afraid to talk about it.'"

Smith is a fervent contributor. This past spring, she posted an article that she urged all white members of the group to read. It was about the "weaponization of positivity," or how some people use "niceness" to stifle frank discussions of racism: "Stop thinking you can Care Bear Stare white supremacy away."

Neutrality on a given issue seems unwelcome in ACCEPT, whose members tend to argue that anyone not working against racism is supporting it. In early August, Smith wrote a post asking white men in the profession to explain how they planned to "dismantle white nationalism and work towards anti-racism" in their colleges and schools.

After just one person replied immediately, Bigham wrote: "THIS ISN'T A RHETORICAL QUESTION!!" Someone else chimed in: "Friends, I'm having difficulty with the silence."

There are other Facebook groups on the admissions block. College Admissions Counselors, with more than 16,000 members, is a big, lively forum. Wonder Women in Admissions has a loyal following among thousands of women in the field. ACCEPT, with 5,400 members, just happens to be the most intense.

On a given day, you might see a discussion of "intent vs. impact." OK, maybe that white person didn't mean to offend, but his remarks did, in fact, offend a person of color. What should he do?

Acknowledge his privilege and apologize. He also should acknowledge the impact of his remarks instead of describing his intentions. That's the kind of thing you learn in ACCEPT.

Many discussions involve the appropriateness of specific words. Recently, an admissions officer started a thread that began with a trigger warning. She then shared the title of a session at an international admissions conference: "East vs. West — Understanding Cultural Clashes, Tiger Moms, and Meeting Students in the Middle."

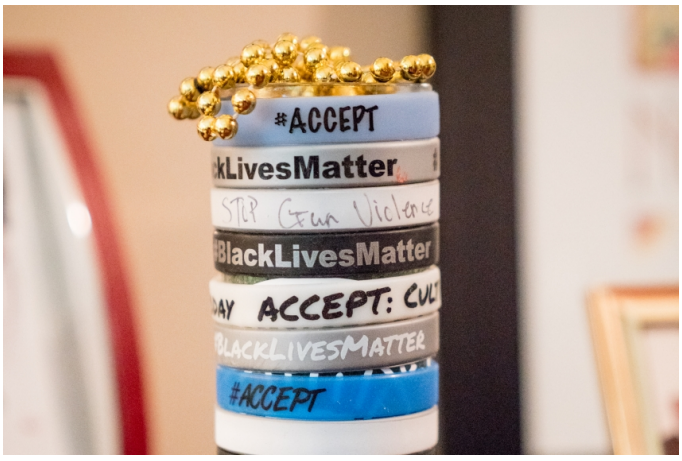
She felt uneasy about the use of the term "tiger mom," suggesting that it wasn't "inclusive language." So she asked the group: Was she being too sensitive?

No, was the unanimous verdict. "Tiger Mom is an offensive term and a dangerous generalization," one person wrote. "This has no place on a session title." Someone else posted an article explaining the term's origin and connotations.

Nikki Chun, director of undergraduate admissions at the California Institute of Technology, finds such threads enlightening. She logs into ACCEPT daily, often posting multiple times a week, and looks forward to Bigham's "Self-Care Sunday" posts, which remind everyone to be good to themselves. When Chun finally got a "conversation starter" badge (a steaming cup of coffee) for being a regular contributor, she was pleased.

Admissions officers of color at predominantly white colleges often feel isolated. Especially in offices where most — or all — of their colleagues are white. "You can feel like an island in those spaces," says Chun, a native Hawaiian who's part Chinese.

Through ACCEPT, she has connected with colleagues all over the country, making her feel like part of a community as well as a broader conversation about diversity. "Being surrounded by people whose experiences and narratives resonate with my own, that has really lit a fire for me," she says. "I feel braver, like I can speak up and say something that before I would've kept to myself."



Claire Bangser for The Chronicle

Wristbands promote ACCEPT's philosophies. "Come for the activism, stay for the discomfort," is the group's unofficial slogan.

When Adrienne Amador Oddi was director of admission at Berry College, in Georgia, ACCEPT inspired her to push for changes that helped the institution enroll and support students of color. "There's no way I would have been empowered to do that without the support and energy in ACCEPT," says Oddi, who is biracial.

Still, as supportive as the community can be, a few members say at times it can be a bit much for even the most devoted. Some exchanges get way theoretical, and some turn heated.

"Sometimes, when I felt like we were getting really into the weeds, I would get upset and think, 'This group is supposed to be accepting, and I'm not feeling accepted,'" says Oddi, now dean of admissions at Trinity College, in Connecticut. "Some days, I was like, 'OK, I'm not a critical race theorist. My bad for being a regular person.'"

