

Recognizing bias as an ethical issue in graduate education

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A female has decided to apply for graduate studies within a male- dominated discipline. She has been accepted to the graduate program and has been assigned a male advisor. While working on her first research project along with another male student under the same advisor, she begins to notice subtle derogative comments directed to her by both her peer and the advisor. She initially feels uncomfortable because of the comments, but decides to ignore them in hopes that they will not continue. One month later, her peers and advisor are still making comments, and now the female student begins to wonder how she can approach the men without appearing to be emotional about the comments.

Would you consider this behavior inappropriate? If so, is it inappropriate because of gender issues or could it also involve classism or even issues related to differences in race?

In this module we address the ethical issues facing women and men from under-represented populations in graduate education. Under-represented groups can include men and women based on their ethnic, religious, cultural, religious backgrounds, or physical abilities, and include silent and even invisible disabilities which can cause them to be marginalized from the dominant attending an institution of higher education. Silent excluded groups may be those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Voice must be given to all to be inclusive. Issues related to inclusion and diversity are based on historical social patterns, and relate to faculty expectations of students which can affect family responsibilities and career possibilities. After describing some of the difficulties facing under-represented groups, we suggest that mentoring is crucial to the success of women and men of under-represented groups. We describe and discuss mentoring along with special considerations that mentors encounter when working with women and individuals from traditionally excluded groups.

The role of gender differences within graduate education

The issues facing women in graduate education are deep-rooted in the past. Thousands of years ago women were the prominent food gatherers and producers of material goods, which led them to be highly respected individuals. However, at some unknown point in time, a gender power shift gradually occurred and now modern day notions warrant men to be the principal producers (Campbell and Storo, 1994). There are numerous theories that attempt to explain this shift, most prominently being the role of

women as child-bearers. If a woman takes on the role of motherhood some people believe that she would not perform adequately in her other roles such as in the workplace because her mental concentration lies elsewhere. However, no single theory for the cause of discrimination is widely accepted. The differences in men and women's historical roles have played into societal issues within the United States. There are no clear scientifically verified differences between the ability of women and men to function in higher education. Gender makes us different biologically, but does not imply that one gender can succeed in a particular field better than the other. While constructing the human genome, modern-day scientists have not discovered a gene related to the ability to succeed in 'science' related fields (Campbell and Storo, 1994; NAS 2007).

Gender inequalities relating to education began as early as the 10th century when universities were established by and for men, particularly for the sons of land owners. This trend continued well into the 11th and 12th centuries while the renaissance universities continued educating sons of wealthy upper class citizens and leaders of society. Men attending Harvard during the 1800s argued that because men have larger brains they therefore were more intelligent than women. Yet they felt women had a head large enough for the emotion of love (Takaki, 1993). In the mid-late 19th century land grant universities (LGUs) were developed to educate the commoners and farmers of the communities, still predominantly men. In addition, few minority males were included. However, the two fundamental ethical values of the land grant universities are the equality of opportunity and the research for the working classes, irrespective of wealth, race, or social status. Unfortunately, problems still exist in regard to gender and origin. These two factors are the most important issues for this particular module.

Low versus high expectations of women and under-represented groups in graduate studies

Two main challenges that face women while in graduate studies in this century are the extremes of low and high expectations by the graduate faculty. In either case, unreasonable expectations can be detrimental to the educational experience and goals. Faculty may inaccurately assume that a woman will be too busy establishing and maintaining home duties or caring for her family, causing her to be unable to put 100% effort into course work and/or projects. A graduate researcher or academic advisor may feel that a female student requires a project that is less physically or emotionally demanding. When compared to their male counterparts, women are called upon less than men during lectures. Often, the questions posed to women are not of the same caliber as those posed to their male classmates. Inappropriate labeling by using terms as 'hon' implies that women are less competent than the men in the same class (Arango and Levey, 1998). When a professor selects women or minority students to respond to a question, inaccurate answers are pointed out more often than if their Caucasian male peers answered incorrectly (Alston-Mills, 2003). At highly selective schools minority female science students have encountered condescending professors who treating them as if they had not met the same entrance requirements as majority students (Malcom, Hall, and Brown, 1976). These actions may cause students of color and women to feel out of place compared to peers. Recent research reveals how very subtle differences in language can activate implicit biases and have a negative effect on women's actual performance

(NAS, 2007). Overly high expectations can be just as unfavorable. The mentor or professor may choose to have the attitude of “let’s show her how difficult this program can be for a woman/minority student” by loading that student with more challenging work than what normally is given to other students. In other words, women or minority students have to prove themselves over and over.

