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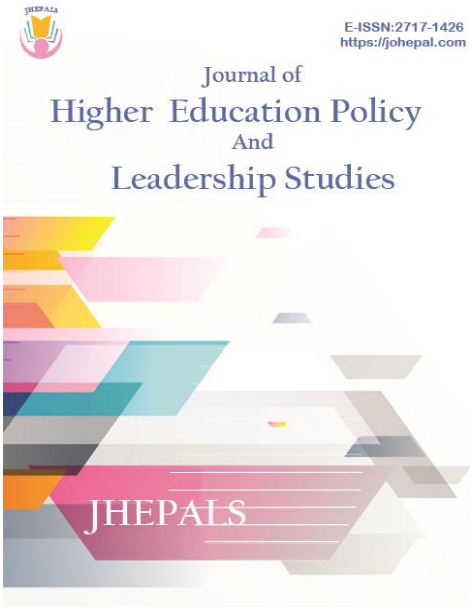

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Examining an Equity-Minded Search Training as a Catalyst for More Inclusive Faculty Hiring

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Abstract

Higher education institutions often utilize search committee trainings to better equip participants with the tools needed to execute a fair faculty search process. This study examined the ways in which a Predominantly White multi-campus university system in the Northeastern United States restructured its system-wide Equal Opportunity search training to assist participants in centering diversity and equity in their searches. Researchers designed and evaluated a pre and post survey to examine the ways in which participation in the equity-minded search training affected respondents' critical understanding of equity and diversity and potentially enriched notions of fairness in the search process. This study advances scholarship focused on the positive impact equity-mindedness can have when thoughtfully implemented into a university-led intervention. Additionally, results demonstrate how institutional leaders in Equal Opportunity can partner with faculty and staff to engage in reflexive and ongoing conversations about diversity and equity to uncover how hiring practices may lead to implicit bias, systemic discrimination, and unintended inequities in the search process.

Keywords: Diversity; Equal Opportunity Leaders; Equity-mindedness; Faculty Searches; Search Training

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Introduction

Higher education institutions across the United States and beyond have been working to increase their structural diversity to better represent the diverse student bodies that they serve for decades (Harris & Ellis, 2020; Hurtado et al., 1999). In the United States, the racial diversity of student populations has grown significantly with nearly 50% of undergraduate students identifying as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (Cavanaugh & Green, 2020). However, faculty populations have remained predominantly White and male (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2018, 75% of faculty in the United States identified as White, with 40% being White men. Increasing these populations in the professoriate has been positively associated with student success and graduation rates and enhanced opportunities for cross-cultural interaction and unique teaching styles that engage students differently than their White counterparts (Cavanaugh & Green, 2020; Hurtado et al., 1999). Even with all the benefits that come with having a racially diverse professoriate, institutions in the United States still have a disproportionately low number of faculty from racially marginalized backgrounds (Harris & Ellis, 2020; Jayakumar et al., 2009).

Scholars have claimed that implicit bias is one of the most considerable challenges to increasing faculty racial diversity (Moody, 2012; Sensoy & Diangelo, 2017; Thompson, 2008; Turner et al., 2008). As a result, administrators have often relied on search committee trainings provided through human resources or equal opportunity units to help mitigate bias and maintain equity (Fine & Handelsman, 2012a; Turner et al., 2008). Research has demonstrated that search trainings can either hinder equitable hiring practices (Hakkola & Dyer, 2022; Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Posselt et al., 2020) or aid respondents in ensuring a fair process ensues (Cavenaugh & Green, 2020; Fine & Handelsman, 2012a, 2012b). Yet, more research is needed to examine how specific types of trainings might serve to either perpetuate bias or support fairness.

Equity-mindedness can be used in higher education as a framework to decenter Whiteness and engage individuals in critical dialogue about systemic oppression, power, and privilege (Bensimon et al., 2016). This perspective also calls attention to disparities in institutional performance outcomes, such as faculty hiring and retention rates, that may be due to implicit bias or institutional inequities (O'Meara et al., 2020). Accordingly, in partnership with an Equal Opportunity (EO) office at a Predominantly White multi-campus university system in the Northeastern United, researchers designed and evaluated the ways in which participation in an *equity-minded* search training affected respondents' critical understanding of equity and diversity and potentially enriched notions of fairness in the search process. For the purposes of this study, faculty diversity included individuals from racially underrepresented populations.

Literature Review

Many higher education institutions express a desire to hire racially diverse faculty but fail to recognize some of the issues that can prevent successful search outcomes from occurring (Gasman et al., 2011; O'Meara et al., 2020; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Members of a search committee, especially the chair, influence the search process as individuals with their own

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biases and perspectives (Hakkola & Dyer, 2022). Combined with power dynamics between the members of the committee (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), issues can arise that silence or alienate marginalized voices (Liera, 2020b) and perpetuate the status quo of Whiteness as the norm (White-Lewis, 2020).