ACCEPT has detractors who dislike its tone, including some college counselors with large caseloads who work in public schools. But they are reluctant to criticize the group publicly for fear of being scorned online. "Access, equity, trying to level the playing field for poor brown kids who need help? That's my day, every day, every hour," one says. "I live what some people in ACCEPT just talk about."

Akil Bello understands those feelings. A testing expert who consults with admissions offices, he has dished out criticism online many times. A black man who often engages in discussions of racial equity, he sees value in occasionally calling out people who are, as he puts it, "unaware of the narrowness of their perceptions." Still, he sees a downside.

"Call-outs can snowball," Bello says. "And that's the dilemma faced by social-justice warriors online. They have pent-up anger at having to filter themselves all the time, and so the expression of that anger and frustration is completely fair. The problem is that it can shut down communication and engagement with potential allies."

Allies can disagree and still be allies. ACCEPT's list of supporters includes some unlikely people, even people who have misgivings about the group.

One of them is Phil Trout, whose words roiled the admissions conference in 2016. "It offers an opportunity to affirm and embrace and — at times — to attack, ridicule, and dismiss," he writes of ACCEPT in an email. He worries that the group "isn't very good about forgiving."

Nonetheless, Trout describes ACCEPT's impact on the profession as extraordinary. He sees evidence of the group's influence in the "huge expansion" of discussions about race, bias, access, and equity among admissions officers and college counselors. The number of conference sessions dealing with those issues, as he notes, has grown considerably since 2016.

At NACAC's conference in 2017, Shaun R. Harper, a prominent black scholar at the University of Southern California, gave a controversial keynote speech in which he accused admissions leaders of clinging to racist practices. He decried a lack of diversity in

a field where 82 percent of chief enrollment officers were white, according to NACAC data. Although Harper's talk had no apparent connection to ACCEPT, it wasn't unreasonable to think that he had walked through a door that the group kicked open.

As a member of NACAC's board a couple of years ago, Trout participated in intensive training sessions on implicit bias. Those sessions came about, in part, he says, "because of the forceful impact of the postings" on ACCEPT.

Bigham, who's known Trout for years, says the two have discussed how the "all lives matter" incident caused them both to do some self-reflection.

The moment convinced her that the group had power — and a responsibility to use it well. In Trout she saw a man on the other side of a generational shift, someone who was trying, who was deserving of another chance. "He and I have come to a good place," she says.

Trout says the experience still gives him cause for "self-chastisement, as well as determination for self-improvement." Recently, he chaired a meeting of a committee that selects the winner of NACAC's Excellence in Education Award, given annually to those who have "improved the field of education and/or the way students are served." Trout says he voted for ACCEPT, which won the award last year.

That award was a tangible reminder of ACCEPT's offline presence. In its first year, the group held face-to-face meetups for members in 17 cities, and those gatherings have continued. This summer 120 people turned out for a meetup in Phoenix.

"Bringing people together, to network, to learn things, it helps you bring something tangible back to your office and run with it," says Jamiere Abney, associate dean of admission and coordinator of outreach for opportunity and inclusion at Colgate University. "There's a need for people to have a place to try and shake things up and reimagine what we do."

ACCEPT's leaders have sought ways to take action offline. After Hurricane Harvey flooded Houston, in 2017, college counselors were among the tens of thousands displaced. So a few dozen members of the group flew there to help families of collegebound seniors

complete financial-aid forms as the University of Texas' November 1 priority deadline approached.

Last year ACCEPT distributed 22,000 Black Lives Matter wristbands to high schools and colleges. Following publicized incidents of racial bias at several colleges, some members have written letters to administrators, offering support for students and suggestions for improving the campus climate. One campus responded by hosting a discussion on confronting racial bias, inviting ACCEPT members to attend.

"The last thing we want is to be just another clicktivist culture, where you click the keyboard and fool yourself that you've really done something," says Frappier, the group's co-leader. "The question is, How do we truly do more?"

On a Tuesday morning in May, dozens of people came to hear about ACCEPT's plans. It was the second day of a regional admissions conference in Phoenix, and Marie Bigham stood at the front of a meeting room sporting dark jeans, a button-down shirt, and neon-tipped nails.

"How are y'all doing?" she asked the crowd, roughly half of whom were people of color.

Sitting in the audience was a friend of Bigham's who said, "People either really like Marie, or they're afraid of her."

Afraid of her, he meant, because she exudes a might-say-anything-at-any-moment kind of fearlessness. Ask her if the glass is half full or half empty, and she'll tell you that "the glass is a symbol of capitalist heteronormative patriarchy, so let's smash the glass!" She's not like most people presenting at admissions conferences, and that's exactly why people listen to her intently.

