Understanding when Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Work “Counts” in Faculty Evaluation (2021-2024)

National Science Foundation
Education and Human Resources, EHR Core Research
HRD Award Number: 2055343

Abstract

Colleges and universities are urgently investing in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts after longstanding and recent calls for racial justice. Much of this labor will be taken up by BIPOC faculty who were already engaged. Yet numerous national surveys, interviews, exit studies, and tenure denials consistently report that when it comes to their tenure and promotion, DEI does not “count,” or they are not sure whether and how DEI worked counted in decisions made. Institutions have tried to reform the tenure process to reward DEI work, including providing equity charges to committees, adding policy language valuing DEI work, encouraging candidates to document DEI work in personnel statements, and using rubrics in evaluation. Each of these interventions can be characterized as different kinds of “nudges.” Nudges refer to deliberate changes to the decision-making context aimed at guiding people toward a particular behavior, which in this case is valuing DEI work. Unfortunately, there is little concrete evidence that any of these initiatives have nudged decisions to value DEI work.

In this study, we use a between-subjects experimental survey design with a national sample of biology and engineering faculty to understand under what conditions, if at all, DEI work is calculated into promotion and tenure decision-making. Guided by research in behavioral economics, psychology, organizational behavior, and higher education, we use behavioral design techniques to alter the decision-making context, or “choice architecture,” in which individuals make decisions in tenure and promotion contexts. We seek to understand the kinds of interventions that positively impact whether and how much DEI weighs in tenure and promotion decisions. This study is the first to use an experimental design to test faculty weighting of DEI in tenure decisions in a STEM field. The study will also contribute to the emerging literature on nudges in higher education organizations and their utility in faculty affairs.

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