In many cases, implicit bias will appear in search committees but go unnoticed or ignored. Color-blind racism or race evasive perspectives, for example, are often seen in searches with committee members saying that they do not "see race" when looking at a candidate and their credentials (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Although many committee members have good intentions with this mindset, they fail to recognize that race is not something they can or should simply ignore. Implicit bias should not be suppressed by committee members; doing so could strengthen underlying biases further (Cahn et al., 2021).

Individual members of search committees bring their own unique perspectives and experiences that influence their decisions in the search process; however, issues that come from the departments, institutional policies, as well as group dynamics can influence the search process as well (Baier & Rawal, 2025; Gasman et al., 2011; Liera, 2020a; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Departments may have varying definitions for diversity or be lacking a definition altogether (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Search committees often lack clear and objective criteria to be used in evaluating candidates, leaving room for bias to emerge (Fine & Handelsman, 2012a, 2012b). Even when criteria are developed, they are often created through a color-blind lens that perpetuates issues of racism in the faculty hiring process (Liera, 2020b). The combination of these issues at the organization level with individual challenges of bias and power dynamics can make the process of diversifying the professoriate challenging (Hakkola & Dyer, 2022; Liera, 2020a).

Search Committee Trainings

While there are a multitude of obstacles search committees face in holding an equitable search (Blair-Loy et al., 2025; Posselt et al., 2020; White-Lewis, 2020) interventions and promising practices have been identified in the literature and are continuously improving to better support equitable hiring (Bilamoria & Buch, 2010; Cahn et al., 2021; Fine & Handelsman, 2012b; Harvard University, 2016; Lee, 2014; Paluck et al., 2021; Smith, 2000; Smith et al., 2004). In an effort to create change within faculty searches as a whole, one such tool has included search committee training sessions to educate members and better equip them with the tools needed to execute a fair search (Fine & Haldelsman, 2012; Kossek et al., 2024). Often, these trainings are provided through Equal Opportunity (EO) offices, as this unit serves to protect employees and potential employees from discrimination on the basis of social identities including race, sex, ethnicity, age, ability, etc. (Malcom-Piqueux, & Bensimon, 2017; U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.)

Obstacles to Inclusive Hiring

Many institutional leaders express a desire to hire racially diverse but fail to recognize some of the individual and organizational issues that can prevent successful searches from occurring (Gasman, 2022). In his study on search processes, Liera (2022) found that search chairs carry significant power in decision-making and can be influenced by implicit biases and subjective perspectives. Given that the chair is often a senior and tenured faculty

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member (O'Meara et al., 2020) and is likely to be a White man (Cavanaugh & Green, 2020; O'Meara et al., 2020), the dynamics at play in a search can lead to an unequal distribution of power between junior and senior committee members (Hakkola & Dyer, 2022; Liera & Hernandez, 2021). Further, members who are part of a marginalized community or who are untenured may not feel as though they can address bias or challenge the ideas of tenured or senior faculty on the committee out of self-preservation (Hakkola & Dyer, 2022; Liera & Hernandez, 2021). Even if they do speak up, their status as a junior faculty or their marginalized identity can be attacked, leading to their dismissal and the perpetuation of bias in the faculty hiring process (Hakkola & Dyer, 2022; Liera & Hernandez, 2021). In addition to faculty members, search committees often include staff and/or students, which can mirror the problematic power dynamics of junior or racially diverse members (Hakkola & Dyer, 2022).

In many cases, implicit bias will appear in search committees but go unnoticed or ignored. Color-blind racism, for example, is often seen in searches with committee members saying that they do not "see race" when looking at a candidate and their credentials (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Bonilla Silva, 2018). Although many committee members have good intentions with this mindset, they fail to recognize that race is not something they can or should simply ignore. Implicit bias should not be suppressed by committee members; doing so could strengthen underlying biases further (Cahn et al., 2021; Fine & Handelsman, 2012a, 2012b).

