

Equity and Inclusion Considerations in the Work of Academic Governance

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Abstract

This paper describes the framework for a workshop on the role of equity and inclusion in the work of academic governance. The goals of the workshop were for participants to understand the role of social justice and equity in creating policy, recognize how academic governance groups may inadvertently create inequities, and identify ways to foster inclusivity within academic governance. The workshop included research on how unconscious bias affects equity and inclusion in academic policy and governance such as teaching evaluations and letters of recommendation that play a role in faculty evaluation and promotion, as well as who participates in academic governance and in how voices are recognized and heard in the decision-making process. The workshop described strategies for minimizing equity issues and promoting inclusion, using case studies to promote discussion and skill development. Workshop content and case studies can be used to promote equity and inclusion with students involved in group work and/or student clubs. Evaluation results and lessons learned from the workshop suggest ways in which future workshops will be improved.

Introduction

Women faculty continue to be underrepresented in STEM fields, despite an increase in the number of women earning doctoral degrees in STEM over the past decade [1], [2]. Barriers to their participation include challenges related to work-life balance, career navigation, stereotype threat, and unconscious bias [1]. Faculty who are underrepresented based on their identities other than and in addition to gender are also impacted by unconscious biases. This impacts the representation and inclusion of a diverse faculty in higher education. Unconscious or implicit biases are associations that are made quickly that affect our perceptions, judgments, and behavior [3]. They may be based on physical or social characteristics associated with race or ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, certain job characteristics, academic institutions, and/or fields of study. Developing an understanding of subtle unintentional behaviors based on unconscious bias is an element of effective gender advocacy [4]. While efforts to minimize the impact of implicit bias plays an important role in promoting equity and inclusion, solutions need to be centered on structuring policies and procedures that minimize the potential for behaviors and attitudes of individuals to promote equity and inclusion [5].

In 2015, the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) created an Advocates and Allies program through funding from the National Science Foundation (Grant No. 1500604) titled, “Engaging Male Colleagues in Institutional Transformation for the Advancement of Women Faculty.” The Advocates and Allies (A&A) project at RIT is based on an innovative approach designed by North Dakota State University to involve faculty men intentionally in the transformation of

departmental cultures and practices [6]. The approach is specifically designed for academic settings to support men faculty, in consultation with women faculty, in gender-equity efforts and includes two essential components:

- Recognize the implicit and explicit intersectional manifestations of gendered discrimination
- Effectively and systematically generate individual behaviors and institutional policies that interrupt inequities and foster gender justice

The workshop “Equity and Inclusion Considerations in the Work of Academic Governance” was developed by A&A at RIT for RIT’s Academic Senate to understand how they may inadvertently create inequities and present barriers to inclusion. The workshop content considers equity and inclusion through the lens of gender, specifically examining challenges for women, while conveying that strategies to address equity and inclusion for women faculty are also effective for other underrepresented populations in academia.

Importance of Inclusion

The representation of women faculty on RIT’s Academic Senate has improved in recent years from women representing 32% of senators in 2010 to 37% in 2020. The current representation is in line with the representation of full-time women faculty at RIT. Women faculty have reported a reluctance to serve on the Academic Senate. Women are at the table, but are their voices being heard? Are they merely serving but not empowered to act as agents of change? A review of the representation of women faculty on the Senate’s standing committees revealed an alignment with gendered roles. Women tended to serve on committees focused on community support, such as Diversity & Inclusion, Academic Support, and curriculum-related committees. Men were over-represented on committees traditionally associated with power, such as Senate Leadership and Resource Allocation & Budget.

As noted above, women faculty reported a reluctance to serve on Academic Senate, which is consistent with women’s reluctance to pursue leadership in public sector government at both the federal and local levels [7]. A 2020 report about the gender gap in local government found that the percentage of women who are policymakers at the federal and state levels is approximately 24% and 25% at the local level [4]. The main challenge is that women are not running for office. A 2018 study identified barriers women face in running for office [5]:

- They perceive the electoral process as highly competitive and biased.
- They are less likely to believe they are qualified to run for office.
- They are less confident and more risk-averse than men.
- They are not encouraged to run for office.
- They have more responsibilities in the home, such as childcare and household tasks.

Participation in government often means adopting a more masculine style of communication [6], [7]. Women may be deterred by negative stereotypes and prejudices and have a lower desire to be in the spotlight [8], [9]. The participation of women faculty in academic governance may be impacted by these same barriers.