Stereotypes about women in graduate studies

Stereotypes relating to women are prevalent in many facets of life and more specifically higher education. Scenarios of thin Caucasian models representing the physical attributes of women in the world as well as the perceived dumb blonde pictured on billboards selling alcoholic drinks and chicken wings to men plague the media daily. It is unfortunate that women still suffer from a lack of respect and from unequal pay. The media can be charged with imposing these negative stereotypes on women, which can be carried into the rooms of an educational institution. However, contrary to stereotypical views within society, women from all ethnic backgrounds in modern day serve the roles of mother, homemaker, and caretaker as well as successful professional.

Lack of sensitivity issues facing students from under represented groups in graduate studies

Examples of the lack of sensitivity exhibited toward female graduate students by their supervising faculty are abundant. If a female graduate student becomes pregnant during her educational career, she may need to take on fewer projects and/or coursework. She will need time after the birth of a child. As a result, her worth is diminished in the eyes of some faculty and advisors. Some women are more sensitive than others and need to have these subjects addressed to them with greater tact. Finally, if a female graduate student is facing marital or other family problems, she may need time to resolve those issues. Often women are the primary caregiver within families. Both male and female students often experience loneliness; pressure to choose a traditional career, to marry, to remain in, or return to the community of their youth; or face expectations regarding their cultural role. Women who chose to marry during school years may face additional, sometimes more complex problems, conflicting demands and responsibilities than do those women who do not marry or than men do (Malcolm, Hall, and Brown, 1976). In addition, both women and men of under represented minorities sometimes carry the burden of representing their ethnic group and the expectation that they will give back to their group of origin by returning to that community. Moving to new communities can be a sign of success to the broader world, but it can mean giving up frequent interaction in a comfortable, familiar social network.

Matters related to classism facing students from under represented groups in graduate studies

Very often, in academia socio-economic differences are not recognized openly and frankly, but they certainly play an important role in interactions between student and faculty. Faculty may presume that a student from a low socioeconomic background is not

as intelligent as a student from the middle or upper classes. The actual concern may be that the student was not properly prepared for college or does not have the level of confidence that other students may have (Massey, 1992). Asian-Americans tend to fall into a distinct category in terms of stereotypes. Many Americans of the dominant culture consider them as “inassimilable foreigners”, those that will not be fully accepted by American society, even though they are stereotyped as having parents who demand academic excellence from their children. In a true academic setting, they are often stereotyped as the “brainiacs”. Asian-Americans tend to face more struggles than other minorities because of a “distinct set of personal, cultural, and familial values, struggling with ethnic and racial identity, and making decisions about where allegiance lies when the different cultural values conflict” (Choi, Schall and Levey, 1998).

Men and women of color, whether Black, Latina, or Native-American also have concerns common to Caucasian men and women. They face “a perception of what is seen” such as cultural and racial differences. Some instructors compound sexist attitudes towards women of color by assuming such students are slower with learning material (Malcolm Hall, and Brown, 1976). Again faculty expectations, and the student expectations that may be influenced by faculty beliefs, can have a negative effect on student performance (NAS, 2007).

Quiz 1

More than 1 answer can be chosen

- 1. Women and students of minority groups**
 - a. may face both low and high expectation levels within their graduate studies.**
 - b. may be more sensitive to specific issues within their graduate studies.**
 - c. are commonly stereotyped by the media.**
 - d. may be given research projects that are less mentally or physically demanding than what their peers may be working on.**
 - e. all of the above answers are true.**

- 2. Examples of Classism include**
 - a. women withdrawing from the university to become a home maker.**
 - b. differences in religion, culture, educational and socio-economic background**
 - c. the socioeconomic background of a student determining academic success.**
 - d. ‘braniac’ Asian American women who dominate the classroom setting.**
 - e. all of the above answers are true.**

Remedies for students

So, what can be done to help alleviate the situation? Communication among our human species has been important since language first began. Communication can unite or divide individuals. Therefore, it is important to combat any fears regarding the discussion of matters relating to diversity. The majority of women and people of color advance (the furthest) because of strong mentors, irrespective of ethnicity. A mentor who supports the development of an individual also tends to understand the challenges brought forth towards career development and advancement of people. Mentors are responsible for being both a person who can offer technical advice and also emotional support to get a task completed. If a mentor sees part of himself/herself in the student and vice versa, the relationship will be more adept to be successful (Thomas, 2001). Individual uniqueness can enhance and direct interactions that people have together (Arango and Levey, 1998). Understanding and appreciating cultural identity for each group is important and as a result, the lens by which the world is viewed varies. Each individual has his or her own strengths and weaknesses. It is imperative that the mentor focuses on the students' strengths while aiding the weaknesses if possible while understanding any gender differences in regard to societal roles of motherhood, caretaker of the home along with maintaining equality with men. The mentor should understand identity of the individual as much as possible and recognize that femininity is part of a woman that should be encouraged rather than directed towards masculinity (Alston-Mills, 2003).