Individual members of search committees bring their unique perspectives and experiences that influence their decisions in the search process; however, issues that come from the departments, institutional policies, as well as group dynamics can influence the search process as well (Blair-Loy et al., 2025). Departments may have varying definitions for diversity or be lacking a definition altogether (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Criteria set by the committees can be vague or subjective, which allows room for individual bias to influence committee decision-making (Liera, 2020a). In some cases, search committees will call on a specific token faculty member of an underrepresented marginalized group and task them with mitigating bias and removing the responsibility from the rest of the committee, further alienating marginalized faculty and causing more harm than good (Bilamoria & Buch, 2010; Gasman et al., 2011; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

Defining Diversity

Diversity is often used as a broad term in faculty search committees (Hakkola & Dyer, 2022). As many institutions begin to share institutional missions and visions for diversity and inclusion (Gasman, 2022), faculty search committees are beginning to include diversity in their job descriptions, request supplemental diversity statements, or ask questions related to the topic of diversity (Liera, 2020; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Although this shift demonstrates a desire to recruit diverse candidates and individuals who are equipped to work with a diverse group of students and peers, many committees fail to develop a clear definition that all members share to assess diversity in candidate pools. This issue is further complicated when considering the complicated and enduring history of exclusion related to racial, ethnic, and gender minorities in the professoriate in the United States (Smith et al., 2004). In her book, *Doing the Right Thing: How Colleges and Universities can Undo Systemic Racism in Faculty Hiring*, Gasman (2022) highlights the socio-cultural and political complexity

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that undergirds much of the lack of diversity in the faculty pool even today. She argues that despite rhetoric to increase representation of racially diverse in academia, "all of the talk about diversity has not manifested in faculty hiring" (Gasman, p. 58). Research such as Gasman's, demonstrates the importance of clearly operationalizing diversity in search processes to include the historical, political, and social power it carries (Gasman, 2022; Hakkola & Dyer, 2022; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

Criteria

Search committee members are often responsible for developing their own criteria, which can result in inconsistencies in how candidates are evaluated (Fine & Handelsman, 2012a, 2012b). Criteria that are typically used in the evaluation process include their experience, achievements, leadership potential, competence in the field, as well as their fit within the department (O'Meara et al., 2020). Although these are common criteria used, there is often little to no guidance on what demonstrates these skills, leaving the evaluation primarily up to the opinion of the committee member. Many of these criteria are also informed by the White male candidate perspective which can further marginalize candidates who come from a marginalized group. For example, O'Meara et al., (2020) found that if a Black candidate is compared to a White candidate, they will likely find that the White candidate has been granted more funding for research or has been given more awards for their work. This evaluation mindset fails to recognize the inequities that occur in academia that set underrepresented marginalized candidates behind (Gasman, 2022), leading to them being seen as less qualified by committees when they have not been granted the same opportunities as their peers.

Some institutions have seen a shift in the criteria used in evaluating candidates to be more inclusive by focusing evaluation on necessary skills as opposed to desirable characteristics (Tomlinson & Freeman, 2017). Utilizing the institutional and departmental missions allow for criteria to apply to the role and be objective as opposed to subjective and allows room for implicit bias (Fine & Handelsman, 2012a; Tomlinson & Freeman, 2017). Compelling committees to focus on these criteria rather than the concept of departmental fit can challenge issues of discrimination from occurring since committee members have to evaluate the candidate with pre-determined criteria (White-Lewis, 2020; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

Token Committee Member

With the lack of racially diverse in higher education as a whole (Colby & Guzman, 2025; Jayakumar et al., 2009), the few underrepresented marginalized faculty at institutions are often called upon to serve on faculty search committees to represent and advocate for diversity (Liera, 2020a). Although many committees mean well by trying to bring representation by ensuring a marginalized faculty member is on the committee, that member is continuing to be marginalized and viewed as a committee member simply to check the "diversity box" for representation (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). This harmful narrative assumes that a token member, or a member who is called upon to represent a marginalized group, is an expert and can speak for an entire marginalized group but cannot contribute anything else that is meaningful to the search (Liera, 2022). Committees need to

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recognize the importance of representation as well as the value that faculty bring as individuals rather than as a representative of a marginalized group (Bilamoria & Buch, 2012).

Practices for Inclusive Hiring

While there is a multitude of obstacles committees face in holding an equitable search, interventions and best practices have been identified and continuously improved to better support inclusive hiring and mitigate bias. These practices include the use of equity advocates and providing training to faculty.

Equity Advocates

As opposed to token committee members who are brought into a space simply based on their identity and expected to represent all marginalized groups, equity advocates serve to challenge bias in the search process, advocate for equitable practices, and provide general assistance to committees in their searches, often holding a voting position as well (Liera & Hernandez, 2021). Equity advocates are trained to specifically tackle these issues which would ensure that there was a representative on each faculty committee who is dedicated to equity and diversifying the candidate pool. In one study, Cahn et al. (2021) found that by having an equity advocate from an outside department serve on a search committee, other members of the committee found that the search process was more equitable and raised awareness of other members regarding implicit bias as well. Equity advocates did feel that they needed to establish themselves as reliable and trustworthy in their committees, however, the overall outcome impacted all members during and after the search in being more aware and working to actively mitigate bias (Cahn et al., 2021).

