Embracing Inclusion in Faculty Hiring and Retention

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11:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

Notes by Holly Willis

On March 25, 2019, Lori Nishiura Mackenzie, the Executive Director for the Clayman Institute for Gender Research at Stanford University and Co-founder of the Stanford VMware Women’s Leadership Innovation Lab, visited USC to talk about faculty hiring processes with a presentation titled “Embracing Inclusion in Faculty Hiring and Retention.”

Mackenzie started by recognizing that broad change related to equity and diversity across an entire campus can be challenging. In place of a radical overhaul of a particular campus and its climate, she advocated instead for “small wins” that accrue. Her talk, bolstered with extensive research, presented five ways we might score these small wins in the context of faculty hiring and retention. However, Mackenzie began her talk by outlining the barriers we need to address.

First, Mackenzie discussed bias, defining it as an error in assessing talent. These errors are in turn supported by stereotypes, which function as cognitive shortcuts in information processing. Mackenzie explained that every culture has at least three frames used to categorize people and, for the US, those frames are gender, race, and age; she added that our beliefs affected by bias and stereotypes happen largely outside our conscious awareness.

Mackenzie went on to say that biases are often more likely to assert themselves in four circumstances, namely 1) when we are overwhelmed with information; 2) when we are in a hurry to make decisions; 3) when the criteria for making evaluations are unclear; and 4) when we do not have a consistent process to guide group decision-making. When these circumstances are present, we need to pay extra attention to the role bias may play. For faculty engaged in hiring, these circumstances are quite familiar!

In addition to bias and stereotypes, Mackenzie addressed the relationship between gender and language. “The most common way that we transmit and maintain culture is through language,” she said, explaining that while we tend to feel that our word choices are made independently, often the words we use are based on stereotypes. Communal terms – words such as warm, tactful, helpful, sensitive, caring – are often attributed to women while agentic terms – such as intelligent, determined, ambitious, outspoken – are often attributed to men.

These biases in language in turn can prompt committees, often unwittingly, to make questionable choices within the hiring process. For example, a committee might unconsciously set a higher bar for certain candidates, asking for further evidence in order to regard a candidate as equally competent with others in the pool. Similarly, a committee might scrutinize certain candidates more carefully by introducing extra criteria or shifting the criteria based on race, gender, or age. There may be a tendency to over-value agency and under-value communal qualities as well. Finally, women and people of color may suffer what is known as the “likability penalty,” which is the idea that while a powerful presence is deemed notable among some candidates, it can be construed as “bossy” among others. Women and people of color are expected – somehow – to be at once likable and nonthreatening, but powerful as well. The contradiction can be impossible to overcome. Worse, many people are not aware of these dynamics and their impact on thinking and decision-making at all.

Mackenzie offered five strategies to overcome the barriers that she outlined. First, she suggested that faculty create a diverse applicant pool in the hiring process by describing positions broadly in ads; avoiding a laundry list of requirements that can make jobs out of reach for diverse candidates; being wary of narrow searches; and considering ways that our institution can bring people to campus who might find the institution too intimidating to even apply.

Second, before evaluating applicants, discuss and find alignment on criteria for the position and be sure to avoid criteria based on style or personality, focusing instead on performance. Consider the ways in which some people may have had advantages that can appear as markers of success. For example, certain candidates may have earned awards that were in turn based on bias. Finally, read the work of those applying rather than simply viewing a CV.

Third, Mackenzie invited us to attend to the use of language and the ways in which communal and agentic terms may be used. For faculty, this can mean reviewing letters of recommendation carefully. If we are in the process of hiring, reading these letters with an awareness of unconscious bias can be useful. Similarly, when we are writing letters on behalf of our own students, we would do well to be sure that we are not unconsciously falling into gender stereotypes when we describe them.

Fourth, Mackenzie said that during the screening process, we should slow down and develop a consistent approach; monitor our criteria carefully during the process; and be on the alert for bias in recommendation letters, teaching evaluations, and other indicators of performance.

And fifth, during the interview process, once again, be consistent and stick to the criteria. Monitor behavior: research shows that women are more frequently interrupted during their job talks than men, for example, which in turn affects their ability to deliver a great presentation. Finally, structure faculty discussions of candidates to get input from everyone.

Mackenzie’s talk was illustrated with abundant research, with report after report indicating the ways in which bias and stereotypes function to affect evaluations of candidates.

Overall, Mackenzie’s presentation was a valuable introduction to the abundant research that shows the chilling impact of bias and stereotypes in hiring, especially in relation to race and gender. Her “small wins” approach offers a viable step forward, inviting us all to make even small, consistent shifts that will help reshape university culture.

Resources

* VMware Women’s Leadership Innovation Lab https://womensleadership.stanford.edu/
* “[Minimizing Gender Biases in Modern Workplaces](https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/publications/reducing-gender-biases-modern-workplaces-small-wins-approach):” A ‘Small Wins’ Approach to Organizational Change,” Shelley Correll, *Gender & Society,* December 1, 2017, Vol. 31, Issue 6.Mackenzie, L., Wehner, J., Correll, S. (2019, Jan 11). [*Why Most Performance Evaluations are Biased, and How to Fix Them*](https://hbr.org/2019/01/why-most-performance-evaluations-are-biased-and-how-to-fix-them), Harvard Business Review.
* Mackenzie, L., Correll, S. (2018, Oct.1). [*Two Powerful Ways Managers Can Curb Implicit Biases*](https://hbr.org/2018/10/two-powerful-ways-managers-can-curb-implicit-biases), Harvard Business Review.
* Phillips, K. (2014, Oct. 1). [*How Diversity Makes Us Smarter*](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-diversity-makes-us-smarter/), Scientific American.