



## Fairly Evaluating Faculty: Strategies that Evaluation Committees Can Use Right Now

Like any human decision-making process, faculty evaluation is prone to unconscious bias and irrational outcomes. Most research and scholarship on equity in faculty evaluation focuses on reforming policies (e.g., the criteria used to evaluate candidates). This brief draws on the research on enhancing fairness in organizational decision-making and examines the key practices that evaluation committee members can use to increase fairness and inclusiveness in their evaluation processes **at the moment**. It is intended to complement policy reform efforts.

### COMMON BIASES IN FACULTY EVALUATION<sup>1</sup>

Bias and Definition	Faculty Evaluation Example
<b>Raising the Bar:</b> Creating higher standards or different filters for candidates from underrepresented groups.	Evaluation committee members highly scrutinize some candidates for 20 minutes or more while other candidates receive no more than a cursory appraisal.
<b>Anchoring:</b> Overly relying on the first information or opinion that is presented in a deliberation	An evaluation committee member expresses a negative, general opinion of a candidate’s performance; the rest of the discussion is then based on debunking or supporting that negative opinion.
<b>Confirmation Bias:</b> Seeking out information that justifies or rationalizes our pre-existing belief or view.	An evaluation committee member has a general impression that one faculty member has been a high performer before appraising their annual review materials; they then seek out information in the materials that this person did indeed perform highly.
<b>Euphemisms:</b> Using value-laden, ambiguous terminology to justify evaluation.	An evaluation committee member justifies their appraisal based on a candidate’s “star performance” without providing evidence that substantiates their evaluation.
<b>Contrast Effect:</b> Comparing two things against one another as opposed to evaluating each on its own merit.	Impressed by the extremely high praise one candidate received in their student teaching evaluations, an evaluation committee member inadvertently holds the next candidate to a much higher standard for teaching.
<b>Subfield Bias:</b> Negative perceptions about research/scholarship viewed to be at the margins of a field/discipline.	Although one faculty member has a publication that has been widely cited and hugely impactful, none of the evaluation committee members are in that subfield and thus doubt the legitimacy of the work.
<b>Affinity Bias:</b> Favoritism towards candidates sharing common interests, backgrounds, or affiliations.	An evaluation committee member gives higher ratings or more positive feedback to a faculty member who graduated from the same alma mater or has a similar research interest as the evaluator.
<b>Recency Bias:</b> More weight given to recent events or achievements of candidates.	A faculty candidate whose research productivity declined due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is considered not productive enough.

<sup>1</sup> Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.  
Moody, J. (2012). *Faculty diversity: Removing the barriers* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Routledge.



CONDITIONS AND STRATEGIES THAT CAN MITIGATE THE IMPACT OF BIAS<sup>2</sup>

Condition	What happens when this condition is missing?	Strategy and Rationale
<p><b>Transparency and Procedure:</b> Extent to which information about the process is available.</p>	<p>Committee members lack information about how the evaluation process will occur or what their roles are supposed to be.</p>	<p><b>Equity Charge:</b> Reminds committee members what the process is supposed to be, which can help ensure committee members are fulfilling their roles.</p>
<p><b>Clarity:</b> Extent to which the process is understood.</p>	<p>Evaluators are unsure of what each criterion means and the kinds of evidence they should use to assess whether it is met.</p>	<p><b>Calibration Exercises:</b> Committee members come to a consensus about what the criteria mean and how they will assess whether each candidate meets it, which reduces the extent to which subjective interpretations can be introduced. After discussing the criteria, the committee can also enhance clarity by applying the criteria to a “test case” and discussing how they came to their evaluative decisions.</p>
<p><b>Consistency:</b> Extent to which the process is evenly applied.</p>	<p>Individual evaluators do not apply criteria evenly across candidates; Among evaluators, criteria are also unevenly applied.</p>	<p><b>Rubrics:</b> After discussing the criteria, committee members insert them into a rubric that allows them to apply the criteria to each candidate evenly. Ideally, the rubric also prompts each evaluator to indicate on what basis they provided their scores.</p>
<p><b>Flexibility/Context:</b> Extent to which evaluation is adaptable.</p>	<p>Evaluators have few ways to understand how a faculty member’s performance is situated within larger external conditions.</p>	<p><b>Discussion of when/how candidate or chair statements will be reviewed:</b> In many review processes, candidates or other individuals may provide information that helps evaluators assess a candidate’s performance in context (e.g., a COVID impact statement; a statement from a subfield expert about the impact of the candidate’s work). Committees should determine when and how such context should be considered in their deliberations and in their overall evaluation, which helps ensure that context is taken into consideration for each candidate.</p>

<sup>2</sup> See O’Meara, K. & Templeton, L., (2022). *Equity-minded reform of faculty evaluation: A call to action*. American Council on Education.



# ADVANCE PROGRAM FOR INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE

Condition	What happens when this condition is missing?	Strategy and Rationale
<p><b>Credit:</b> Extent to which processes recognize differences in effort/intensity.</p>	<p>Evaluators have little or no understanding of the effort or intensity associated with different kinds of faculty work (e.g., high effort service commitments) or the quality of the work that faculty completed.</p>	<p><b>Committee Composition:</b> Although recognizing effort/intensity for different kinds of faculty work is best addressed by policy, having a diverse committee increases the likelihood that committee members will be able to speak to effort associated with different kinds of faculty work.</p>
<p><b>Accountability:</b> Extent to which individuals are held responsible for actions and following rules/processes.</p>	<p>There are no mechanisms to ensure that the decision-making process is followed, and few ways to get the committee back on track when an evaluative discussion starts to go astray.</p>	<p><b>Statement of Mutual Expectations:</b> Statements of mutual expectations<sup>3</sup> are written documents that outline how committees will behave, prepare, and conduct evaluations. They may outline deliberative processes and decision-making procedures, but they can also outline key steps that will be taken if expectations are not being met. In this way, they serve as a proactive nudge that “norms” productive committee membership, while also functioning as an accountability mechanism that can be referenced when expectations are not being met.</p>
<p><b>Agency:</b> Extent to which committee members can express and have their perspectives heard.</p>	<p>Some committee members speak up first/more compared to others.</p>	<p><b>Scripting Committee Deliberations:</b> Providing some general structure or guidelines for how deliberations will unfold (e.g., each person presents a case; alternating speaking order; assessing each candidate in the discrete areas of research/scholarship, teaching, and service before determining their overall merit) can help ensure that each member of the committee is heard, and their perspectives are taken into consideration.<sup>4</sup></p>

<sup>3</sup> See example: <https://advance.umd.edu/node/330>

<sup>4</sup> See UMass-Lowell’s Personnel Decision-Making Guidelines:

<https://www.uml.edu/academics/provost-office/faculty-success/advance/personnel-practices/confronting-bias-personnel-protocol.a.spx>