ADVANCE *Investing in Faculty Success and Inclusive Work Environments*

# What Is Bias and How Does It Emerge in Faculty Hiring?

Biases are patterns in the way we think and act and can undermine our ability to make effective and fair judgements during the faculty hiring process. This research brief summarizes the common biases that emerge during the faculty hiring process. It then discusses the ways these biases can influence specific phases of the hiring process: framing the position and forming the committee; marketing, outreach, and recruitment; evaluation of candidates; and forming the short-list and making final hiring decisions. Studies conducted within higher education settings are emphasized.

## Common Biases in Hiring

**(Moody, 2012)**

- ☐ **First Impressions:** Drawing conclusions based on initial meeting.
- ☐ **Elitism:** Positively associating quality with more selective institutions.
- ☐ **Affiliation Bonus:** Overvaluing candidates who are part of one's professional or personal networks.
- ☐ **Raising the Bar:** Creating higher standards or different filters for candidates from underrepresented groups.
- ☐ **Cloning:** Overvaluing candidates who possess traits similar to oneself or a prior faculty member.
- ☐ **Good Fit/Bad Fit:** Overvaluing candidates who have cultural or experiential similarities to the existing department members.
- ☐ **Ranking/Digging In:** Overreliance on quantitative scoring.
- ☐ **Attribution Error:** Ascribing candidate behaviors to their character rather than the context.
- ☐ **Euphemisms:** Using value-laden, ambiguous terminology (e.g., "star" "promise") to justify evaluation.
- ☐ **Wishful Thinking:** Assuming that non-biased, objective evaluations can be rendered.
- ☐ **Negative/Positive Stereotypes:** Presumptions of competence or incompetence or leadership potential.
- ☐ **Myths and Assumptions:** Psychoanalyzing candidates; Presupposing candidate's potential behaviors or responses.

# How Bias Emerges in the 4 Phases of Hiring

## PHASE 1: FRAMING THE POSITION AND FORMING THE COMMITTEE

***Crafting the Job Advertisement***

The language used in the job advertisement can bias who is interested in applying for a role at a specific institution in several ways. First, studies show when job ads are written with masculine-typed wording (e.g., competitive, strong) or stress prototypically masculine personal characteristics (business sense, decisiveness), women are less likely to apply - while men are equally likely to apply regardless of the language used in the job ad.[1] Second, women and candidates from racially minoritized groups may be particularly attuned to the signals that the job ad contains regarding the diversity climate in the department or institution. Candidates from racially minoritized groups job-seekers are more likely to apply to positions that signal a commitment to diversity within the job ad – beyond what is required by legal equal employment language.[2] Announcements should be carefully worded, however, to reflect that the department is actively pursuing its diversity, equity, and inclusion goals rather than implying that DEI has already been achieved.[3] Third, departments often write job ads narrowly, focused on specific research areas or methods.[4] This can limit the diversity in who applies the position as well as limit a department's ability to address new and emerging research areas.

***Forming the Search Committee***

Individuals are naturally attracted to others who have similar backgrounds and experiences. Search committees may gravitate toward candidates who mirror their own skills or backgrounds, or who replicate the faculty member who held the position previously.[5] Thus, search committees that lack diverse membership may be more prone to bias in their evaluation of candidates.[6] Power dynamics and rankism can also shape how search committee members interact with one another as well as the results of the search. Untenured and early-career faculty members, who are more likely to be women and/or from racially minoritized groups, may be uncomfortable with disagreeing with full professors during committee deliberations.[7]

## PHASE 2: MARKETING, OUTREACH, AND RECRUITMENT

***Who is Asked and Encouraged to Apply to Faculty Positions***

Bias can emerge in the recruitment and marketing process in many ways. Search committees may feel that there is no diversity in the pipeline, or that qualified racially minoritized candidates are so highly sought after that recruitment efforts will be a waste of time. Though there are fields with less diversity than others, recent studies show that diversity among PhD doctoral degree recipients outpaces faculty diversity.[8] Additionally, studies on faculty hiring show that even the most competitive faculty candidates only receive around two tenure-track offers (or less), and that candidates from minority groups are not receiving significantly more offers in comparison to peers from other backgrounds.[9]

### *Institutional Prestige and Reputation*

Often, the rank or prestige of the institution that a scholar matriculates from is used as a proxy for determining their quality and future productivity – elements essential to determining hireability.[10] For example, in computer science, history, and business fields, researchers found that only 25 percent of degree-granting institutions produce 71 percent of all tenured and tenure-track faculty. [11] Yet, women are underrepresented among the highest-prestige programs and overrepresented in unranked programs. [12] By only recruiting from the "top-ranked" programs, search committees may miss opportunities to recruit candidates from underrepresented groups, in addition to missing out on highly productive future faculty.[13]

## PHASE 3: EVALUATING CANDIDATES

### *Letters of Recommendation*

Multiple studies conducted within in different academic fields (chemistry/biochemistry, psychology, academic medicine, and geoscience) found that the content and quality of letters of recommendation for academic positions varies significantly based on the gender of the applicant.[14] Letters for women tended to be shorter and contained more "doubt raisers." Women were often described as communal and less agentic than male applicants. Letters for men contained more standout adjectives ("outstanding", "excellent"), while letters for women contained more grindstone words ("hardworking"). These trends were true regardless of recommender gender.

