



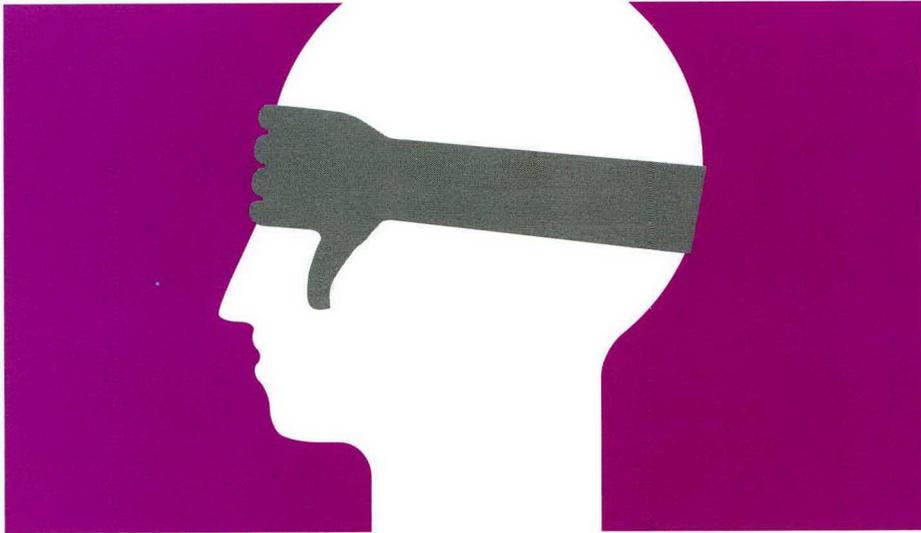
on my mind

Perspectives from the NAIS President

HIDDEN FORCES

The power of implicit bias and its impact on hiring

By Donna Orem



the nature of implicit bias in our society and how it affects interactions that can have profound implications for various groups.

Project Implicit. Founded by three scientists—Tony Greenwald of the University of Washington, Mahzarin Banaji of Harvard University, and Brian Nosek of the University of Virginia—Project Implicit seeks to be a laboratory for understanding the nature of hidden biases. Currently, it offers 14 Implicit Association Tests (IAT) to assess hidden biases in areas of race, gender, age, and more. The Pew Research Center employed the tests in 2015 to “explore the extent to which single-race whites, blacks, and Asians have a subconscious bias for or against their own or another race, and whether similar biases exist among biracial adults.” The results showed the insidious nature of implicit bias and debunked some myths about what groups hold the greatest bias against others.

“About three-quarters of respondents in each of the five racial groups, including those who are biracial, demonstrated some degree of implicit racial bias. Roughly equal levels of implicit racial bias were found among men and women, old and young, and college educated and those with a high school diploma or less formal schooling. Republicans and Democrats with the same racial background also had similar levels of underlying racial bias.”

Implicit bias in hiring study. A 2003 study, conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Chicago, sought to identify whether hidden biases

THE RECENT INCIDENT at a Starbucks in Philadelphia in which two African-American men were arrested for trespassing has ignited a national dialogue about racism in America. Some saw the incident as explicit racism while others suggested it could be implicit bias at work. Starbucks chose to address the situation by closing stores nationwide to provide implicit bias training for employees.

What is implicit bias? The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University defines it as:

“The attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual’s awareness or intentional control. Residing deep in the subconscious, these biases are

different from known biases that individuals may choose to conceal for the purposes of social and/or political correctness. Rather, implicit biases are not accessible through introspection.”

In his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, psychologist Daniel Kahneman points out how our nature as human beings can easily allow hidden biases to creep into our decision-making. He suggests, for example, that in perusing résumés, we weigh a few factors slowly, but hundreds of factors quickly, often unconsciously. Therefore, even if we are working hard in our slow thinking to avoid discrimination, it can easily creep into our fast thinking, which is drawing from thousands of associations and stereotypes we have formed over our lifetimes.

RESEARCH ON IMPLICIT BIAS

In the past two decades, there have been numerous attempts to illuminate





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play a role in the hiring process. The researchers sent out 5,000 résumés responding to job ads placed in the Boston and Chicago metro regions. They randomly assigned stereotypical white-sounding names to some and stereotypically African-American names to others, and found that those applicants with white-sounding names received an astonishing 50 percent more interview invitations than those with African-American names.