Mentoring – an Avenue to promote the success of women and men from under represented groups

Successful mentoring of the underserved population is important to professional and personal success within a chosen field. Positive guidance is especially critical for those who are obtaining a degree in higher education (NAS 2007, p. 158). Without a positive mentor, it may be difficult for students to overcome common societal issues such as stereotyping, lack of sensitivity, unknown levels of expectation, and classism. We believe mentoring is vital and use the field of animal science as an illustration.

Casey and Plaut (2003) surveyed members of the American Dairy Science Association and American Society for Animal Scientists about the role of “gender and race/ethnicity in hiring and promotion practices within the Animal Sciences.” Out of 1490 surveys received, “survey responses represented 70% male, 30% female, 85% non-minority and 15% minority.” “The overall numbers of females and minorities in Animal Science {academic positions} are low relative to the population. The proportion of these groups in higher-ranking positions is significantly less compared with non-minority males. Although there is no significant salary difference across genders, salary is significantly lower for minorities. The ability to have a career and a family differs significantly across gender; while 70% of women are childless, only 22% of the men are. Child rearing is a significant issue for females in terms of salary and promotion. There was also a significant difference in the perception of men, women and minorities in promotion, salary and opportunities to collaborate as a result of women and minorities feeling a chilly climate compared to that experienced by non-minority males.” Graduate students also responded to the survey and 30% of these students were racial minorities.

Mentoring is an important aspect to the success of these students. Mentors themselves may have experienced struggle or observed those who have. As a result, they are now able to serve as guides through situations perceived as difficult by graduate students.

What is mentoring?

Mentoring can be defined as a relationship developed between an individual who has more knowledge of a particular topic matter (mentor) with a person of less knowledge in respect to that topic (protégé). This relationship is formed to provide guidance, support and instruction. Mentoring can be formal or informal in structure. An informal structure occurs naturally. In contrast, a formal structure is assigned. The latter is often what happens within the academic system between research advisors and graduate students. Mentoring can also be defined as the “general, pervasive, and ubiquitous process by which value systems, cultures, knowledge, and skills are transmitted from one generation to the next and within a generation” (Bagayoko, 1997).

However one chooses to define mentoring, the goal is for the protégé to be able to go into society or defined environment with the ability to interact effectively and make positive contributions. It is important for students to receive knowledge that will allow them to succeed while being aware of any hidden agendas, staying connected to influential people within their field, and learning the ability to successfully network. While keeping their professional goals clearly defined to themselves, successful students also convey the clarity of their goals to the people they surround themselves with professionally and personally (Bowser, Auletta, and Jones, 1993).

What is the role of a mentor?

A true mentor must “play the dual role of coach and counselor; coaches giving technical advice, explaining how to do something, while counselors talk about the experience of doing it and offer emotional support as needed” (Thomas, 2001). Mentors should alert protégés to the rules of the game to assure a level playing field. Thus, a good mentor provides information to promote success. A mentor should view the relationship as developing the protégé into a future mentor. At the same time, a mentor must be open and willing to learn from the protégé. A successful relationship depends on mutual respect. Some of the best mentor/protégé relationships occur when the protégé sees the mentor as a person that s/he would like to become. An academic mentor should introduce his/her protégé to the professional world and aid the person in achieving personal, scholastic and research goals. At the outset, both should agree on the expectations of the other. One way to achieve the goals of each is to have a set of working agreements.

How do differences in ethnicity play a role in the mentoring process?

There are innate difficulties when mentor and protégé are from different cultures. However, awareness of the differences is a vital component to the process. Negative stereotypes relating to origin and gender of the protégé should not be an attitude held by mentors. Protégés should also receive the benefit of the doubt. If these differences cannot be resolved, the mentor may not be able to see beyond the deficiencies or weaknesses of

the protégé (Thomas, 2001). A graduate student is dependent upon the mentor or major professor for counseling, quality of advice, and useful information (Malcom, Hall, and Brown, 1976). It is important to provide the student with a “sense of community” within their academic setting that may lead him/her to positive associations within their personal lives (Brown University, 1996). Casey and Plaut (2003) indicated in a recent survey “that a fair number of minorities are pursuing graduate degrees in Animal Science with the majority being Asian (47%), followed by Hispanic (34%), and Blacks (12%). Several respondents commented that although their department has become more diverse in terms of gender the same could not be said for racial diversity. Survey respondents were asked whether they felt that their department was racially diverse, pooled data indicated that 52% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that their department was racially diverse, while 48% perceived their department to not be diverse.”

