

Tips for Student Selection: Avoiding Equity and Inclusion Hazards



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Unwelcoming Program Application

Program descriptions do not show diverse students are welcome, that the environment is supportive, and that they can be successful.

Common mistakes:

- Jargon, technical terms, vague words, and acronyms instead of plain language.
- Potentially exclusionary language (e.g. his/her vs. their).
- Unnecessarily high or vague minimum requirements, "Shows potential in X, Y, Z", "Shows commitment to..."
- Failing to explicitly welcome diverse prospective students to apply



In-Group Bias

Decisions are made based on similarities to the decision maker(s) or other irrelevant criteria.

Common mistakes::

- Valuing "fit" or "likeability"
- A selection committee of just one demographic group
- Leaving decisions up to one single interviewer
- Evaluating prospective students without a rubric



Adverse Effect Discrimination & Stereotype Threat

A stressful, intimidating, or unfriendly process for members of certain groups leads to overwhelm and decreased performance.

Common mistakes:

- The process creates unequal treatment for some people (adverse effect discrimination)
- The process undermines the prospective student's confidence by reinforcing a negative stereotype (stereotype threat)
- The process does not allow all prospective students to show their strengths



Lack of Transparency About the Selection Process

The prospective student feels confused about the goals of the process, is unable to demonstrate their full excellence, or when biased input from external sources is allowed to influence the final decision.

Common mistakes:

- Some members of the selection committee have not engaged with or attended different aspects of the selection process
- Conflict of interest and bias affecting the final decision
- Scrutinizing prospective students from diverse backgrounds more intensely
- Comments unrelated to the rubric, "He's charming...", "She's attractive..." etc.



Negative Encounters with Untrained Colleagues

Staff or faculty members make inappropriate comments that lead to a grievance or complaint or make the prospective student question whether they want to stay in the selection process.

Common mistakes:

- Lack of training
- Lack of communication about "off limits" topics
- Saying things or asking questions that are not allowed to be said or asked (i.e. because it is related to protected grounds)



Use recruitment materials to attract diverse students

- Use a flexible and welcoming tone.
- Indicate that accommodations are available for prospective students with disabilities.
- Include the University Diversity Statement.
- Be clear about duties and responsibilities.
- Be expansive about credentials, education, transferrable skills, experience, or contexts that may be of value. For example—parenting or managing a restaurant can provide multi-tasking or inter-cultural competency skills.



Form a diverse & welcoming selection committee

- Consider the types of diversity it is important to have represented in the selection committee (identity, discipline, position, etc.).
- Ensure there are at least 3 people on the committee.
- If there is little demographic diversity in your department, consider inviting members from other departments, rather than overburdening the same colleagues by repeatedly asking them to join.



Create a humane, accessible process for diverse applicants

- Create a process that is warm and inviting and signals that this prospective student belongs.
- Follow principles of universal design—provide options that allow all prospective students to demonstrate their strengths.
- Provide sufficient breaks throughout the process, including snacks, water, lactation rooms, and a quiet space for prospective students to recharge.
- Ensure accessibility needs are met—universal washrooms, baby feeding areas, food choices, transportation considerations.



Design an equitable, standardized & transparent process

- Describe in detail: who will be present at each step, the goals and timeline for each part, and who is involved in the final decision (also who is not).
- Provide interview questions ahead of time so that the applicant has time to review them.
- Use a standardized script for greeting and giving clear instructions.



Provide training to everyone who meets with prospective students

- Provide training about what conversations and questions are allowed and what is off-limits.
- Prospective students may meet with a variety of people, but only members of the selection committee should impact the ranking and final decision.