

Examining Implicit Bias and Its Effect on Hiring and Inclusiveness

By Elizabeth Wroblewski

Like many higher education institutions wishing to diversify, the College of Biological Sciences (CBS) at the University of Minnesota has long engaged in efforts to recruit and retain students from underrepresented groups. Three years ago, the college also ramped up its efforts to recruit diverse faculty members and create a more inclusive climate. In support of this goal, CBS human resources utilized a two-pronged approach that aimed to increase the CBS community's level of self-awareness as a first step toward enhancing a climate of inclusion and removing barriers in the recruitment of a diverse faculty.

Implicit Bias Training

In 2012, CBS launched a new cluster-hiring approach to find field-shaping faculty to advance critical research areas in the biological sciences. The goal was to increase the number of female faculty and faculty from underrepresented groups. In addition to encouraging current faculty to reach out to their contacts to recruit women and candidates from underrepresented groups, HR required all search committees to undergo training in implicit bias prior to evaluating applications. The implicit bias training was based in part on materials used by the Society for Neuroscience's "Women in Neuroscience" workshops on unconscious bias, in which two CBS department heads participated.

Training included research results that showed unintentional but real bias across gender, race and rank of faculty toward applicants based on gender and race. During year one of the cluster hire, one of these department heads presented materials to each search committee and engaged them in dialogue about strategies to circumvent bias. Subsequently, current research on gender and race bias was added to the training program. Today, this training is a requirement for all faculty search committees in CBS.


Exploring CBS Culture

Also in 2012, CBS received a grant from the university's office of equity and diversity to work with Wing Young Huie, a nationally renowned photographer who uses his art to spark discussion about perception, identity and bias. The

college's HR team worked with Huie to design workshops that focused on identity and science in order to help the CBS community connect to issues of equity and diversity. The ultimate goal of the seven workshops, presented to faculty, staff and students, was to increase the self-reflection needed to truly create a more inclusive climate. Huie began each workshop with his own photos, asking participants to interpret their meanings and showing how culture shapes perceptions. He then asked participants to consider questions about their own identities and present them on a chalkboard. Photographs of participants revealing different parts of their identities were compiled in a video and shared with the entire CBS community.

Outcomes

CBS's efforts to decrease implicit bias has strengthened the diversity of its applicant pools. Interview pools now contain a larger percentage of women (in some cases up to 55 percent) than they have in the past. Out of 14 faculty hires over the past two years, six were women. The college is currently in the final interview phases of this year's searches and hopes to see an even greater increase in the number of female hires. The Exploring CBS Culture project was well received as well. Participants indicated an increased appreciation of how culture shapes perceptions and agreed that the workshops sparked examination of their identities in new ways. Participants also indicated a desire for further training in equity and diversity issues.

As part of its new strategic plan unveiled last fall, the University of Minnesota is calling for greater efforts to diversify faculty and staff across all units and includes the use of implicit bias training as one of many tactics to utilize. In terms of culture change, there is a broader acceptance of this training on the part of faculty (heads of search committees in another science college have invited CBS personnel to present the training to their committees), and search committees are taking a more thoughtful, strategic approach to recruiting and hiring women and members of underrepresented groups. 

Elizabeth Wroblewski is director of strategic initiatives for University of Minnesota's College of Biological Sciences. She can be reached at wrobl003@umn.edu.