Gender Equity in the Classroom and Beyond
15 Evidence Based Strategies
Promoting a Productive and Inclusive Classroom Climate

As a fully gender-inclusive institution, Chatham University continues its historic commitment to women's leadership and gender equity, in the classroom, across campus, and beyond. Here are fifteen evidence-based strategies from a multi-disciplinary research literature that promote a productive, inclusive, and welcoming classroom climate for all students.

1. Examine your assumptions and biases.

It is very common for instructors to assume that student share their own background, but this is not necessarily so. Do you find yourself addressing students as if they all share your religion, gender or sexual identity, or economic class? Assume that in every class you will have students who self-identify as LGBTQIA, first generation students, and students who have lived in poverty. If we keep that in mind, it can help us avoid using language or examples that are non-inclusive. [See our "Checking Your Assumptions" resource.]

Also, consider taking an Implicit Association Test (IAT) to explore your own implicit biases. Even people consciously committed to equality and who reject prejudice, can still retain unconscious prejudices or negative stereotypes that will be revealed on an IAT. For example, a person might believe that women and men are equally good at STEM, but the automatic associations used on the test could show closer associations with men and STEM than women and STEM. [See implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html to take an IAT.]

2. Learn and use students' names and gender pronouns.

Chatham classes tend to be small, which makes learning student names easier! You can start with a few names and build up. At the very least, let students know you are making an effort to do so. One technique is to ask students to state their names before every comment they make in class for the first couple of weeks: it can be awkward for the first day, but then students often appreciate the exercise as they also learn their peers' names.

Rather than calling roll from the roster, which may include "dead names," consider asking students to state their names and gender pronouns on the first day of class. This inclusive practice allows students to self-identify, avoids mis-gendering, and helps to challenge assumptions we all make based on gender presentation. We never want to force a student to say more than they wish, but this practice changes norms and can provide an enormous sense of relief for those who are rarely given the opportunity to name themselves.

3. Model inclusive language.

Most basically, avoid using masculine pronouns and terms for both males and females (for instance, at Chatham we use "First Year Students rather than "Freshmen"). When you use American idioms, explain them for the benefit of non-native English speakers. Be familiar with and comfortable using the common terms that trans and gender-identity-diverse students use to self-identify. [To familiarize yourself with emerging gender terms, see our "Sex and Gender 101" resource.] Listen to the way your students self-identify and use the same language they do.

Using inclusive language means talking in a way that does not specify a gender, sex, or sexual orientation. For example, instead of using terms such as "boyfriend," "girlfriend," "husband," "wife," or "spouse," you can use "partner" or "significant other." Or, instead of using terms such as "mom and dad," you can use "family," which would be inclusive of students who have single parents, stepparents, LGBTQIA parents, or any alternate family structure. Also, use "sexual identity" or "sexual orientation" rather than "sexual preference" or "lifestyle." Note: Make sure you never disclose a person's sexual or gender identity without their permission. This information should be considered confidential, and you should not reveal it to anyone else unless the student has given you permission to do so.

4. Use multiple and diverse examples.

Multiple examples increase the likelihood of students relating to at least one of them. Take care to include examples that speak to individuals across the gender spectrum and that work across cultures.

5. Establish ground rules for interaction.

This will ensure that other students are also being inclusive and respectful. In order to generate maximum buy-in to the ground rules, you can engage the students in helping to write them on the first day of class. You will still need to enforce the ground rules and correct students for the occasional non-inclusive or disrespectful comment. [See also our "Sample Classroom Policies" resource.]

6. Examine your curriculum.

Think about whether certain perspectives are systematically not represented in your course materials (for instance, a course on family focusing only on traditional families, or a course on public policy ignoring race issues).

Neglecting some issues implies a value judgment, which can alienate certain groups of students. Whenever possible, select texts and readings whose language is gender-inclusive and free of stereotypes, or cite the shortcomings of material that does not meet these criteria so that students are aware of it. Think carefully about assignments that ask students to describe their personal lives, either in writing or during class discussion; you don't want to create a situation where students feel forced to reveal their gender or sexual identities or to pretend to be heterosexual or cis-gender out of fear of how you or the other students in the class might react. Check out this handy tool that can help you analyze your syllabus for gender balance of authors:

jlsumner.shinyapps.io/syllabustool/

7. Use blind grading and admissions.

It is crucial to be perceived as fair, both in grading and in implementing course policies. Perceptions of unfairness can induce feelings of learned helplessness, which are highly demotivating for students. One way to address implicit bias is to always use blind grading: hide student names or use cover sheets with student names that you can remove before grading. You can also avoid grading in alphabetical order, or use a code in place of names, to keep yourself "blind" to the student you are assessing.

If you are part of an admissions committee, use blind admission techniques: for instance, for graduate admissions, read letters of recommendation last, after other criteria has been evaluated. Note that we academics tend to over-emphasize pedigree, and that white and Asian men are over represented at the top schools. Letter writers for women also tend to use words like "brilliant" far less often than for men.

8. Be mindful of low ability cues.

In their efforts to help students, some instructors inadvertently send mixed messages. A classic (and hopefully waning) example is: "Sure, I'll be happy to help you with this, I know women tend to have more trouble with math." These cues encourage attributions focused on permanent, uncontrollable causes, which diminish students' self-efficacy. Instead, it is more productive to focus on controllable causes, such as effort.