Although equity advocates have demonstrated effectiveness in improving awareness in some cases (Cahn et al., 2021), others argue that it may allow other members to feel exempt from considering bias and discrimination in searches since the responsibility has been placed on one or two members based on their title (Liera & Hernandez, 2021). The chair may also override or dismiss the equity advocates because they may not see the value of the role which further discourages others from advocating for an equitable search process (Liera & Hernandez, 2021). Equity advocates have demonstrated usefulness, however, there are limitations to the role as well.

Trainings

To create change within faculty searches as a whole, university led search trainings can provide general knowledge regarding inclusive practices for search committees, search processes, and candidate evaluations. This type of training can also instill the responsibility to ensure fairness and equity on all members of the committee (Cavanaugh & Green, 2020; Liera, 2022; Fine & Handelsman, 2012a; Turner et al., 2008). While mandatory trainings make sense in theory, they can be difficult to implement, and the content may not resonate with all respondents (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Paluck et al., 2021). Moreover, if faculty are not invested in learning about equity-mindedness and how to implement it in their hiring processes, they will likely resist it and fail to demonstrate the same equity-minded work that those who are invested would (Cavanaugh & Green, 2020). Equity work also involves time and labor from faculty which can make convincing faculty to attend trainings a challenge (Liera, 2020a; Bilamoria & Buch, 2010; Cavanaugh & Green, 2020; Cosgriff-Hernandez et al.,

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2023; Turner et al., 2008). Trainings focused on diversity and equity involve time and emotional labor, which can make attendance difficult for some individuals (Liera, 2020a). Despite these challenges, research suggests that well-designed trainings can be effective in mitigating bias in faculty searches to make them more equitable (Bilamoria & Buch, 2010; Fine & Handesman, 2006; Greenwald et al. 2022, Paluck et al., 2021).

Equal Employment Opportunity

Although there is a limited body of literature on Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) in academia in the United States, EEO still plays a significant role in faculty hiring in higher education. EEO serves to protect employees and potential employees from discrimination on the basis of various social identities including race, gender, ethnicity, age, ability, etc. (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). Offices for EO or Human Resources serve to ensure equal employment opportunities for candidates regardless of their identities which is important to an equitable hiring process. In this study, The Office for EO assisted in facilitating training sessions for faculty and staff participating in faculty search committees to be better equipped to facilitate equitable search processes and outcomes.

Research Questions

1) To what extent did respondents perceive the equity-minded Equal Opportunity search training as effective in mitigating bias in the search process?
    a) Do perceptions of the effectiveness of implicit bias training differ by professional role among respondents?
2) How did participation in an equity-minded Equality Opportunity search training inform respondents' understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the search process?

Conceptual Framework

Equity-mindedness was used as a guiding framework to inform the revision and development of the EO search training content and analysis of the survey data. Grounded in critical race theory and organizational learning, equity-mindedness explicitly scrutinizes deficit-based language about diversity and highlights the practices, policies, and historical inequities that foster disparities in higher education (Bensimon, 2018; Bensimon et al., 2016; Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). Further, it shifts the focus from a critique of individual deficiencies to an interrogation of organizational practices, values, and dynamics, as a way to uncover allegedly neutral standardized and systemic inequities (Bensimon, 2018).

Guided by equity-mindedness, the EO director and researchers modified the search training using values-based research about diversity in the professoriate and empirical data demonstrating systemic issues regarding disproportionate inequalities and implicit bias in hiring. Additionally, rather than a focus on legal compliance, the training focused on providing opportunities for search committee members to reflect on their beliefs about diversity and fairness and encouraged to problematize normalized hiring practices that may conceal implicit bias. With the goal of promoting fair searches, this framing also invited search committee members to critically engage with the concept of diversity and how their understanding of this term may influence equity during the search process.

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Research Methodology

Researchers strategically partnered with a Predominantly White multi-campus university system in the Northeastern United States that had overhauled its EO search training in 2019 to center equity and diversity in the search process more distinctly. These changes were largely due to an exploratory study of their former search training process that uncovered how implicit bias and power dynamics contributed to search chair role confusion and inequitable hiring practices. The organizational context of this study was distinctly important because the university had participated in a federally funded ADVANCE program designed to diversify faculty and enhance equity across the campus from 2010 to 2016. In 2016, the program ended, and Equal Opportunity centralized into a system-wide office, combining all branch campuses across the state. During this transition, the university hired two different EO directors. These changes highlighted inconsistencies, gaps, and opportunities for improvement with the EO search training content and structure, concluding with a decision to improve the training in 2019.

