

“Having a diverse search committee makes it less likely that the committee will overlook talented individuals with non-traditional kinds of experience.”

(Smith, 2000)

Potential Sources of Bias

Even when we are committed to promoting diversity in the workplace, research indicates that we bring our personal experiences and cultural histories into the hiring and employment process.

How is it that women are now nearly half of all doctoral recipients, but only 33% of the faculty at doctoral institutions, and 23% of tenured and tenure-track faculty at Virginia Tech in 2004? How is it that the progress in hiring ethnic minority faculty has been so slow and difficult, and gains are so quickly eroded when retention fails? The reasons are subtle and often not visible to those in the majority culture. Unrecognized biases and assumptions play a powerful role in maintaining the status quo.

Schemas that allow us to make short-hand assumptions about someone based on the person's or group's main characteristics unknowingly shape our expectations and judgments. Advantages accumulated by some (such as attending the best graduate schools or working with influential mentors) are often viewed as signs of individual merit. Cumulative disadvantages (such as attending less prestigious institutions or taking time out for a baby) more often characterize the experiences of women and people of color and are assumed to reflect less talent or commitment. Small differences can add up to large differences in salary, promotion, and prestige over a career.

(Valian, 1999)

Examples of Assumptions or Biases in Academic Job-Related Contexts

Participants in a study of academic psychologists were four times more likely to write “cautionary” statements in the margins of applicants with female names compared to those evaluating the identical vita with a male name. Both men and women said that they were more likely to hire the male applicant than the identical female applicant.

(Steinpreis et al, 1999)

“...peer reviewers cannot judge scientific merit independent of gender.”

(Wenneras and Wold, 1997)

300 letters of recommendation studied for medical school faculty positions found that letters written for female applicants were shorter and tended to display more “doubt raisers” than for male counterparts. Women were more frequently portrayed as students and teachers and men as researchers and professionals. Adjectives such as “superb” and “exceptional” were more frequent in recommendations for male applicants.

(Trix and Psenka, 2003)

Search committees tend to weigh recommendation letters higher if the evaluators know the writers. This can be a disadvantage for black men and women who may develop different network systems.

(Sagaria, 2003)

Many beliefs about minority faculty applicants turn out to be myths. Common assumptions, such as: “There are so few scholars of color who earn doctorates”; or “There is a bidding war for the handful of talented minority doctoral graduates,” simply did not turn out to be true for the minority recipients of prestigious Ford, Mellon, and Spencer doctoral fellowships. There was little evidence of institutions clamoring to attract these talented future faculty – only 11% of the scholars of color were recruited for a faculty position and encouraged to apply.

(Smith, 2000)

Black women and men and white women applicants for 147 administrative positions at a large research institution were more frequently probed for personal information during interviews than were majority male candidates.

(Sagaria, 2002)

Scholars of color often have different professional paths. Search committees should recruit applicants who have diverse academic and professional histories. “Teaching excellence, work experience – including non-academic work – service and outreach records should also be considered when evaluating candidates for a faculty position.”

(Turner, 2002a)

“The attributes we associate with specific gender and racial labels are over learned — that is, they are habitual and unconscious.”

(Bielby, 2000)

“As we become aware of our hypotheses, we replace our belief in a just world with a view of the world in which bias plays a role. Since this is a state of affairs we wish were otherwise, we prefer not to acknowledge it. But we can learn.”

(Valian, 1999)

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Tips for Reviewing Dossiers

Self-Growth and Education

- Recognize personal biases and prejudices that might influence hiring and promotion decisions.
- Be familiar with research on biases and assumptions.
- Acknowledge the impact of cumulative disadvantage.

Create Consistent Hiring Practices

- Use clear job descriptions.
- Create transparent policies and procedures.
- Develop criteria for evaluating candidates and apply them consistently.
- Include individuals with different perspectives on hiring and personnel committees.
- Educate committees on bias and assumptions.
- Make sure policies are modeled and reinforced by leadership.

Put Education and Policies into Action

- Review dossiers carefully: Consider the entire package; do not weigh one element too heavily.
- Be aware of how the style or origin of a reference might bias against females or ethnic minorities.
- When hiring, review the final pool of applicants for diversity.
- Do not use informal methods of hiring or promotion exclusively.

Evaluate

- Consistently assess hiring and promotion practices.
- Be able to defend every decision to reject or retain a candidate.
- Periodically evaluate your decisions and consider whether qualified women and underrepresented minorities are included.



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