



Ensure Students Are Learning:

Equity-Minded Principles for Department Chairs to Engage Faculty

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Department chairs and other key roles like deans, assistant and associate deans, directors, and senior faculty members are all administrative positions typically deemed as **midlevel leadership** (Amey & Eddy, 2018). Midlevel leaders are responsible for the daily institutional operations and have more of a pulse on what students need and what issues colleges in communities are facing (Eddy et al., 2016). Midlevel leaders such as department chairs are on the front line advancing equity work. Therefore, community colleges should develop the capacity and potential for individuals serving as department chairs to be equity-minded change leaders.

Bragg and McCambly (2018) envision **equity-minded change leaders** as “advocates for addressing inequities in the experiences and outcomes of students of color and other student groups systematically failed by educational organizations” (p. 2). While top-level leaders are more conspicuous, forward-facing representatives of the college, midlevel leaders, like department chairs, are more under the radar and perhaps more unfettered to take the risks necessary to dismantle policies, structures, and even practices like implicit biases, which are unduly harmful to minoritized students (Eddy et al., 2016).

Uncovering Implicit Bias

While we might not consciously convey our biases, we all bear **implicit biases** that negatively influence our decision-making processes and actions as educators. Implicit biases are attitudes and stereotypes that “affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Activated involuntarily without awareness or intentional control. Can be either positive or negative. Everyone is susceptible” (Staats, Capatosto, Wright, & Jackson, 2016, p. 14).

Moreover, we are all socialized to have implicit biases as these biases are formed by the unfortunate messages we receive about different groups of people (Staats et al., 2016).

Department chairs work closely with faculty and other key instructional staff such as academic advisors. Thus, they are in a unique position to lead and help others become aware of their implicit biases.

The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity suggests the following steps to challenge and change our implicit biases, and so we recommend that department chairs consider how these steps can be embedded in faculty and staff meetings as well as ongoing professional development.

1) **Educate Yourself** by taking the Implicit Association Test (IAT) at implicit.harvard.edu and brainstorm concrete ways in which you can change your pedagogical practices based on the results.

2) **Take Action** by seeking out and connecting with other faculty and staff who have also bought into and are actively countering their stereotypical views towards minoritized students.

3) **Be Accountable** by honestly confronting your own biases and actions (Staats et al., 2016, p. 15).

In conclusion, we suggest department chairs create time, space, and processes that allow faculty to evaluate and critically examine their own instructional practices for evidence of implicit biases. For an expanded discussion on this topic, see Andrews and Welton (2020).

References

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