Collaborating with EO leaders, the researchers assisted with the restructuring of the search training, providing empirical data and guidance throughout its development. Informed by equity-mindedness, the revised training shifted the focus away from deficit language about diversity and provided specific examples of how institutional policies, committee dynamics, and normalized practices embedded in racialized status quo hiring unintentionally support bias and unfair search outcomes. For the study, the researchers were interested in learning the extent to which search committee training participants perceived the effectiveness of the revised EO search training and whether they found this approach useful in advancing their understanding of how to utilize inclusive practices during their searches. Hence, the research team designed a pre and post search survey to measure these topics.

The pre survey included 18 questions; 11 were Likert scale items examining respondents' experience in the search training; two were demographic questions; and five were open-ended questions, focusing on respondents' understanding of inclusive and equitable search practices as a result of the search training. With IRB approval, the EO office sent the pre search survey to all search training participants within a week of participation in the revised EO search training. We received a total of 161 responses after one year of data collection through Qualtrics. Of the 161, 51 identified as tenure-track, tenured, or adjunct faculty. The data was exported to SPSS 28 and transformed into numerical values that were associated with their original labels to conduct a statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were pulled based on the various positions of the respondents, which provided mean responses, standard deviations, and confidence intervals for each question ($\alpha = 0.05$).

A post search survey was designed to better understand the effectiveness of the training upon completion of the search process. This survey was sent out after the respondents' search was completed. It included three close-ended demographic and informational questions and three open-ended questions related to reflections on how respondents recalled and incorporated content from the EO training and general reflections of revised training structure. We received 57 responses to the post survey. Of the 57 respondents, 48 identified as tenure-track, tenured, or adjunct faculty. Of this group, 43 indicated that they had a successful search process.

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Data Analysis

After the data was collected through Qualtrics, it was exported into an Excel file where it was formatted to be entered into SPSS 28. The data was then transformed into numerical values that were associated with their original labels to conduct a statistical analysis. It is important to note the search training was provided to all members across a university system, inclusive of seven institutions. Thus, respondents included staff, tenure-track and tenured faculty, post-doctoral fellows, adjunct faculty, and students who served on faculty search committees. The EO office sent the surveys to all respondents. During the analysis process, the researchers aggregated the data into meaningful groups to identify themes. Originally, faculty were split into three groups: adjunct, tenure-track, and tenured; however, these groups were combined into one variable, "faculty," since the individual groups were too small on their own and the positions are relatively similar. Once the grouping was completed, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with the position of the staff member as the factor and the Likert questions as the variables. From this, descriptive statistics were pulled based on the various positions of the respondents, which provided mean responses for each group for each question along with the standard deviation and confidence intervals for each question using a confidence level of 95.

The qualitative data were coded using an inductive and iterative analytical process to identify initial codes and then grouped into broader themes (Neuendorf, 2017). Data was first analyzed independently by the researchers, and then together to discuss convergences, reconcile divergences, and create a collective codebook and thematic map for further analysis. Below we discuss the results and findings from the survey in more detail.

Positionality

Within the context of this study, salient social identities included race, gender, and sexual orientation. The researchers reflexively considered how our privileged (i.e., white) and minoritized (i.e., female, non-binary, and queer) positionalities may have influenced potential biases, assumptions, and initial interpretations of our qualitative findings to enrich trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, we openly shared and discussed our data and interpretations with EO staff to enhance the credibly of our analysis (Creswell, 2018).

Results

While our original inquiry was interested in faculty members, in particular, upon analyzing the ANOVA, none of the questions had a statistically significant difference ($p > .05$; see Table 1) in mean score between the groups of respondents. This finding suggests that all groups involved in the training demonstrated similar outcomes regardless of their professional role. For all questions with the exception of Question 9, the mean scores were above a 5, indicating that the majority of respondents across all professional roles at least somewhat agreed with each statement (see Table 2). This demonstrates that the respondents, regardless of their position, found that the training was effective at conveying strategies for mitigating bias in searches and providing education on how implicit bias can influence the search process. Once quantitative data analysis was completed, the researchers transitioned to analyzing the five open-ended questions (See Online Supplement File).

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Findings

The findings that emerged from the qualitative data in this study align with and supported the results from the quantitative data analysis. Upon completion of coding, we identified two major themes: problematizing the search process and creating an equitable search. We discuss these themes below, along with a conclusion highlighting general respondent reflections on the quality and value of the revised EO search training.