Quiz 2

More than 1 answer can be chosen

- 1. Mentoring can be described as:**
 - a. giving the protégé an ability to make positive offerings within their field.**
 - b. having both a formal and informal structure.**
 - c. giving support, guidance and instruction to a protégé.**
 - d. protecting the protégé from learning about hidden agendas.**
 - e. all of the above answers are true.**

- 2. The role of a mentor is to:**
 - a. set and maintain a working agreement with clearly stated expectations for the protégé.**
 - b. introduce the protégé to the professional world.**
 - c. tutor the protégé through difficult course work.**
 - d. serve as both a counselor and coach to the protégé.**
 - e. all of the above answers are true.**

- 3. Science should**
 - a. be attainable to all students; regardless of gender or origin.**
 - b. be able to offer students an opportunity of diverse fields of employment.**
 - c. be predominately lead by Caucasian males.**
 - d. contain multicultural tones.**
 - e. all of the above answers are true with the exception of c.**

- 4. A successful mentor/protégé relationship includes**
 - a. communication.**
 - b. the ability for both parties to see part of themselves within each other.**
 - c. understanding and appreciating any gender and/or cultural differences.**
 - d. support the professional and person development of the protégé.**
 - e. all of the above answers are true.**

5. If there is a difference in ethnicity between the mentor and protégé, the mentor should

- a. look beyond the surface to see the strength and value within the person.**
- b. isolate the protégé from people that will negatively stereotype them.**
- c. give the protégé the benefit of doubt.**
- d. provide the protégé with a sense of community.**
- e. all of the above answers are true.**

6. Female graduate students

- a. do not excel as well as males within their course work.**
- b. may not only encounter gender stereotypes but also stereotypes related to their ethnicity.**
- c. have faced gender inequalities within academia dating as far back as the 10th century.**
- d. will have to withdrawal from their graduate studies to begin a family.**
- e. all of the above answers are true with the exception of d**

Issues facing graduates after completion of their graduate studies

Upon finishing their graduate studies, individuals are faced with several options on the type of employment to obtain. The choices are to pursue a career in industry, government or academia. However, it is important for the individual to obtain information regarding each field. There are programs available to inform all people about multiculturalism, gender issues and the benefits of such knowledge. In relation to higher education within sciences, Rosenthal (1997) states that it is imperative to “bring awareness to the relationship between culture and science. In regards to women in science: science education has a goal to make sure that science is attainable to all students; regardless of gender, culture, religion, race and that science is made attainable to people with different learning styles, interesting and relevant to everyday situations of the individuals life”. There is an underlying goal in the sciences to reform it so that true diversity is a part of our world. As the population in the United States increases with the constant influx of people from various countries, the concept of multicultural tones within higher education will flourish.

Summary

Although there are various concerns that face students of under-represented groups in graduate education, it is important to recognize these factors so that there is success in mentoring. A person who has interacted with a positive mentor is one who can then positively mentor others.

Questions for discussion

Case study #1

You are participating in a discussion question posed by your male, Caucasian professor. Students are raising their hands in order to be called upon and Jack (Caucasian male) was chosen immediately by the professor. Once Jack was finished answering, then Jackie (Caucasian female) was chosen. You notice that the professor did not choose Juan (Latino) or Kehong (Asian-American female) to answer the question even though they raised their hands before Jack or Jackie did. You (Caucasian male/female) are now chosen by the professor to answer another question.

- A. What other information about this situation is needed?
- B. What are the available options for Juan and Kehong?
- C. How should you respond?
- D. Is there an opportunity for you to serve as a mentor?

Case study #2

A female has decided to apply for graduate studies within a male-dominated discipline. She has been accepted to the graduate program and has been assigned a male advisor. While working on her first research project along with another male student under the same advisor, she begins to notice subtle derogative comments directed to her by both her peer and the advisor. She initially feels uncomfortable because of the comments, but decides to ignore them in hopes that they will not continue. One month later, her peers and advisor are still making comments, and now the female student begins to wonder how she can approach the men without appearing to be emotional about the comments.

- A. What other information is needed?
- B. What are the available options for the female student?
- C. As a member of her graduate committee, what would you suggest to this student?

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