9. Assign mixed groups.

Research shows that groups with women perform better than those with all men by boosting their "collective intelligence" or "c" factor. The average intelligence of a group does not impact the "c" factor very much, nor does having "smart" individuals in the group; in experiments, the single most important element of a smart group was its "average social sensitivity," or ability to read non-verbal cues from teammates, an area where women tend to score higher. By assigning students to mixed groups and explaining this rationale, instructors can help students think about how they will implement this strategy in their work settings.

10. Monitor who is speaking.

With even just a few men in a classroom, the gender dynamics shift with women tending to get proportionately less airtime. Pay attention to who is speaking and why. Perceptions can be highly skewed and even well meaning instructors may believe that women are getting equitable

speaking time: use data sources if you have them. For instance, when having teams report back on their work, track who is chosen to speak, and consider assigning that role if groups consistently choose male representatives.

11. Attend to other inequalities.

Gender is not the only inequality operating in our classrooms. We experience multiple and intersecting identities and systems of power at the same time, including race and ability. Be sure you are attending to this intersectionality. For example, recognize that women of color are often silenced twice, for reasons of both gender and race. Also, be sure you are providing reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities, as required by law. You can contact our OAAR Center for more information.

12. Don't ask people to speak for an entire group.

Students from marginalized groups often report either feeling invisible in class, or sticking out like a sore thumb as a token. This experience is heightened when they are addressed as spokespeople for their whole group, and can have negative implications on performance. Since members from an underrepresented group may feel the effects of gender, ethnicity and race in different ways, be careful not to assume that all the female students in your classroom have similar attitudes or experiences or that their concerns about gender will be more pressing for them than, say, race or class or religion.

13. Practice inclusive classroom behaviors.

Researchers have documented the small unconscious behaviors – "micro-inequities" – that certain student groups experience repeatedly. For instance, in traditional gender inclusive classrooms women report that instructors tend to interrupt them more often than men, ignore them more often, call on them less often, ask them more recall questions and less analytical questions, acknowledge their contributions less, and build on their answers less. To combat the highly discouraging cumulative effect of these micro-inequities, consider these strategies:

- *After you ask questions, look around the room to make eye contact with students of all genders.* Use this eye contact as nonverbal encouragement for student participation. Check yourself to see that you're not looking mostly at those students closest to you.

- *Watch students for nonverbal clues that may signal interest or disagreement, and call on them in addition to those who raise their hands.*

- *Be aware of the nonverbal clues you may be giving to students as they speak.* For instance, leaning forward, which suggests interest, or looking at your watch – can have an important effect on which students speak again.

- *If you find that you consistently lecture or sit next to certain students, move to new locations, or move around the room as you speak.*

- *Increase your wait time for responses.* Average teacher wait time is one second, but a wait time of 3-5 seconds produces significantly more, and better responses from more students. You might have to ask your question, and then count off the seconds to yourself before you call on students. You can also have all the students write a quick response to your question, and then pick someone who might normally be hesitant to speak to report to the class. Or, you can form students into pairs, and have them briefly share responses with each other before you call on individual students to report their ideas to the class ("Think-Pair-Share"). Don't always call on the student who raises their hand the fastest or who solves the problem first. You can tell students that you will not call on anyone for several seconds so they can think through their answers. This prepares them for the silence that follows and encourages everyone to think.

14. Address tensions early.

If you are closely monitoring the climate and it becomes apparent that you or others are inadvertently shutting people out, marginalizing others, pressing someone's buttons, or so on, you want to address the situation before it gets out of hand. This may mean apologizing for yourself and others: for instance, saying something like, "I'm sorry if some of you interpreted my comment as …". Or take a student aside after class to explain, "Some people believe it is racist or sexist to say, xyz."

You want to confront comments that are heterosexist, homophobic, or biased in terms of gender identity or expression right away. It is important to respond to comments that use non-inclusive or derogatory language or that rely on stereotypes or assumptions, especially comments made in the classroom. When inappropriate comments are made, all eyes will be on you. How you respond to such comments sends an important message to all the students in your classroom. [See also our "Handling Hot Moments" resource.] It can help to discuss intent versus impact, for example, saying, "You probably didn't mean this, but some people might interpret your comments as sexist because…" This strategy protects students who make unsophisticated remarks so that they don't shut down, which would prevent further development. But at the same time, you are acknowledging the frustration of the rest of the class.

15. Address biases in hiring.

Students benefit from having a diverse faculty; and faculty and staff also benefit from having diverse colleagues. Recent research demonstrates the ways in which implicit biases impact academic recruiting and hiring practices, even when institutions value diversity. To address implicit bias on faculty search committees, be sure to establish search criteria (for instance, using weighted rankings) before reviewing applications. When it is done later, people tend to rationalize their choices to fit their unconscious bias and support the candidates they like. In addition, including at least two women (or people of color, or LGBTQIA people) in a finalist pool greatly increases the chances of a "diverse" hire: new evidence shows that when there is only one woman or marginalized-identity candidate in a pool, their odds of being hired are statistically zero. But the addition of just one more woman or marginalized-identity person leads decision makers to consider those candidates.

Evidence and Resources

These teaching strategies were adapted by Jessie B. Ramey, Ph.D., Director of the Women's Institute at Chatham Univeristy and Associate Professor of Women's & Gender Studies, from the following sources:

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