Problematizing the Search Process

A key component of equity-mindedness is related to critical reflection. Accordingly, several survey questions focused on critical reflection of current search process practices. Respondents expressed that the revised EO search training encouraged them to think about how bias may be covertly seeping into their searches. Examples included questioning a candidate's language to being more aware of personal preferences as a potential blind spot in their evaluation of candidates. These results emerged in both the pre and post search surveys, as respondents articulated the importance of discussing the meaning of diversity and how bias might surface in the search process. One respondent recalled how diversity and bias are connected, stating that "diversity and ensuring the absence of bias in determining staffing options is such a complex process." Many respondents acknowledged the challenges that are faced when mitigating bias to increase diversity in a candidate pool, with some respondents providing examples of strategies to mitigate bias. Although many respondents were able to recall the importance of acknowledging bias in the search process, a few focused on attempting to remove bias altogether as opposed to acknowledging it and being aware of how it may influence perspectives of various committee members. This could demonstrate a need for more clarification on how bias influences searches and that it is not something that needs to be eliminated, rather it needs to be acknowledged, addressed, and factored into the search process.

While some respondents appreciated the clear definitions of terms like diversity and equity, the concept of diversity was also a cause for confusion for some respondents, with one respondent contending that diversity was "being used incorrectly. Diverse means a mix. A person is not diverse. A person might be black or Latinx or homosexual. That doesn't make them diverse." This quote demonstrates a potential gap in the training where further clarification of terms may be necessary. That said, only a few respondents found that providing a definition of diversity was confusing. Most respondents reported a clear understanding of diversity in their responses. Since the revised EO search training focused on educating search committee members on topics of diversity, equity, and strategies for mitigating bias, these findings show promise in enhancing participants perspectives in these areas in preparation for their search committee activities.

Creating an Equitable Search

The framework of equity-mindedness draws from empirical data and relevant examples to demonstrate how individual and institutional mechanisms support systemic inequities (Bensimon, 2018). Accordingly, the open-ended pre and post survey questions focused on the ways in which the search training content and facilitator explained and incorporated tools to help participants mitigate and uncover potential biases and support reflexivity.

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Throughout both survey responses, respondents were able to recall multiple examples of bias that were discussed in the EO training. For many, specific examples, such as the video demonstrating bias in orchestra tryouts, resonated with them and was notable enough to include in their responses as a reason to check the fairness of their preferences during their searches.

Additionally, the Harvard Implicit Association Test was mentioned by seven respondents as a tool they used to reflect on their own biases and to educate other search committee members during their searches. They noted that this also helped them facilitate a more inclusive search. The training was guided by a PowerPoint, with a guided discussion about the definitions of diversity and equity in the context of the institution and the search. Many respondents found this conversation valuable and some even asked to receive a copy of the presentation to use in future searches.

The search process can often be infiltrated by issues of bias; however, these issues can be addressed through specific practices that were discussed in the revised EO training. Specifically, one of the post survey questions asked about strategies respondents used to mitigate prejudice during the search process. Along with communicating a better understanding bias, diversity, and equity, respondents recalled various strategies they employed to support an equitable search, such as intentional development of evaluation criteria and explicitly talking about diversity and bias with all committee members. The ability to use these strategies during the search process demonstrated the impact they had on respondents in the revised EO search training. Respondents also discussed evaluating candidates individually to reduce group-think as well as evaluating candidates using more time to prevent snap judgments, both of which were strategies respondents were encouraged to reflexively consider during the revised EO search training.

One goal of the pre search survey was to gain a better understanding of the extent to which respondents understood equitable practices in evaluation of and engagement with candidates. In response to these questions, respondents exhibited an understanding of value-neutral criteria that could be covered, identifying what was appropriate and what may lead to inequitable practices. In particular, respondents stated that they should focus on characteristics that relate directly to the position as opposed to the personal characteristics of each individual candidate, which may be unrelated to their ability to do their job. Multiple respondents included the idea of being aware of their biases as they evaluated candidates while also actively working to focus on qualifications as opposed to personal preference. Further, respondents shared a better awareness of appropriate language to use in searches to avoid possible discrimination. For instance, one respondent stated, “I was taken aback that questions regarding a candidate's ability to speak languages other than English was not permissible.” This statement echoes other respondents’ reactions, which demonstrated a willingness to change normalized processes in order to facilitate and support a more equitable search process. Respondents also demonstrated an understanding of how bias can infiltrate casual conversations with candidates if committee members are not careful. In relation to this, a few respondents recognized that even questions that may be well-intended (e.g., language ability, family status, religious affiliation) can be problematic when they are asked during a search. These findings demonstrate the importance of feasible strategies and examples participants can relate to and apply to their current search processes.

