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Regional

For social justice, we need to look in the mirror

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr.
Letters from Academia

One of the most contentious issues in politics in general – and in higher education in particular – is political correctness.

Usually defined as the avoidance of language or actions that are seen as excluding, marginalizing, or insulting groups of people that have been discriminated against because of their gender, race, or other identifying factors.

The term is now oftentimes used in a pejorative sense, particularly in conservative circles.

Higher education, more than any other setting, has been pointed out as the main generator of political correctness. Yet, academia continues to be one of the major offenders when it comes to real actions towards equality.

According to the American Association of University Professors, despite the fact that 60 percent of all doctoral students in the U.S. are women, only 46 percent of assistant professors, 38 percent of associate professors, and 23 percent of full professors are female.

In Europe, the numbers are similar. On top of that, women faculty members at colleges and universities in the United States earn on average 10 percent less than their male counterparts.

And women higher education administrators earn, on average, 20 percent less than their male counterparts, about the same difference as in corporate America.

When it comes to ethnicity, the statistics are no better.

According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, nearly 35 percent of assistant professors are minorities, but only 18 percent of them reach the top level of the academic echelon, full professorship.

To remedy this situation of inequality, many colleges and universities try to include (or increase) the number of women and minorities on search and promotion committees. One of the unintended consequences of this policy is that in institutions with a low percentage of minorities and women, they can get overworked by disproportionate participation in those committees with the expectations that any bias by white males will be excluded.

Now new research is providing data showing that such efforts can be counterproductive. In a study published just a few weeks ago in the journal "American Economic Review," the authors found that a larger number of women in evaluation committees does not increase either the quantity or the quality of female candidates. Further, the researchers found that female evaluators are not significantly more favorable toward female candidates, and that, at the same time, male evaluators become less favorable toward female candidates as soon as a female evaluator joins the committee.

These results seem counterintuitive. Yet, the methodology behind this research is robust. They analyzed how a larger presence of female evaluators affects committee decision-making using information on 100,000 applications to associate and full professorships in Italy and Spain and these applications were assessed by 8,000 randomly selected evaluators. So, there is no question that they used large enough sample sizes to generate their outcomes.

But how can we explain these results? For years there has been the belief that once women entered the lower ranks of the academic career, it was only a matter of time that they would move their way through the pipeline to reach high-level jobs. This is known as the "pipeline theory." Yet, after decades of making sure that women are included in search and promotion committees, the share of women among faculty members remains low. That is particularly true in disciplines such as philosophy, mathematics, and physics.

Another explanation that has been advanced is that due to biological (pregnancy, maternal care) and social constraints (lack of sensible maternity leave policies, expectations for gendered roles at the household level, lack of female role models), women are less productive in the number of publications they write, the main measure used to evaluate scholarly performance. Further, several studies have shown that there is a bias against females who coauthor publications with males in the belief that the males were the ones who really did the work.

Other explanations have been advanced. One is that because of social pressures some women may dedicate more time to "socially desirable" tasks. Another is that women are less likely to apply for promotions because they feel they will be discriminated against anyway.

These results remind me of a study by Robert Putnam, a Harvard professor, that was published 10 years ago that showed that in ethnically diverse neighborhoods trust (even of one' own race) is lower, altruism and community cooperation rarer, friends fewer.

What this means is that we humans have an issue with diversity. When we make groups (in this case committees) more diverse, what happens is that people respond negatively to such mixes. That is why many colleges and universities have been implementing in the last few years surveys that help to identify our own biases. We in academia don't like to think that we are racists or misogynists, but the reality is quite different.

A colleague of mine, psychologist Kristin Sommer of Baruch College, pointed out that there is research that shows that training people with counter-stereotypical exemplars causes a decrease in implicit measures of racism, with results lasting at least 24 hours.

The same can be said regarding gender. What these studies imply is that if we want to "re-program" or condition ourselves to think less stereotypically, we need to be more attentive to counter-stereotypical exemplars in everyday life.

Therefore, although the idea of making search and promotion committees more diverse seems to be the right thing to do to advance the cause of social justice, in the final analysis we have to look to ourselves and make sure we do not carry the biases that seem to be part of human nature.

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