

Helping students navigate implicit bias

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Credit: Changbok Ko

Most undergraduates will tell you they don't have a bias for or against any gender in the workplace—but surveys will often reveal implicit biases that the students aren't aware of. An interdisciplinary team at NC State University has developed an interactive class exercise aimed at business school undergraduates that uses real-world career tools to help students navigate issues related to implicit bias.

"We hope the tool will be used in classes to give students some experience in thinking about issues related to [implicit bias](#), about how the language we use can affect our [unconscious biases](#), and about how these unconscious biases can play out in both their careers and in professional activities that affect others," says Marcia Gumpertz, a professor of statistics at NC State and co-author of a paper on the educational tool.

The paper, "An instructional exercise in gender [bias](#)," is published in the *Journal of Accounting Education*. The paper offers a detailed description of the [educational tool](#), allowing instructors to incorporate it into their courses. The researchers note that the tool could likely be used in any undergraduate classroom, and has clear relevance to any undergraduate coursework in the business disciplines.

During the exercise, students are asked to take an online survey. In the survey, students are told to assume that they have just been hired by a company and asked to evaluate three [job candidates](#). The students are given job descriptions and resumes to review. The job descriptions were manipulated to use language that is coded as being masculine or feminine. The job candidates were given names that are used equally by men and women (Taylor or Peyton) or are predominantly viewed as being masculine (Jacob or Michael) or feminine (Emily or Hannah). The researchers selected "accountant" for one of the jobs, because research finds that people explicitly state it is a gender neutral position, but implicitly view it as being masculine.

After completing the survey, the instructor provides a brief overview of bias and implicit bias, followed by a review of the survey results and discussion about how implicit bias may have influenced those results.

"The exercise is designed to engage students, but has clearly-defined learning objectives," says Beth Ritter, corresponding author of the paper

and a professor of practice of human resource management in NC State's Poole College of Management (PCOM). "We want students to gain an understanding of bias; to be able to identify common forms of unconscious bias; know about evidence-based strategies for reducing bias; be familiar with gender-coded wording and how it can influence [professional activities](#); and learn about tools that employers can use to reduce common forms of bias in recruiting and hiring."

"I worked on this project as an undergraduate, and think it's a valuable [tool](#) for helping students learn both how to advocate for themselves and how to navigate their own biases—I found it useful professionally after graduation," says Alexsiara Bynum, co-author of the paper and currently a UX designer for a large aerospace company.

"It's also important because we are effectively trained to compartmentalize conversations about bias, diversity and equity, but this training exercise puts those issues into the context of a [student's](#) career," says Tayah Butler, Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in PCOM. "In other words, the exercise drives home that bias and equity are things that will affect students. It's going to be part of their professional lives, and it is important for them to be aware of these subjects.

"We want students to understand that you don't have to have the word 'diversity' in your job title to make an impact. People in all sorts of different careers can make a difference for the better simply by being thoughtful about implicit bias in their actions and behaviors."

More information: Beth M. Ritter et al. An instructional exercise in gender bias, *Journal of Accounting Education* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jaccedu.2020.100710](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaccedu.2020.100710)

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