

Practical Tools for Recognizing and Reducing Unintentional Bias

The ISU ADVANCE Program and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences co-sponsored a workshop on October 31, 2007 that focused on causes and effects of unintentional bias. The workshop included a keynote presentation by Dr. Erin Kelly (Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota) entitled “Subtle Gender Bias at Work,” which is available as a reference document in PDF on the ISU ADVANCE Web site (www.advance.iastate.edu).

In addition, the event included a Reader’s Theatre presentation of a typical faculty meeting. Following the keynote and theater presentations, workshop participants engaged in discussion to generate ideas for recognizing and reducing unintentional bias in our everyday work. Those ideas are presented here, organized according to three themes (although some overlap occurs between them): Departmental climate and culture, facilitation of faculty and staff meetings, and the role of leaders.

Departmental climate and culture:

- Work to minimize cultures of “insiders” and “outsiders”
 - Important information should flow across social networks to reach all members
 - Members should agree upon “conversation starters” that are safe and inclusive (to minimize “clubbish-ness”)
 - Encourage ways of thinking about members as “whole person” in addition to “scholarly person” – i.e. that it is okay to have commitments outside the work place
- Foster safe environment for pointing out when unintentional biases are expressed
 - Start with “change agents”/supporters/identified influencers (under-represented faculty don’t want to inherit watch-dog role)
 - Develop mechanisms that are agreed upon for dealing with biases when expressed
- Leaders within departments should serve as role models for others
 - All leaders (e.g. senior and influential department members, not just chairs) may need mentoring and increased awareness of issues related to unintentional bias
- Unintentional biases may be even greater when intersecting hierarchy – for example, between senior faculty and junior faculty, adjunct faculty, and staff, so careful attention must be paid to those interactions

Facilitation of faculty and staff meetings:

- Initially, more formal structures and more deliberate processes will be conducive to change the tone of interactions to minimize unintentional bias
- Timing of meetings is important
 - Routine meetings should be scheduled at times that allow members to fulfill commitments outside the workplace without loss of credibility or questioning of dedication (e.g. between 8am and 5pm)
- Ground rules for conduct of meetings should be made explicit and revisited on a regular (at least annual) basis
 - Formalize procedures for placing agenda items
 - Meetings should include opening “go-rounds” to give all participants a voice,

go-rounds should also be used in discussion of important departmental decisions to be more certain every member will “weigh in”

- “Hand-raising” or other signals should be agreed upon for sharing “the floor” during open discussion
- All members should be aware of the need to encourage participation by all
- Meeting conveners (chair or other designated person) should be responsible to monitor process and be sure everyone is given a voice/opportunity to speak
- Department faculty meetings should set the standard for other departmental (e.g. committee) meetings in which ground rules are also explicit
- For meetings that are “evaluative” (i.e. P & T, search committee reviews of candidates) ensure there is enough time to “do things right,” including development of decision matrices that can be equally applied to all candidates to level the playing field
- Important decisions should be made using paper ballots
- Departments/units need to have frequent enough meetings/conversations to minimize isolation of under-represented members.

Role of leaders (Chairs, Deans, leaders within units, Provosts, etc):

- Leaders may need mentoring to increase their own awareness of unintentional bias/effects of accumulated disadvantage, and should examine their own assumptions and behavior, work to counteract bias
- Leaders should encourage increased awareness and cultural value for diversity among unit members, cultivate new ways of thinking and acting
- Set the tone
 - Set clear expectations for members and hold them accountable
 - If convening meetings, insist on good process (all participants have a voice)
- Committee structure and assignments should be carefully considered, and charges and expectations for interaction made clear (that work will not be done on an ad-hoc basis)
- Departmental leaders should be involved in creating more formal information networks that do cross the existing informal networks – e.g. having lunch meetings with all assistant professors together to discuss
- Departmental leaders should “touch base” with all faculty and staff, but particularly with under-represented faculty and staff to know how things are going (to eliminate need for watch-dogs, to get feedback in a safer setting)
- Departmental, college or other unit leaders should formalize promotion procedures for tenured faculty (timing for promotion from associate to full) and consider carefully how bias may enter into decisions at this level
- Leaders above departmental level should be influential in “enforcing” standards

The October 31 workshop was designed to initiate a university-wide discussion at ISU about the causes and effects of unintentional bias, as one underlying factor that influences our institution’s ability to increase the participation and advancement of women in science, mathematics and engineering. We thank workshop participants for their energy, creativity, and positive contributions to this dialog! The ideas offered here are a starting point to help reduce unintentional bias in interactions among individuals, departments, and other campus units.