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Reflections on the Revised Equal Opportunity Search Training

When asked to provide final feedback on the training, many respondents focused on the value of the training. A common finding that emerged was that respondents found the training to be a great refresher or introduction to issues of bias and ways to support diverse faculty. There was also an emphasis on how the training was repetitive for some respondents, possibly demonstrating a need for alternative training that go more in-depth after completion of the first one. Some contradictions emerged, with some respondents stating that they felt the training went into great depth and was thorough while others felt it was lacking depth and was rushed. Further, some respondents enjoyed being able to participate in the training via a synchronous online video platform, while others felt it led to disconnection. These contrasting views demonstrate the individualized experiences, differing needs, and disparate knowledge of participants. Finally, some respondents reflected on the need for additional EO leadership and guidance throughout the search process, rather than relying on one training at the beginning of the search. As a whole, however, respondents appreciated the revised EO training and EO's role in providing valuable resources to further their learning after the training.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how an equity-minded EO search training helped respondents better understand diversity, bias, and equity in the search process. We also explored the ways in which respondents perceived the training to be effective in supporting an equitable search. In general, the quantitative results and qualitative findings suggest that an equity-minded framing can shift search committee members beyond compliancy and toward critical reflection and intentional practice. Specifically, respondents found that the revised EO training was effective at conveying strategies for mitigating bias in searches and providing education on how implicit bias can influence the search process. That said, the qualitative data highlighted tension around clarity of the definition of diversity, inaccurate beliefs that implicit bias could be eliminated, and critiques of a one-time online training with no further institutional accountability. These findings signal the limitations of a single intervention and the need for more sustained organizational supports. Combined with our quantitative results, these themes aligned with the current literature that suggest an equity-minded framework may help mitigate bias and enhance fairness in search processes (Liera, 2020a, 2022; Liera & Ching, 2020). Below, we examine how our themes are supported and reflected in literature related to equity-mindedness and faculty hiring.

From Compliance to Critical Reflection

Respondents across institutional roles reported mean scores above 5 for all items except one. This aggregate result suggested that respondents, regardless of professional role, perceived the training to be effective, which indicates that an equity-minded EO training can be a useful intervention for stakeholders across the university system. Further, by offering the same training to everyone serving on a search committee, this intervention promoted equitable hiring as a shared institutional responsibility, supporting organizational learning, rather than merely individual compliance to institutional policy. Additionally, by providing examples of how committee norms, institutional policies, and allegedly neutral evaluation

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criteria can reproduce inequitable hiring practices, the training assisted respondents in viewing equity in hiring as a group process, instead of an individual charge. This contributed to more critical conversations during the search and a deeper questioning of how to appropriately engage with candidates.

One of the strongest contributions of the revised training, found in both pre and post search survey responses, was respondents' capacity to problematize the search process. This finding reflects the emphasis of equity-mindedness on identifying and scrutinizing practices that appear neutral but may produce inequitable outcomes (Bensimon, 2018; Liera, 2020a). One respondents' reflection on the relationship between diversity and bias, and another's recognition that seemingly innocent questions can generate unfair dynamics, allowed respondents to interrogate their practices with each other. Through this approach, committee participants were invited to discuss their own assumptions and to consider how institutional norms influenced the evaluation of candidates, how committees made decisions, and whose voices carried weight. These types of dialogues are critical in mitigating bias, as Liera and Ching (2020) found that ostensibly value-neutral concepts such as "merit" and "fit" are shaped by history, culture, and power, and may reinforce Whiteness as the unspoken norm within academic hiring. Without questioning the normalized search process, inequitable outcomes are likely to occur. Accordingly, incorporating equity-mindedness into the EO training shifted the discussion from legal compliance to collective reflection, learning, and accountability (Bensimon et al., 2016; Cavanaugh & Green, 2020; Liera, 2022).

One theme focused on a tension that exists around the concept of diversity. While many respondents appreciated a clear definition, one respondent disagreed with the definition, arguing, "Diverse means a mix. A person is not diverse." This issue is reflected in the literature (Hakkola & Ropers, 2018; Jayakumar et al., 2018) and often results in meaningless calls for increases in faculty diversity (Gasman, 2022), which result in minimal traction. This theme highlights the importance of providing nuanced definitions of complex terms like diversity and equity, while also supporting participants in making connections between these terms and the enduring disadvantages of minoritized individuals in academia (Gasman, 2022). Without this bridging, search trainings may inadvertently reinforce the very race-evasive ideology that equity-mindedness is trying to interrogate.

From Passive Awareness to Agency

Equity-mindedness focuses on a shift from blaming individuals for deficiencies to highlighting institutional structures that maintain inequities and allowing for individual agency in changing these structures (Bensimon, 2018). Faculty search committees are often composed of a search committee chair who has seniority and/or tenure, which leads to unequal power dynamics between the junior members of the committee and the potential for bias to emerge during the search (Hakkola & Dyer, 2022). Rather than viewing this issue as an individual problem, the revised EO training encouraged search members to think about how the entire committee is responsible for monitoring and calling out bias. Results supported this shift, as several post survey respondents reported the need to discuss bias openly with their colleagues during their searches. This practice is supported in the literature, as Fine and Handelsman (2006) contend that every search committee member must hold themselves accountable in order to ensure fair search practices ensue.

