

An NSF funded program to improve the climate for UNH faculty through fair and equitable policies, practices and leadership development.

## Debunking Assumptions in the Faculty Search Process

**W**ith funding from the NSF and support from the Provost's office, the UNH ADVANCE Program aims to create sustainable institutional transformation with the overall goal of increasing the number, retention, and success of women faculty primarily but not solely in the STEM disciplines. Gender disparity and lack of faculty from underrepresented groups in STEM are both national and local concerns. By developing approaches to increasing the representation and advancement of women in STEM academic careers we contribute to the development of a more diverse science and engineering workforce. A major initiative of the UNH ADVANCE Program is the development and implementation of a program for search committee members that focuses on developing consistent, effective and fair policies and procedures to ensure that UNH continues to attract and retain the best and most representative faculty possible.

**Examples of research documenting common social assumptions that affect searches:** Studies show that we often apply generalizations that may or may not be valid to the evaluation of individuals (Bielby and Baron, 1986).

- A study of over 300 recommendation letters for medical faculty hired by a large U.S. medical school found that letters for female applicants differed systematically from those for males. Letters written for women were shorter, provided "minimal assurance" rather than solid recommendation, raised more doubts, portrayed women as students and teachers while portraying men as researchers and professionals, and more frequently mentioned women's personal lives (Trix and Psenka, 2003).
- In a 2010 study, over 120 study participants reviewed identical resumes for a laboratory manager's position. Half read "John's" resume while the other half read "Jennifer's." Both male and female faculty reviewers exhibited bias against the female applicant (Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, et al., 2012).
- Research shows that incongruities between perceptions of female gender roles and leadership roles cause evaluators to assume that women will be less competent leaders. When women leaders provide clear evidence of their competence, thus violating traditional gender norms, evaluators perceive them to be less likeable and are less likely to recommend them for hiring or promotion (Phelan et al.; Eagly and Karau; Heilman et al.).

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*W.T. Bielby, J. Baron, American Journal of Sociology 91 (1986); F. Trix, C. Psenka, Discourse & Society 14 (2003). C.A. Moss-Racusin, J.F. Dovidio, et al. Science Proceedings of the National Academy of Science 109(41): 16474-16479 (2012); A.H. Eagly, S.J. Karau Psychological Review 109 (2002); J. E. Phelan et al., Psychology of Women Quarterly 32 (2008); Sex Roles 41 (1999).*

## Common **assumptions** affecting searches followed by documented **realities**:

Many search committees are impeded in their efforts to use best practices when, for example, enhancing diversity might be perceived as sacrificing expertise. Smith, Wolf, and Busenberg (1996) interviewed over 300 recipients of the prestigious Ford, Mellon, and Spencer doctoral fellowships in an attempt to discover PhD recipients' real-life job-market experiences. Their research findings, outlined below, starkly contrast the realities with the pervasive assumptions regarding faculty diversification. UNH aims to provide search committees with the tools they need to hire a candidate, regardless of that person's demographics.

**ASSUMPTION** Academe is a meritocracy.

**REALITY** Although scientists like to believe that they select the best based on objective criteria, decisions are often influenced by biases about race, gender, and age that have nothing to do with the quality of a candidate's work.

**ASSUMPTION** Changing the rules means that standards of excellence will be deleteriously affected.

**REALITY** Throughout a STEM career, advancement depends on judgments of one's performance by more senior colleagues. This process does not optimally select and advance the best scientists and engineers, because of implicit biases and disproportionate weighting of male candidates.

**ASSUMPTION** Women are more interested in family than in careers.

**REALITY** Many STEM academic women persist through their careers despite severe conflicts between their roles as parents and as scholars. These efforts, however, are often not recognized as representing the high level of dedication to the careers they represent.

**ASSUMPTION** The system as currently configured has worked well in producing great science; why change it?

**REALITY** The global competitive balance has changed in ways that undermine America's traditional STEM advantages. Career impediments based on race, gender, or ethnic bias deprive the nation of talented and accomplished researchers.

**ASSUMPTION** The matter of underrepresentation on faculties is only a matter of time; it is a function of how many women are qualified to enter these positions.

**REALITY** Women's representation decreases with each step through the tenure track and academic leadership hierarchy—particularly among women of color—even in fields that have had a large proportion of women doctorates for 30 years.

**ASSUMPTION** Wealthy and prestigious institutions that have resources with which ordinary institutions cannot compete are continually recruiting individuals. This creates a revolving door that limits progress for any single institution in diversifying its faculty.

**REALITY** Though some underrepresented and women faculty are pursued by institutions with means, such is not the norm. Indeed, financial packages and institutional prestige were not primary reasons for faculty relocation; transfers were more likely to be motivated by unresolved issues with the institution, dual-career choices, and appropriate fit.

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*Prose for Assumptions and Amendments is used with permission from the University of Rhode Island's Advance website, Myths and Realities, Faculty Recruitment Handbook. [http://web.uri.edu/advance-women/files/Recruit\\_Handbook-download\\_version.pdf](http://web.uri.edu/advance-women/files/Recruit_Handbook-download_version.pdf)*

*Smith, D. G., Wolf, L. E., & Busenberg, B. (1996). Achieving faculty diversity: Debunking the myths. A research report of a national study. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.*

For more information about UNH ADVANCE, please visit <http://www.unh.edu/advance>