To promote equity and inclusion in the work of academic governance at RIT, a workshop was held for the Academic Senate and standing committees. The session goals were for participants to understand the role of social justice and equity in terms of setting policy and how the Academic Senate might inadvertently create inequities and to identify ways to foster more inclusivity within the Academic Senate itself.

Workshop Description

The components of the workshop included a discussion of the importance of equity and inclusion in the work of academic governance, an overview of unconscious bias, considerations for equity and inclusion in the development of academic policy, and strategies for promoting equity and inclusion. Case studies were used in small group facilitated discussions. The case studies assisted participants to develop an awareness of how unconscious bias may manifest in meetings, how it can influence the creation and implementation of policy, and what individuals can do to address it.

To launch the session, participants were asked to share thoughts about the role of the Academic Senate in promoting equity and inclusion at the university. Fig. 1 includes responses from the participants. Not all of the text in this graphic is legible. The intent is to demonstrate how Google “Jamboard” was used in a virtual workshop to promote interactivity.

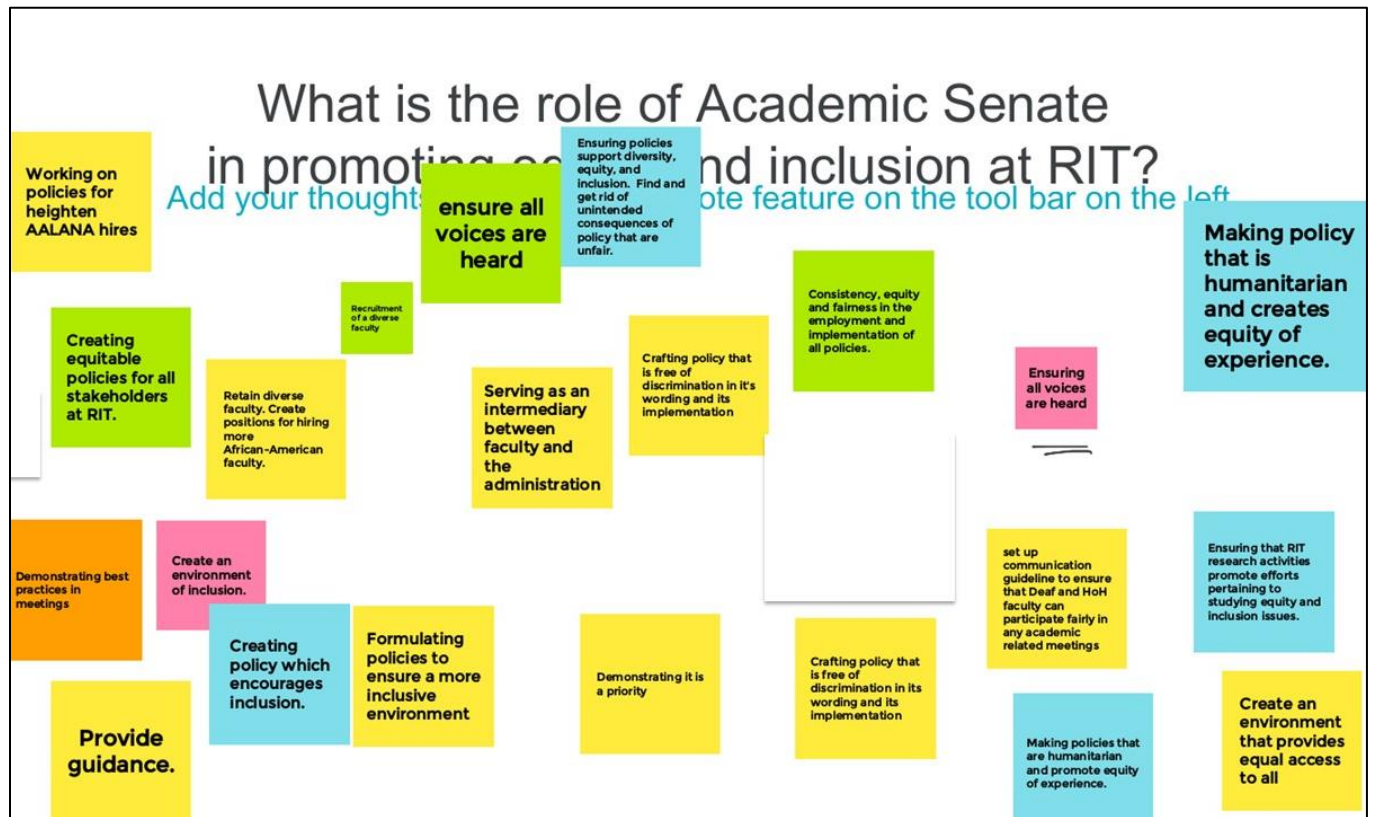


Fig. 1. Workshop participant responses to the introductory question of the role of Academic Senate in promoting equity & inclusion at RIT.