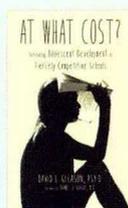
Blind auditions study. A 2000 study conducted by Cecilia Rouse, an associate professor at Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, and Claudia Goldin, a professor of economics at Harvard University, sought to identify whether there was hidden gender bias in hiring for symphony orchestras and the impact that blind auditions may have in eliminating that bias. They found, using data from the audition records, “that blind auditions increased the probability that a woman would advance from preliminary rounds by 50 percent.” In examining the makeup of orchestras since blind auditions were introduced, data reveal that female members increased from 10 percent in 1970 to 35 percent by the mid-1990s. Rouse and Goldin attribute about 30 percent of this gain to the advent of blind auditions.

BIAS IN EXECUTIVE HIRING

Does implicit bias play even a greater role in hiring at the executive level—and account for a glass ceiling that still remains fairly impenetrable? A 2015 Pew Research Center study examined Americans’ views about the abilities of men and women to handle top leadership positions in the United States and found that, “when it comes to characteristics that apply specifically to political and business leadership, most Americans don’t distinguish between men and women.” But among those who

do draw distinctions, women are perceived to have a clear advantage over men in some key areas—honesty, integrity, and the ability to reach compromise. Given these findings, why is it that men outnumber women (both white women and women of color) in top leadership positions in every field? A new comprehensive study by *LeanIn.org* and McKinsey draws the conclusion that implicit bias is the culprit, noting that, “We have blind spots when it comes to diversity, and we can’t solve problems that we don’t see or understand clearly.”

What I’m Reading



I just began reading *At What Cost?: Defending Adolescent Development in Fiercely Competitive Schools*, by David L. Gleason. It explores the growing anxiety, depression, and self-injury in our student population. This is a must-read for educators and administrators alike.

What really hit home was the following quote, a sentiment I often hear from leaders in our schools: “Caught in an intense predicament between the parents, on the one hand, whose demand for these schools only increases, and the selective colleges, on the other hand, that rely on these schools for high-quality applicants, we have had to develop a complex set of self-protective practices to keep our schools in business.”

This is the bind we are in, but we must work together as a community to find a different path forward. There are no silver-bullet solutions in this competitive landscape, but we must begin the conversation to ensure the well-being of the students we serve.

Between 2016 and 2017, NAIS conducted its own research to better understand the barriers to women and people of color seeking independent school headships. The various studies investigated how search firms source and put forth candidates; what qualifications, experiences, and behaviors drive search committees to choose the candidates they do; and how candidates approach the search process. The first study identified that there are many decisions made throughout the search process that result in candidates being eliminated, particularly women and people of color. For example, in the early stages of the search process, the following attributes can be predictive of who makes it to the semifinalist stage:

- The quality of the written application
- The fit with the school culture
- Experience at similar schools
- Proven record
- Experience with school focus area
- Fit with region

Three of the above factors are of particular note for women and people of color. The “proven record” criterion tends to be a proxy for either previous experience as a head of school or as a division or assistant head. Thus, at this first stage, candidates—particularly people of color who often come from an administrative path—fall out of the process if they have not held those roles. Search consultants interviewed noted that search committees often perceive—whether true or not—other leadership positions, such as diversity director or business officer, as too narrowly focused, thus not preparing candidates for the breadth of experience needed for headship. As the process moves on, experience at similar schools and fit with school culture become more important in narrowing the pool. It is at this point,

some survey respondents noted, that implicit bias may enter the process. As one search committee member noted, “Schools are always looking for the *beloved family member they have not yet met*, so if you’re a diverse candidate you may not appear to be that family member.”

RETHINKING JOB DESCRIPTIONS

The NAIS research findings make me ponder whether we can begin to eliminate some implicit bias in the hiring process by rethinking the way we approach the head’s position description. As many search consultants will tell you, when they work with search committees to create this document, the result is a position description describing God on a good day. Does the very nature of that job description eliminate strong candidates,

particularly women and people of color, before the hiring process even begins? A new organization called Gap Jumpers, whose mission is to eradicate bias in workplace, posits that bias is present in all parts of the hiring process, and we need to examine each part to identify how we can eradicate bias. For example, they suggest that we tend to create job descriptions by compiling a long list of skills and responsibilities rather than calling out the outcomes we seek. The result is that, unconsciously, we are painting a picture of what an ideal candidate should look like rather than what the ideal candidate must do.

For example, a job description of an organization seeking a project manager outlined a long list of skills and qualifications, but Gap Jumpers was able to help them identify the

primary outcome they sought: successful cross-management of time-sensitive projects. The Gap Jumpers team helped the organization rewrite the job description anchored around this attribute.

In the independent school world, we might not eliminate people who haven’t held head or division head jobs as quickly if we look through the lens of what a new head needs to strategically accomplish. If we use a similar lens to review the interviewing and selection processes, calling out the ways that implicit bias creeps in, we may be able to open the door wider to women and people of color seeking headships. Food for thought as we think about hiring the next generation of leaders. ■

DONNA OREM is president of NAIS.



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