### *CVs*

We rely heavily upon CVs to evaluate candidates' research interests, teaching experience, and leadership potential. However, bias can influence our evaluation of these materials in multiple ways. Several studies show that when faculty members review CVs, they were more likely to rate white and Asian men as hireable compared to Black and Latinx men, Black and Latinx women, and white women, with bias being the most pronounced against Black and Latinx women. [15] Furthermore, many indicators of performance indicated on a CV (e.g., number of publications or grants) may also reflect biases, in that there is significant evidence that women are cited less frequently, and Black scholars are significantly less likely to receive prestigious grant awards.[16]

### *Parental and Partner Status*

In laboratory experiments testing the impact of parenthood on employment, researchers asked participants to evaluate the resumes of two, equally qualified candidates with different parental status.[17] Evaluators found mothers to be less competent and recommended a lower starting salary. This research supports other findings in higher ed, which indicate motherhood can have significant impacts on women faculty's careers.[18] Research on dual-career academic couples shows that search committees often view women candidates with men partners to be less "moveable" and are therefore less likely to extend them job offers, and women hired through dual-career policies often encounter gender bias that undermines their satisfaction and advancement.[19]

### *Perceptions of Brilliance, Competence, and Leadership Potential*

When evaluating candidates, search committees may also be influenced by their perceptions of the candidate's brilliance, competence, or leadership potential. Studies indicate that in fields where "brilliance" or natural talent is a criterion for success (such as mathematics, physics, or economics), Black students and women are less likely to obtain doctoral degrees.[20] Women and racially minoritized faculty members are often evaluated as being less competent than white and/or men colleagues – especially when the hiring criteria is vague or ambiguous - which has been linked to negative hiring outcomes.[21] Women and racially minoritized faculty members are less likely to be viewed as future leaders, in part because they may be perceived to not have traditional qualities we associate with leadership (e.g. decisiveness, competiveness).[22] Finally, we know that the criteria committees use to evaluate candidates can sometimes shift depending the candidate's identities, with women and racially minoritized scholars encountering greater scrutiny.[23]

### *Teaching Evaluations*

Students are also prone to bias in their evaluation of faculty.[24] In one study, researchers drew from RateMyProfessors to examine the evaluations of 190,006 professors in the United States.[25] They found that women faculty, particularly in specific disciplines, were rated more harshly than men. Another study found similar results for openly gay faculty, with students reporting that gay faculty were significantly less credible than straight teachers.[26] Racially minoritized faculty and women are also less likely to be described as brilliant in teaching evaluations from students.[27] Other research has found that women with a feminine appearance are less likely to be viewed as scientists.[28]

### *Epistemic Exclusion and Contributions to Research Teams*

There is significant evidence that racially minoritized faculty members are more likely to do research considered to be at the "margins" of their fields, use alternative forms of scholarship, do community-engaged research, and/or study communities of color.[29] Bias towards so-called traditional areas of scholarship results in epistemic exclusion[30] and may influence the ways search committee members view some candidates as "risky" or influence which candidates are perceived to "fit" within a department.[31] Bias can emerge when evaluating how much individuals contribute to group research.[32] In one study, the researcher used academic CVs to assess whether coauthored or solo-authored publications mattered differently for the tenure decisions of men and women faculty.[33] The author found that men are tenured at roughly the same rate regardless of whether they co-authored or solo-authored papers, while women suffered a significant penalty (lowered chances of getting tenure) when they were listed as co-authors. In another experimental study, researchers manipulated the gender of the author associated with a research abstract.[34] They found that students were more likely to say that an abstract associated with a man author had higher scientific quality than the same abstract written by a woman author.

## PHASE 4: SHORT LISTS, INTERVIEWS, AND FINAL DECISIONS

***Candidates on the Short List***

In a recent study, researchers found that the demographic composition of the shortlist impacts hiring outcomes - beyond the impact of mere probability.[35] Evaluators assessed the credentials of candidates in a finalist pool, who had the same qualifications but whose names were experimentally manipulated to sound more white or Black (or man versus woman). They found when the majority of candidates were white (or a man), the participants preferred a white candidate, but when the majority of candidates were Black, they preferred a Black candidate. If two or more Black candidates were in the candidate pool – regardless of the pool size – the odds of hiring a Black candidate were significantly increased.

***Job Talks***

An emerging area of research indicates that women are more likely to be interrupted during academic job talks than male candidates.[36] Researchers analyzed video recordings from 119 job talks across five engineering departments at two research intensive universities. They found that women receive more follow-up questions and more overall questions, and that a higher proportion of women's time during the job talk is taken up by audience questions. The overall effect is that women candidates have less time to discuss their skills and qualifications, and instead, spend more time responding to audience questions that may not be related to their skills or competencies as faculty. This research mirrors findings from the greater literature that indicates women are more likely to be interrupted in both private and public settings.[37]

# FURTHER READING: SELECTED REFERENCES ON EFFECTIVE BIAS AND EQUITY-MINDED INTERVENTIONS

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