Unconscious Bias

The workshop included an overview of unconscious bias and the impact it has on judgment and behaviors, using resources from the organization Lean In (<https://leanin.org/>). Their mission is to "...help women achieve their ambitions and work to create an equal world" [8]. It was emphasized that everyone has unconscious biases. For example, while men may exhibit behaviors and judgments based on unconscious biases towards women, women may as well. Unconscious biases that impact women in the workplace were described. These include [9]

- Likeability bias: women face a social penalty when they assert themselves. Men are expected to be assertive. Women are expected to be kind and communal. When they are assertive, they are viewed negatively.
- Performance Bias: when gender is removed from decisions, bias is reduced. For example: when blind resumes are reviewed, women are selected more often.
- Maternal bias: mothers are viewed as less committed to careers and can intensify performance bias. It was noted that men also face parental bias.
- Attribution bias: women's contributions are seen as less valuable. They often get talked over in meetings. Women are less likely to be presumed the leader of a group.
- Affinity bias: we gravitate to people like ourselves. Hiring managers spend more time interviewing candidates who are like themselves.
- Double Discrimination and Intersectionality: women who have multiple identities can face biases due to other identities. These can amplify the impact. Race + Gender \neq Experience of Race + Experience of Gender

It was conveyed through the workshop that the disadvantages faced by women faculty are part of a systemic problem. To create change around a systemic problem, we need to examine the advantageous side of the system. Advantage is generated when systems or institutions are, or have historically been, dominated by a particular group. When one group is disadvantaged in a system, by necessity, another group is systemically advantaged.

Equity & Inclusion in Policy Development

Equity in the Work of Academic Governance

Historically, academic institutions were built for and by white men. It is important to reconsider our academic structures and revise them to support equity and inclusion for all. To combat individual behaviors or judgments based on unconscious bias, it is important to shape policies and structures to minimize the impact of these biases. According to Payne and Vuletich,

Understanding implicit bias as a cultural phenomenon, rather than a fixed set of beliefs, has important policy implications. Most notably, the best approaches for reducing the harm of implicit bias should aim at changing social contexts rather than changing people's minds. [5]

Equity concerns in policy arise any time there is a lack of clarity and/or lack of transparency. RIT participates in the COACHE faculty climate survey [10]. Results from the 2019 survey

indicated women faculty were significantly more likely to report less satisfaction with the clarity of tenure criteria and standards. Faculty who have stronger professional networks benefit from career assistance and direction provided by their connections. Faculty who are underrepresented may have smaller networks to provide this support. Thus the execution and implementation of policies related to career advancement need to be carefully considered. Who ensures policies are enacted equitably? Are “objective” criteria set forth really objective? Situations that involve negotiation and power dynamic differentials (i.e., junior faculty and their leadership) and individual decision making (versus collective decision making) should be minimized, avoided, or structured in a way that decisions are clearly justified. It is also known that decisions made hastily and without input from diverse voices are more likely to be biased [11].

Any policy that requires negotiation may be problematic as women tend to have lower self-efficacy and satisfaction related to interactions involving negotiation [12]. Women and unrepresented populations also express concern about using policies that may be perceived as a lack of commitment to their careers. A survey was conducted at RIT in 2019 about family leave policies. At the time, there was no policy related to modification of duties due to the birth or adoption of a child. Faculty were asked if they negotiated a modification of duties, i.e., course release, the release of service assignments, etc. Only 61% of those who recently had a child reported negotiating a modification of duties. The number one reason provided for not doing so was being unaware that this could be negotiated. The second most common reason was concern that such negotiation would impact chances for tenure or promotion.

