Managing Implicit Bias in Teaching Observation

About Implicit Bias
Implicit bias affects everyone. The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity defines implicit bias as “the attitudes or stereotypes that unconsciously affect our understanding, actions, and decisions. These biases include both favorable and unfavorable assessments and are activated without one’s awareness or intentional control. Individuals therefore do not consciously hide these biases, and they also do not necessarily align with our declared beliefs” or intentions.

Implicit Bias in the Classroom
Implicit bias can affect the evaluation of a range of groups, including but not limited to faculty from traditionally marginalized racial or ethnic groups, female or gender non-conforming faculty, or faculty who are overweight, older, less able-bodied, speakers of English as a second (or third or fourth) language, and many more. We hear often about the impact of implicit bias on students (e.g. bias against women in STEM, socioeconomic bias, dialect bias). Those same implicit biases can affect our views of instructors as well.

Strategies for Managing Implicit Bias
It is important to act intentionally and to rely on clear structures rooted in the evidence from observations, the criteria of effective teaching from the scholarship of teaching and learning, and the stated goals of the instructor for the class session itself.

Prior to conducting an observation, pause for reflection to avoid implicit bias through self-awareness and to promote open-minded consideration of the classroom environment.

- When you picture the classroom you plan to observe, do you make assumptions about the students who may be in the room for that course? Do you note any surprises in your preconceptions about the learning environment? Try imagining a different set of students and consider how both groups may achieve the same level of academic success.
- Consider participating in Harvard’s Project Implicit program. Take one or more of Harvard University’s confidential Implicit Association Tests (IAT) to help identify implicit biases you may have developed in early life or through interacts with mass media or other cultural influences. According to Project Implicit, the IAT “measures attitudes and beliefs that people may be unwilling or unable to report” in order to achieve greater understanding of the unconscious processes that shape our social interactions.
- Check in with yourself as you review the syllabus and course materials. Imagine a different instructor had submitted the same materials. Would you view them any differently? Why or why not?
- During a classroom teaching observation, you may also wish to take a few minutes to listen to the room without looking at the instructor or students and reflecting upon whether or not you notice additional evidence of learning within the classroom.