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Examining an Equity-Minded Search Training

The post survey self-reported perceptions of increased knowledge of and responsiveness to implicit bias align with research on implicit bias training, showing that awareness and intent can improve post-training. This result was reflected in Greenwald et al.s' (2022) study, which examined implicit bias as a public health problem. Their analysis found that organizational preventative training measures can help mitigate implicit biases linked to discriminatory actions. Our results fit within the pattern that this type of training can be successful, as respondents believed they gained knowledge and strategies for mitigating bias during their search. However, it is important to note that providing only one intervention has its limits, as Cahn et al. (2021) argue that while many institutional leaders turn to training of search committees, the effect of such a training is bounded and must be juxtaposed with additional structural interventions. Bhalla (2019) concurs, maintaining that training alone may not shift fundamental hiring practices unless accompanied by structural supports such as rubrics, equity advocates, and standardized protocols. Accordingly, while our results support the theory that intentional equity-minded training can increase perceived knowledge of and responsiveness to implicit bias, long-term impact likely requires coupling trainings with redesigned search protocols that explicitly address "fit," evaluation criteria, and committee processes (Cahn et al., 2021).

A Starting Point

Even with ambiguity about long-term benefits, the result demonstrating little variation between professional roles suggests the training was accessible and relevant to all participants, which was a goal within the context of the equity-minded EO revision process. This is encouraging, since much of the faculty-hiring literature emphasizes the distinct cultures and behaviors of faculty compared with staff and administrators (Cavanaugh & Green, 2020; Hakkola & Dyer, 2022; Liera, 2020a, 2020b). The accessibility and perceived effectiveness of the training offer insight into how EO leaders may incorporate equity-mindedness into their own institutional context, with the recommendation to move beyond a one-time intervention in order to support ongoing reflection and enduring institutional change (Bensimon, 2018; Cahn et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Racially diverse faculty members play a pivotal role in managing positive race relations on campus (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). They also bring a wide range of perspectives to issues and fields of study that enhance the development of student learning outcomes (Nelson Laird, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2001) and increase inclusive excellence and academic freedom (Bilamoria & Buch, 2010; Smith, 2000). The importance of diversity among faculty members is crucial to breaking down stereotypes and implicit bias (Gasman, 2022; Smith, 2000; Umbach, 2006), enriching student experiences (Espenshade & Alexandria, 2009) and fostering innovation (Kets & Sandroni, 2015). Diversity within departments, disciplines, colleges, and universities can send a powerful message about equity and inclusion to students, staff, and faculty as they experience the entirety of their academic environment (Gasman, 2022; Turner et al., 2008). Yet, despite widespread support from institutional leadership to increase diversity in the professoriate (Gasman, 2022), this population remains disproportionately low (AAUP, 2024).

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Inequitable hiring practices towards racially diverse faculty have contributed to low participation rates of this population among the full range of disciplines in post-secondary institutions (AAUP, 2024; Moody, 2012; Trower & Chait, 2002). In response to this issue, our research highlights how an intentionally designed equity-minded EO search training can help decrease implicit bias toward racially diverse candidates and increase equitable hiring practices. Our study demonstrated strong perceived increases in implicit bias awareness and accountability toward monitoring bias during the search process. The results of the study suggest that the revised EO training was a good baseline to support organizational solutions aimed to advance equity in hiring. Broadly speaking, we encourage EO leaders across institutional contexts to consider integrating equity-mindedness into their policies and training activities to create a more sustained accountability process and learning opportunity for all organizational members.

Limitations

There are several limitations to note in this study. Given employees at this institution are only required to attend one EO training during their employment at the institution, the impact of this training may diminish overtime. Accordingly, while the revised EO training was perceived to be effective during the duration of the search and shortly thereafter, the long-term impact of this training warrants further examination. Additionally, while some information has been provided regarding the institutional context, we did not disclose all details to ensure confidentiality of the site and its employees. Thus, the transferability of the results and findings may be limited to institutions of a similar setting to the one in this study.

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We have no conflicts of interests to disclose.

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Human Participants

This study included human participants. The first post-search survey included 151 respondents, and the second post-search survey included 57 respondents. All ethical guidelines are considered by the authors and in alignment with the authors' affiliated university.

Originality Note

This manuscript presents original research conducted by the authors. This work has not been published previously and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The author(s) claimed that [OpenAI] is used in this research just for the purpose of improving the language of the manuscript. No further use of these technologies are also confirmed by the author(s) to write different parts of the research.

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