During the workshop, research studies on gender biases that impact faculty were shared. In tenure and promotion cases, recommendation letters have been shown gender bias. These include [13], [14], [15]:

- Greater use of superlatives and agentive terms to describe men (e.g., outstanding researcher)
- Use of gendered adjectives or qualifiers for women (i.e., as a woman)
- Shorter letters for women that contain fewer details about their specific skills as researchers
- Use of relational terms to describe women (i.e., compassionate, etc.)

There is also evidence of gender bias in student evaluations of teaching effectiveness that, for better or worse, is often factored into tenure and promotion decisions. Student evaluations suffer from issues similar to letters of recommendation where gendered descriptors are often used to describe women versus men. An interactive component of the workshop asked participants about words that may be more likely to show up on teaching evaluations for men versus women. A website called “Gendered Language in Teaching Reviews” by Ben Schmidt uses the Rate My Professor website as the source for an interactive chart that displays the usage of given descriptors by gender and by discipline [16]. An example of the word “brilliant” is shown in Fig. 2.

Inclusion in the Work of Academic Governance

To provide a supportive and welcoming environment that engages all voices, academic governance groups should develop expectations for discussion and interaction that all participants agree to honor. The workshop team shared guidelines for *Establishing Meeting*

Ground Rules for Effective Communication [17]. The use of parliamentary procedure, such as Robert's Rules of Order, may have advantages and disadvantages. Those who are unfamiliar with the rules may be at a disadvantage. Efforts should be made to ensure all participants understand any guidelines for discussion and decision-making.

