Why An Unconscious Bias Workshop?

“Together, we are powerful!” is the mantra of the CFA Council for Affirmative Action (CAA).

In December 2012, an intrepid band of CFA activists met as a taskforce to share and discuss their ideas and views about making that mantra a more visible and vibrant part of our work; and making CFA a more inclusive and democratic union. The taskforce conversation centered on revisiting the original intent of the Council for Affirmative Action while building on the work the CAA has already done, to diversify and further democratize CFA.

The taskforce decided that the purpose of the Oakland meeting was to develop something whose scope by necessity had to be big and bold. Something not tried before in the history of the CAA or the CFA. They decided to develop a CAA based diversity training workshop, or series of workshops, that would take our work to the campuses, using the same successful delivery (system) vehicle suggested by (implicit in ) the Lecturers Council’s Nuts and Bolts and Pension and Benefits workshops, yet focused on the signal disempowering force of hidden or unconscious bias. The goals were to create a workshop that could be used at every CSU campus to help faculty become aware of their unconscious biases and preferences and through that awareness, to transform the way hiring, evaluation and retention are done. And to help workshop participants “build a shared vision of how to create a truly inclusive and respectful sense of community with other persons, especially those whose backgrounds are different from their own.”

There was unanimous agreement that something like this, of this scope, was needed on our campuses. But were the taskforce members all on the same page with the definition? What is hidden bias? How could they actually uncover it, much less develop a training module to address it?

Their work was informed by research conducted by the American Values Institute and the Equal Justice Society. Those groups describe hidden (or unconscious or implicit) bias as that which we carry without awareness or conscious direction. Everyone has unconscious biases & preferences. Unconscious biases or preferences are defined as hidden prejudices that we all have that operate on a subconscious level. This could be related to race, gender, disability, religion etc. The hope is that through uncovering each of our unconscious biases and preferences we will become more aware of (and change for the better) the way we behave in the workplace. This could be on RTP committees and/or on hiring/search committees. The idea is to foster an environment wherein we can recruit and retain a more diverse faculty workforce and decrease workplace hostility.

Advances in neuroscience and other social sciences have helped us to understand that people can consciously believe in equality while simultaneously acting on subconscious prejudices they are not aware of. By looking at the complexity of how our brains work, this research has given us a way to understand better how decision making happens in our minds- and to use this understanding to disrupt the impact of hidden biases so that our consciously held values can prevail. Implicit Social Cognition. Also known as Hidden Bias or Unconscious Bias

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or Implicit Bias, arose as a way to explain why discrimination persists, even though polling and other research clearly shows that people oppose it. Initially, some researchers conjectured that people sought to hide their bias from pollsters — and simply lied about their views for fear of appearing prejudiced. Neuroscience and the study of implicit bias allows us a glimpse into the human brain and unravel the mysteries of why we treat each other with such cruelty or with care, and what ultimately leads us to create policies designed to help or to hurt.

The taskforce decided early on that this was not to be your typical diversity workshop. This was meant to make you aware of the subconscious, hidden or previously unknown biases and preferences that exist in all of us. This workshop would involve real and personal effort! This would mean sharing on a deeply personal level and going deep!

A workshop that is both engaging and creative was created. Participants will be required to take a few online tests that were developed using academic research methods to uncover each of our unconscious biases or preferences. The tests, called Implicit Association Tests (or IAT’s), are short, easy and even fun. The IAT was invented by Anthony Greenwald and colleagues in the mid 1990s. Project Implicit\(^i\), which allows individuals to take these tests online, is maintained by Anthony Greenwald (Washington), Mahzarin Banaji (Harvard), and Brian Nosek (Virginia).

The workshop is designed to allow discussion about the IAT, an illustration of bias and exercises to uncover how bias has shaped participants individual lives as well as the organizations in which they work. With this awareness the workshop moves to a discussion methodology that guides participants through their past, present, future and helps them set goals for personal change and the creation of institutional change.

Initial feedback about this workshop, gathered by formative evaluation at several CSU campuses, has been very positive to date. The team of volunteer faculty presenters continues this work with a full schedule across the CSU in Fall 2016, and looks forward to a busy Spring 2017 as well.

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\(^ii\) http://www.americanvaluesinstitute.org/

\(^iii\) http://writers.unconsciousbias.org/

\(^iv\) http://writers.unconsciousbias.org/

\(^v\) https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/

\(^vi\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Currere

\(^vii\) http://www.equaljusticesociety.org/

\(^viii\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Pinar