Diversity and Inclusion Focus Groups 2019-20
2019 Theme: Networks

Experience shaped by connections
Who? In what context? How often?

Connections of many types
Professional
Social
Interdisciplinary
THIS YEAR:

Fall~ systemic ways that diversity is hindered (big picture)

Spring~ interpersonal ways we can be inclusive (small picture)

Goals:
think more deeply and broadly about topics of inclusivity
learn about each others’ experiences in this department
Today: Letters of Recommendation

Why do we care?
- They are often considered the most important part of a student application
- They are a central part of the faculty selection process

Can it reinforce inequality?
- They can be written and read with a framework of bias unintentionally
- Placing a lot of weight on who is writing the letter measures the applicant’s access to prestigious writers (again)
  - Which potential writers are seen as unbiased by the applicant?
Fast FACTS

- Application materials are more likely to be considered qualified to be a laboratory manager if they are associated with a male name
  - “Faculty's subtle gender biases favor male students” Corinne A. Moss-Racusin, John F. Dovidio, Victoria L. Brescoll, Mark J. Graham, Jo Handelsman; Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences Sep 2012, 201211286; DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1211286109

- Letters of rec tend to have more standout words for men than women. Letters with standout words also have more ability-associated words, rather than grindstone-associated words.
Grindstone Adjectives

- 34% of female letters included these, only 23% of men.
- Men are described in terms of ability, women in terms of effort.
- Contrast grindstone adjectives to ability adjectives.


Personal realm: ‘teaching’, ‘training’

Professional realm: ‘research’, ‘skills’, ‘career’
Featured Article:
Women postdocs less likely than men to get a glowing reference

- Study of recommendation letters for postdoctoral positions
- Women were 10% less likely to get an “excellent” recommendation
- In many fields, women leave academia at the stage of applying for a postdoc
- In similar studies that account for differences in qualifications, a similar but smaller effect is found
- Readers may also have biases: “team player” is more likely to be read as a leadership quality for a man, but makes a woman sound like a follower
Editors’ choice of reviewers differed by gender across STEM fields: men are much more likely to pick men, and women are more likely pick women.

This was true for most men; the effect in women was due to a small number of outliers. Most women did not choose in an unbalanced fashion.

Note: the study did not control for an effect in which women are less likely to accept an offer to be a reviewer.

This may be due to the way scientists construct their social networks

It may be due to a general tendency of homophily, which would mean generally selecting for people more similar to you.
Community Values

- Step-up, step-back.
- Listen actively, respectfully and with an open mind.
- De-escalate; criticize ideas, not individuals.
- Be cautious about sharing specific, personal or targeted situations or people.
- Use “I” statements.
- Avoid judgement, blame and inflammatory language.
- Avoid assumptions about any member of the group.
- Take care of yourself.
Let’s talk

*Discussion Ideas*

- pros/cons of the letter of recommendation system?
- places where bias can arise?
- places where bias can be avoided?
- structural factors at play?
- role of the social and professional network?
- role of language in letters and in general?