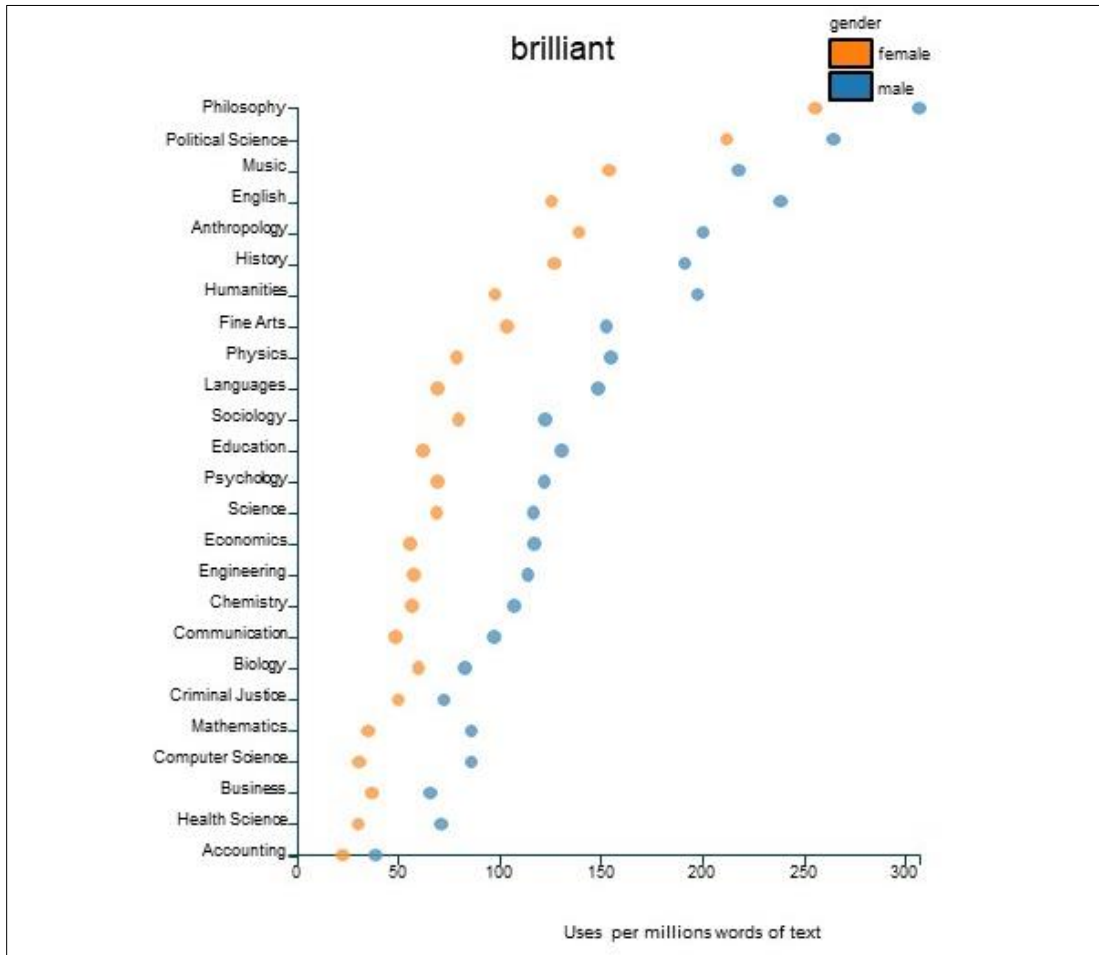


Fig. 2. Example of gender differences found in the text of teaching reviews from Rate My Professor. Figure reproduced with permission from [16].

Meetings of RIT's Academic Senate for the 2020 academic year and this workshop were held virtually utilizing the Zoom platform due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Benefits of the online platform, particularly for deaf and hard of hearing faculty, included the raise hand feature to signal a desire to participate in the discussion and minimal distractions from side conversations.

Members of the Women's Caucus of the Academic Senate at RIT were recently asked to share their experiences on the Academic Senate. Frustrations that were expressed included a protocol for discussion that is not well understood and the tendency of some senators to dominate the conversation. Satisfying outcomes from involvement with the Academic Senate included a

network of support and connection for women; finding their voice, formation of a new Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Standing Committee; and civil dialogues where everyone felt comfortable to speak up, contributing to a wide range of ideas. These women were motivated to serve on the Academic Senate to effect positive change, to have a voice, and to reinforce women's voices on campus.

Interactive Discussions

The workshop included two interactive discussions implemented through facilitated breakout sessions with small groups. One discussion focused on inclusion in meetings and the other on equity in policy.

Breakout Discussion #1: Meeting Dynamics

The first breakout discussion examined scenarios developed by LeanIn.org [9] that demonstrate common biases women face in the workplace. Faculty who assign group projects could use this exercise to develop students' awareness of unconscious bias and what to do when they encounter bias during interactions with their team. Scenarios were taken from LeanIn.org's *50 Ways to Fight Bias* digital program and included

In a meeting, a woman strongly disagrees with a man about how to approach a problem. He says, "We can't talk about this anymore. She's getting too emotional."

Your manager complains to you after a woman on your team was interrupted by her children during a Zoom meeting, saying, "That was really unprofessional."

During a presentation, a Black woman is repeatedly interrupted by someone who has less expertise on the subject she is talking about.

Each group was asked to select a scenario and discuss the following:

What is your reaction to the situation?

Have you heard or seen something like this before?

- Why does this matter?
- Why does this happen?
- What would you do?

Before the group discussions were launched, participants were given an overview of how to be an effective bystander from *A Guide to Bystander Awareness & Responses* [18], a resource developed by the AdvanceRIT office at RIT. This tip sheet is useful for understanding the importance of active bystanders in addressing unconscious biases and provides concrete suggestions for how to be an effective bystander. General pointers include

- Know yourself.
- Doing something is almost always better than doing nothing.

- Decide whether you want simply to stop the escalation or also to educate.

Groups were given 15 minutes to discuss a scenario or two. Each facilitator took notes and later reported to all workshop participants about their group's discussion, including why they selected the scenario, if participants reported seeing something like this before, and the suggestions for action that were shared.

Breakout Discussion #2: Policy

The second breakout discussion focused on equity concerns in policy. Participants were asked to reflect on ways that unintended bias may exist in policy. They were asked to consider the following:

- Are there unintentional bias implications in RIT's policies?
 - Unintended bias in policy language
 - Differential power dynamics
 - Need for faculty to negotiate
 - Lack of clarity
 - Lack of transparency
 - Dependence on assistance or direction from one's network
- Could a policy be unbiased yet not address implicit biases inherent in the criteria?
 - "Objective" criteria: is it truly objective?
 - Importance of execution and implementation
 - Who ensures policies are enacted equitably?
 - Check box mentality
- Discussion questions:
 - What concerns do you have?
 - What barriers exist to addressing these concerns?
 - How do we overcome barriers to addressing this?

