

# The Dangerous Mind: Unconscious Bias In Higher Education

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The challenge of accessing higher education doesn't disappear with the arrival of a college acceptance letter. Even those fortunate enough to gain admission to college are not necessarily guaranteed full access for a number of reasons — some students will struggle academically; others might struggle with economic woes or illness. But beyond these well recognized difficulties, new evidence suggests that women and minorities may face an even more troubling barrier in their pursuits of higher education: unconscious gender and racial biases that pervade academia.

A recent sociological study, led by Katherine L. Milkman of the University of Pennsylvania, set out to investigate how patterns of access to faculty mentors are affected by race and gender. Milkman's research, published in 2014, addressed the question of how race and gender affect the ability of college students to form meaningful relationships with professors. Milkman's team sent emails to a

diverse group of 6,500 professors teaching in 89 disciplines at 259 institutions of higher education in the United States, including top-tier universities. Each email was identical in content but differed in the name signed at the bottom of the message; the **names used** were chosen to reflect typical Caucasian, Black, Hispanic, Indian and Chinese names — names like Brad Anderson, Meredith Roberts, Lamar Washington, LaToya Brown, Juanita Martinez, Deepak Patel, Sonali Desai, Chang Wong and Mei Chen.

The **results** were deplorable. Somewhat unsurprisingly, a greater number of responses were sent to the fictional members of the Caucasian male category. Chinese female names — the category that got the lowest number of responses — received 29 percent fewer responses than Caucasian male names. Professors at private institutions and in traditionally high-paying subject areas, like business, were particularly biased in their response rates. The important conclusion to draw from this study is that, although many academics portray themselves as progressive, their **unconscious bias** still acts as a race barrier for students looking for mentors. Perhaps most surprisingly, even minority faculty members displayed the same biases as their white counterparts, showing that such psychological predispositions create barriers that transcend academic or personal backgrounds.

These findings of unconscious, or implicit, bias are part of a larger body of work by civil rights activists and scholars that finds modern racism to be of a much more subtle nature than the widespread, blatant racism that existed a generation ago. Stereotypes, according to **social cognition theory**, are expectations that influence the way individuals process new information. In other words, stereotypes make it much harder for people to see qualities in others that go against the ideas that they already hold about a certain group of people. In a timed word-association test, Harvard Professor Mahzarin Banaji presented positive words (“peace”) and negative words (“war”) with images of white and black faces and found that subjects could more quickly match positive words with white faces than with black faces. This study led psychologists to believe that unconscious bias plays a major role in modern-day racism. The phenomenon of unconscious bias is manifest in Milkman’s study, wherein university professors unconsciously associated minority students with qualities that reduced the likelihood that they would respond to the students.

The **results** of the Milkman study also show that certain academic fields were especially unlikely to respond to emails with names signifying a minority group. While the social sciences and humanities demonstrated some amount of discrimination, fields such as business, education, health sciences and engineering demonstrated relatively larger degrees of bias. Since the latter subject areas typically lead to higher-paying job prospects for graduates, these results suggest that professors’ biases may play a large hand in perpetuating the economic disadvantages that minorities already face.

The brunt of racial biases, however, ended up bearing most heavily on East Asian and Indian students, who are **more highly represented** in higher education than most other minority groups. In the Milkman study, Asian-American students received the smallest amount of responses out of any group. Since Asian-Americans are often stereotyped in America as a model minority, it may come as a surprise that they face the most discrimination. Yet for Asian-Americans, neither the model minority label nor relatively high representation in higher education seems to ensure better treatment from professors.

To their credit, universities haven’t been entirely blind to issues of diversity on their campuses. In response to the widespread racial gaps in academia, many universities have made conscious efforts to diversify. Brown University, for instance, established the Office of Institutional Diversity to create a more diverse student and faculty body. The office markets to and recruits “high-quality students from

a diverse range of background experiences” and “review[s] rates of dismissal, academic probation and graduation across various group categories such as race, gender and socioeconomic class.” Efforts like these, while extremely important, leave the problem of implicit bias largely unaddressed. The results of the Milkman study should prompt universities to reconsider their efforts to diversify campuses. It is clear that diversity in numbers, albeit a worthy goal, does not sufficiently ensure that all students have equal access to educational opportunities like mentorship — especially since Milkman’s study found that minority professors harbor implicit bias. Instead, universities may need to look at the problems caused by institutional racism: the idea that racism manifests itself in institutions within a society and self-perpetuates.

A more diverse faculty and student body are essential to creating an even playing field, but universities must take active steps to undermine the implicit biases that pervade their campuses. Though it’s a daunting task, there are some strategies that make a meaningful impact. **Research** shows that exposing people to counter-stereotypes and encouraging them to consciously resist stereotypes can decrease their implicit biases. Unconscious bias training exists in the **corporate world**, focusing on making employees more aware of their minds’ unconscious stereotyping of minorities. Corporations have picked up on the prevalence of bias, with over 20 percent of large US employers with diversity programs providing unconscious bias training, according to the Wall Street Journal.

As universities attempt to promote equality for people of all races, genders and ethnicities, they must combat the unconscious bias that plagues relationships between students and professors. To do this, they should adopt unconscious bias training and help assist all professors counter their biases. This type of effort to counter pervasive implicit biases is an important step to ensuring that minority students aren’t left behind after setting foot on campus.

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*Art by Soraya Ferdman.*