For a few minutes, Bigham showed off ACCEPT's stylish new website. She described still-emerging plans for the group's first conference, "Hack the Gates: Radically Reimagining College Admissions," in Washington this fall. She introduced OiYan Poon, a scholar who directs Colorado State University's Race and Intersectional Studies for Educational Equity Center, which will co-sponsor the conference.

"The Facebook group is the core of who we are," Bigham said, "but we want to engage people who aren't on social media."

ACCEPT's leaders haven't taken a position on specific admissions practices, such as ACT/SAT requirements or early-decision programs. During the conference, which will have an online component, the group plans to solicit suggestions for how to "dismantle" the path to college and create a more equitable one.

As Bigham told the crowd, selective colleges have a choice to make. They can continue to run an admissions process that disproportionately benefits white, affluent applicants, or they can reimagine themselves in ways that might better serve an increasingly diverse nation. "What we've been doing for the last 70 years," she said, "might have been harmful and antithetical to our stated goals."

Bigham asked people in the audience to share some concerns.

One ACCEPT member said she worried that the group was too insular, that its members were just "preaching to the choir."

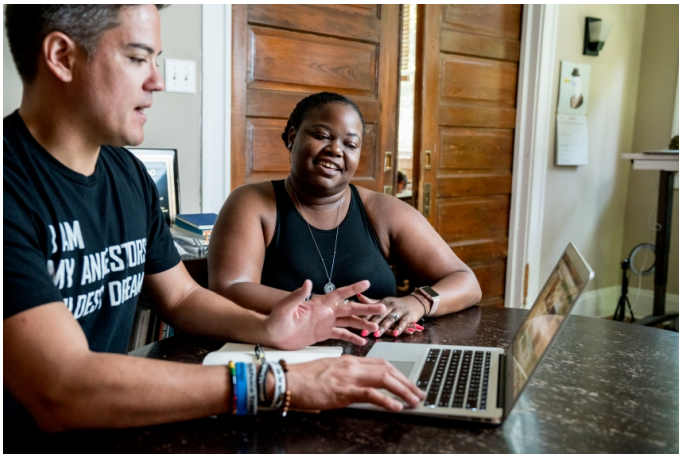
A black admissions officer who works at a private college described her office culture as unwelcoming. "We're tokenized," she said. "It's hard for us to speak up."

A white woman who works at a private high school shook in her seat while describing her frustration with rich, demanding parents. "I'm sorry," she said, wiping her eyes. "This is the first time I've been able to express myself."

"Go for it!" Bigham said. "Feel free to cuss."

With that, many people applauded. The moment was pure ACCEPT: A diverse crowd, speaking freely, sharing some raw emotions.

Later that afternoon, Heath Einstein, dean of admission at Texas Christian University, gave a presentation on the challenge of helping students from marginalized backgrounds feel comfortable and included on predominantly white campuses. He asked his audience to imagine what it was like for a student of color to walk through buildings named for white men, to see Greek letters for fraternities catering to white students.



Claire Bangser for The Chronicle

Steve Frappier and Ebonee Mahone-Todman discuss conversation threads that appear on ACCEPT's Facebook page.

Einstein, who is white, said ACCEPT had helped him think harder about how to meet such challenges, down to the kind of admissions team he wants to build. "Every day, I read something there that opens my eyes," he said. He has torn through Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* and several other books that were recommended in ACCEPT.

The forum has brought together many people who probably wouldn't ever find themselves in the same kinds of restaurants, vacation spots, or churches. Even in blistering exchanges, Einstein hears the sound of diverse colleagues trying, sometimes clumsily, to work out their feelings, make sense of their faults, and show some empathy toward others.

"In this space, I've come to understand that the major social issues of our day can no longer be seen as separate from higher ed and admissions," Einstein said. "They are, in fact, linked."

The admissions office is deluged by metrics, fixated on short-term goals. But the world just beyond its walls is one in which the president of the United States tells congresswomen of color to "go back" to other countries. In which a white conservative activist is waging a relentless war on affirmative action. In which plans for a black Little Mermaid cause controversy. All of those things help explain why, for some people, one online forum feels like a refuge.

At the conference in Phoenix, Einstein wore a gray ACCEPT wristband, just as many other people did. When he ran into other members of the group, he didn't shake their hands. He hugged them.

Correction (8/12/2019, 12:12 p.m.): A photo caption accompanying this article originally misspelled the name of a participant in ACCEPT. She is Ebonee Mahone-Todman, not Ebony Mayhone-Todman. The caption has been corrected.

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