Facilitators were given policy examples for discussion in the event that the group did not identify a policy on their own, such as the tenure clock extension policy at RIT for parents with the birth or adoption of a child, and the recently enacted tenure clock extensions related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID tenure clock extension: Policy E05.2.c.4.d:

In extraordinary cases, tenure-track faculty may request an extension of the probationary period for extenuating circumstances prior to September 1 of the year of the faculty member's tenure review. A confidential written request, detailing the reasons for the extension, shall be submitted to the department head. The department head forwards the request, along with his/her written recommendation to the dean. The dean forwards the request, the department head's recommendation, and his/her written recommendation to the provost. The provost shall review the request and recommendations and make a determination. The faculty member, department head, and dean will be notified in writing

of the extension decision and in the case of a positive decision, the projected tenure review date.[19]

The COVID tenure clock extension policy is “opt-in” versus “opt-out.” Although no approval is needed for a faculty member to receive the extension (they only need to notify their department chair), the opt-in requirement may cause a faculty member to feel they are asking for special treatment or be concerned they will look less committed to their career. Instead of asking vulnerable faculty to opt-in, opt-out policies provide all faculty additional time and place the burden of “opting-out” on those likely to be in privileged positions [20].

Inclusion of Diverse Voices in Academic Governance

Participants were asked to consider what personal actions they could take to encourage more diverse participation in academic governance. They were asked to think of several people they would consider nominating to serve on the Academic Senate and then review the list to see if the individuals provided a diverse perspective based on their identity. If not, it was suggested they revise their list to provide diverse perspectives. They were asked to consider which faculty from both of their lists would make the best candidates for the Academic Senate and why. A firm that RIT has employed to conduct searches for leadership positions uses this technique when asking committee members to nominate candidates. In reviewing these lists, they have found that the best candidates are often on the revised lists.

In considering what they could do to encourage involvement in academic governance, participants were reminded that diverse faculty, such as women and those from underrepresented populations, need to balance service commitments. When asking these faculty members to consider serving on the Academic Senate, suggest tips for negotiating a reduction in other commitments. Tell the faculty the contributions they would bring to senate: highlight the attributes that would make them a good representative and the need for diverse voices on the senate. Describe how participation in Academic Senate is a valuable leadership opportunity and can assist with growing their professional network at the university. Share your own experiences of serving on Academic Senate and the importance of its work.

Conclusion of the Workshop

At the conclusion of the workshop, participants were asked to think of one thing they are going to do when they see bias or one thing that they have learned that they are going to share with others. They were asked to write this down and commit to taking this one action to promote equity & inclusion in the work of the Academic Senate. Examples of comments to the prompt “I commit to making Academic Senate more equitable and inclusive by...” included

- Nominate with an eye toward diversity
- Invite contributions from senators who do not speak regularly
- Listen carefully
- Try to identify inequity in policy language
- Hold yourself and others accountable
- As a person who likes to speak, I will go against my instinct to raise my hand and wait for others to speak.

- Back up others and amplify

Evaluation of the Workshop

There were 81 participants from the RIT Academic Senate and its Standing Committees. Of those who completed the evaluation survey (N=20), 85% strongly agreed that attending this session was a valuable use of their time. Respondents reported the most useful aspects of the workshop as the breakout sessions, having all of the information in one place, committing to an action, and the shared experience as an opportunity to develop a common language and tools. One respondent noted: “Being able to do so is very important for a unit to be able to raise topics of conversation. This is primarily why such sessions are generally more impactful.”

Suggestions for improvement included developing scenarios of unconscious bias specific to an academic setting, more time for discussion, providing materials in advance, having a handout of the PowerPoint slides as a guide during the session. One participant suggested: “Every leader who must review and evaluate faculty performance must undergo similar sessions. I also suggest each leader get evaluated by their staff more than once every five years.” There was strong sentiment that learning opportunities related to equity and inclusion need to continue.

Conclusion

The workshop that is described in this paper focused on developing an understanding of the role of equity and inclusion in the work of academic governance. The understanding of this role was developed using research, university data, and case studies with interactive discussions. The workshop content, resources, and activities can be used for other groups. For example, at RIT the Software Engineering department offers elements of this workshop to students in their freshmen seminar. Elements of the workshop have been used by the Advocates & Allies program at RIT to develop men as allies for gender equity among faculty by developing an understanding of unconscious bias and the role it manifests in the equity and inclusion of diverse individuals. However such training often focuses on individual behaviors and judgments. A focus on changing structures, such as academic policies, can have a more profound impact in preventing or minimizing the impact of unconscious biases.

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Biographies

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