
Regional

Does unconscious bias effect higher ed hiring?

Nobody wants to be called a racist or a misogynist. Most people think that they are not. However, we are constantly making decisions that are influenced by unconscious biases.

Unconscious biases are defined as social stereotypes that are formed about certain groups of people by individuals from outside their own conscious awareness. Psychologists agree that everyone holds unconscious beliefs about various social and identity groups, and that these biases stem from one's tendency to organize social worlds by categorizing.

Although less evident, unconscious biases are far more prevalent than conscious prejudice and are often incompatible with one's conscious values. Certain scenarios can activate unconscious attitudes and beliefs, especially biases that may be more prevalent when multi-tasking or working under time pressure.

Biases based on gender, race, and other factors can creep in unconsciously and cloud judgment, even when someone has the best of intentions. Higher education is not immune to these biases. Despite much talk about political correctness or of being "liberal," as we have demonstrated in past articles in this column, there is much bias – unconscious or not – when it comes to hiring faculty and staff and to admitting students in colleges and universities.

This is a serious problem not only because we are talking about social injustice or even illegal actions, but also because we need a diverse work and study environment capable of producing better solutions to the problems we face every day.

So what can we do to at least minimize uncon-

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scious biases? Fortunately, both government agencies and many corporations have developed a number of policies and practices that help us to find a way to clear the path to a more equitable solution when it comes to dealing with people who are different from us.

Like with any other human problem, the first step that we need to take is to recognize that we have implicit biases. There are a number of studies supporting this contention. In a study published in 2007, a Harvard professor found that although ethnic diversity is increasing in most advanced countries, driven mostly by increases in immigration, problems arise as a result of those increases in diversity. The study found that in ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the United States, residents of all races tend to 'hunker down.' That trust (even of one's own race) is lower, altruism and community cooperation rarer, and friends fewer. He concluded that in the long run, "successful immigrant societies have overcome such fragmentation by creating new, cross-cutting forms of social solidarity and more encompassing identities."

Therefore, a special effort must be made to train different constituencies in order to overcome unconscious bias. There are several documents that can be used to that end. One was put together by The Association for Women in Science: http://www.awis.org/?Implicit_bias. Another is a document that

the Mathematical Association of America that helps remind us of the right steps to take in the hiring process to help avoid bias. You can find that document at http://maa.org/sites/default/files/pdf/ABOUTMAA/avoiding_implicit_bias.pdf. Finally, you can also provide members of a search committee with a self-test that can help them to discover their own biases. You can find it at: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>. It takes about 10-15 minutes and it makes you stop and think about the associations you make in your mind.

Another important step is to give your undivided attention when evaluating candidates. Some studies have shown that you are more likely to lean on biases if you're rushed, distracted, or tired. Therefore, you should avoid this trap by reviewing applicants when you can achieve your optimum mental focus, giving yourself plenty of time, at least 15 to 20 minutes or ideally 30 minutes per applicant.

Another important consideration is to have a very clear idea of what you are looking for when hiring someone. The more precise your expectations, the less likely you will be to make biased decisions based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, or national origin, for example. To have an evaluation form that helps you to go over the same questions and the matches per expectations can be really useful to that end. Other measures, such as when initially reviewing applications to avoid accessing any information such as the name of the person, can reveal that person's inherent characteristics like the ones mentioned above.

Another important step is to keep track of the results in the hiring of the organization. For example,

have you hired more women or minorities than the already existing proportion in your organization? If not, why is that? What can you do differently in the future to change bad outcomes? Those are points of reflection that have to be informed by statistics.

Another important question you have to ask yourself when making a final decision is, how do I decide among two or three finalists? Have I taken into consideration whether or not underrepresented groups are qualified or not for the job? Have I taken into consideration the fact that underrepresented minorities have had fewer opportunities than others to obtain an education in an Ivy League school versus a state university? Are not women more likely to be discriminated against because their expectations for "brilliance" are different from their male counterparts?

These and many other questions are the ones that we should be asking ourselves when making final decisions. After all, we do not live in an egalitarian society where everybody has had the same opportunities in life.

Whether we got into a top school, for example, is always influenced by our families' financial status, where we were born, and the color of our skin. Until we dispel the notion that everybody was born and educated under the same circumstances, or given the same opportunities, we will not develop a true sense of social justice.

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