

Reducing Unconscious Bias

A Resource For Hiring Committee Members, Fall 2009

Las Positas College

This resource was developed by members of The Campus Change Network. We hope you find it useful. Use of this resource is voluntary. If you have any feedback, suggestions, comments please post them to the CCN blog. We will be soliciting feedback as we develop and ne this resource.

<http://campuschangenetworklaspositascollege.blogspot.com/>

Un-con-scious: not perceived at the level of awareness; occurring below the level of conscious thought

Bi-as: a particular tendency or inclination, esp. one that prevents unprejudiced consideration of a question

Unconscious Bias

Participating in the hiring process for staff, faculty, and administrators is one of the most important ways we can serve our students and the larger College community. It is an obligation we all take it very seriously. Las Positas College is committed to processes that encourage and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion – all essential to a healthy, vibrant, and dynamic institution.

The process should assure prospective employees that they are being given full, fair, and impartial consideration by hiring committees.

In order to guarantee that fairness and impartiality are maintained throughout all phases of the hiring process, committees should be cognizant of a number of dynamics as they work - individually and together as a committee. First and foremost, committee members must recognize the potential for the unconscious bias that may influence them as they proceed. All of us have natural, built-in biases - things that make us feel more or less comfortable. These biases are not necessarily bad unless they prevent us from being open to “new and different” perspectives or prevent us from discarding the stereotypes and prejudices we have held about others. These biases are most often unconscious and they have the power to negatively affect relationships – long and short term, formal and informal. Recognizing and understanding these biases is essential to building the kind of college community we seek and to hiring employees who can contribute to it.

Many people feel most comfortable interacting with others who are just like themselves. It is natural to look for and favor applicants who will be a “good fit”, who can help to create smooth and effective working relationships. At the same time, this tendency has the potential to lead to premature or unfounded judgment. For instance, consider common items on a printed application: a person’s name, place of residence, schools a person attended, previous employers – one or all of these might cause someone to wonder if the person would be a “good fit”. Likewise, during an interview, committees might be uncomfortable with the way some candidates dress, or speak, or how much time it takes them to answer a question, or how they regard the committee, or how formal or informal candidates may appear or, even, their physical appearance. Few would claim aloud that these things caused them concern, but they are often unconscious or unspoken concerns.

All of us must be willing to be honest in reviewing applications and in interviewing candidates. We need to address unconscious biases directly and with conviction. We must be able to verbalize the concerns we have, not ignore them or pretend that our concerns don’t exist. By addressing the concerns “head on”, everyone benefits; everyone learns and grows from these experiences and our students and our institution benefit most of all.

Roles and Responsibilities of a Hiring Committee Member Regarding Unconscious Bias

Committees are formed with the belief that the views and perspectives from different individuals can lead to better decisions than a single person. As committee members we contribute input from both our constituents groups as well as our personal perspectives. In this way, committees take into consideration a variety of needs, values, and frames of reference and balance those with the needs of the College. One of the most advantageous aspects of hiring committees is the increased ability to recognize and reduce unconscious bias. We all have unconscious bias and a properly functioning committee will help its members recognize and face that bias in a collegial and productive manner, helping to check each other's blind spots.

Recognizing and facing unconscious bias in ourselves or in our colleagues can be an uncomfortable process. Best practices suggest committees formulate internal guidelines or processes before screening, interviews, or deliberations begin so that members can raise the issue professionally and productively when they sense unconscious bias. It is not only your right but your responsibility as a committee member to address issues of bias if you feel they are inappropriately affecting the hiring process.

Tips for Open and Professional Discussion of Bias In the Hiring Committee Setting

Committee members should develop an environment of trust and cooperation so that they can work together. The committee Chair plays an important role in setting and maintaining the climate of a committee.

If possible, the committee should collaboratively develop ground rules for the expectations/ responsibilities of members, how they will raise contentious issues and handle disagreements.

Committee members might want to share their priorities for the position based on the Job Description before the screening of applications starts.

Keep deliberations about candidates "skills based" rather than "feeling based".

Be cautious of phrases such as: "I just don't like him", "I don't think she is a good fit", which are more feeling based and less skills based.

Some skills may be more affective rather than cognitive or based on experience. For example, "ability to motivate students" or "work well in a team" can be difficult to assess empirically. When assessing and discussing such affective skills we need to be especially mindful of unconscious bias.

When pointing out potential bias try to avoid an accusatory tone or aggressive words. The idea is to create a moment of reflection, not to have a confrontation.

In a first-level interview, be cautious about assessing a candidate for "fit". This can often be used to validate bias and is not the purpose of first-level interviews. First level interviews are intended primarily to assess skill level.

Be open to the possibility that someone on the committee may point out biases you might have.

Sometimes what you see as bias others might see as valid concerns. Ideally, the committee will openly and honestly consider the possibility that unconscious bias is at work.

"Our brains are wired to reflexively categorize and stereotype people, often in ways we consciously reject as false"
-Barbara Reskin in Unconsciousness Raising

Starter Phrases for Opening a Dialogue about Unconscious Bias

Raising the possibility of unconscious bias with colleagues can be uncomfortable and may even be seen as inflammatory. Finding the right words and tone can be difficult. In response to requests for “starter phrases”, here is a short list of ways you might start a dialogue about unconscious bias.

“Does anyone else share my concern?”

“I’d just like to throw this out there.”

“Can we discuss/consider....?”

“Can you tell me again why you rated this candidate so low?”

“Am I missing something about the qualifications of this candidate that makes them unqualified?”

“My understanding is that we are screening for qualifications, not fit.”

“When you say, ‘I just don’t like them’ I wonder what you mean”.

Examples of Diversity Questions to ask in Interview

We have received numerous questions about how to ask better diversity questions in an interview. It seems that many people want to get away from the generic “values diversity” question. Many people want to drill underneath the socially acceptable answer to see what a candidate brings in terms of diversity and inclusiveness to the position but are unclear how to do so. What are the candidates’ actual skills and knowledge in this area as it relates to the job? The following types of questions are not only legally permissible but also get to a candidates’ relevant abilities and experience.

-Are you familiar with the demographic makeup of our student body? What do you understand about the demographic/cultural makeup of our student population? Have you had any past experiences working with or interacting with different cultural/ethnic groups in our region? Have you had any past experiences working or interacting with groups or individuals from cultural or ethnic background different from your own?

-Have you ever had to handle a problem in an academic setting that stemmed from the fact that students came from ethnic/cultural backgrounds that were different from yours or different from each others’? What was the problem and how did you handle the situation?

-How do/would you infuse issues of (diversity, global perspectives, poverty etc) into your course? How would you handle a situation where lab partners have cultural differences? How would you handle a fundamentalist Christian voicing opposition to evolution?

My experience at Las Positas College over the years has been positive and beneficial in all aspects, except one. I have found it to be very apparent that there is a lack of diversity within the staff. I believe this has put me at a disadvantage for being open to new experiences and understanding of different cultures, styles of teaching and attitudes. Understanding different cultures and perspectives is an important aspect of an education. Being that this is the case, I truly wish the staff at Las Positas College showed more diversity to give students a new outlook. A more diverse faculty would give students a more beneficial and positive experience not to mention openness to new things, as well as learning to embrace change. I know changing the homogenous representation of the staff could be a challenge. For the future of Las Positas College, I hope that unconscious bias is consistently brought up and talked about in order to prevent it from sneaking into the decision of hiring a new faculty member. I know change can bring on discomfort but I have come to the understanding that discomfort with change is only temporary and getting through it and adapting to the change shapes and broadens one’s character that much more.

-Megan Snyder, LPC Graduate, Class of 2009