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# An Intervention Strategy Addressing Implicit Bias in Scholarships

By Lauren M. Klink, University of Wisconsin-Madison

*White students receive a disproportionate amount of private scholarships compared to their Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) peers (Kantrowitz, 2011). Scholarships provide important financial support for higher education and BIPOC students are more likely to graduate with loan debt compared to their White peers (Mishory et al., 2019). This loan debt is higher on average for BIPOC students compared to White students (Mishory et al., 2019). Scholarships could provide funding to reduce loan debt. In considering administrators who are involved in selection processes such as scholarship awarding, their implicit bias can impact judgment (Capers et al., 2017). I have sought to lessen the potential impact of implicit bias on scholarship administration through a low-cost and adaptable intervention strategy which is being piloted at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The intervention includes a website, holistic training modules, campus communications and an annual meeting.*

Keywords: Scholarships, Implicit Bias, Debt, Applications

Financial aid administrators need to consider how their implicit bias impacts decisions surrounding scholarship awarding. White students receive an extraordinary amount of scholarships compared to their Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) peers (Kantrowitz, 2011). Nationally, White students represent 69.3% of private scholarship recipients, but represent 61.8% of the undergraduate student population (Kantrowitz, 2011). BIPOC students represent 30.5% of private scholarship recipients and 38.0% of the undergraduate student population (Kantrowitz, 2011). As a financial aid administrator, I have explored this problem through understanding the impacts implicit bias has on scholarship awarding and share an intervention being piloted at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to reduce these potential impacts.

Implicit bias encompasses the views or stereotypes impacting people's actions and decisions outside of their conscious awareness (Staats, 2015). These preferences impact socialization, interpreting unfamiliar information, and decision-making (Kantrowitz, 2011). Implicit bias is experienced by most people and bias could contribute towards disproportionate scholarship awarding between White and BIPOC students (Staats, 2015).

## Literature Brief

The literature is lacking specific data on the impacts of implicit bias on financial aid administrators responsible for scholarship selection. However, the impacts of implicit bias on scholarship applications can be explored through reviewing literature on bias in key fields typically used on applications. The key fields I suggest are: names of students, test scores as a proxy for merit, co-curricular activity evaluation, and recruitment efforts.

## **White-Sounding Names**

Scholarship applications require a student name to be listed and this provides an opportunity for implicit bias. Students with White-sounding names receive more frequent responses from professors and admissions counselors (Milkman et al. 2015, Thornhill, 2017). Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) reviewed employment applications that were identical with the exception of the name listed. The researchers determined that White-sounding names like Emily or Greg received significantly more call-backs than Lakisha or Jamal (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). This literature demonstrates that bias exists towards names even when the material in the body of the email, application, or resume is identical.

## **Merit Test Scores**

Merit is a key field on scholarship applications and is often displayed as a standardized test score. Implicit bias impacts merit when we consider who generally performs well on standardized tests. LaFortune et al. (2018) found that BIPOC students were more likely to attend schools in underperforming lower-income school districts and that standardized test scores in these districts are below average. Yet, these standardized test scores may be required in scholarship applications (Slay, 2020). When scholarship administrators require this information, they should consider how a school district's funding is closely correlated with test score achievement (LaFortune et al., 2018).

## **Extra-Curricular Activities**

Scholarship applications typically require a list of extra-curricular student activities. Extra-curricular activities are functions performed outside of a general course of study (Broh, 2002). A student is more likely to participate in extra-curricular activities if they have greater time and resources (Broh, 2002). Requiring extra-curricular activities could disadvantage BIPOC students who are less likely to participate due to limited time and resources compared to their White peers (Meier et al., 2018). Meier et al. (2018) and Broh (2002) conclude that extra-curricular activities may be dependent on wealth and may not be a predictor of success at the collegiate level. As a result of these findings, extra-curricular activities on scholarship applications may be an inaccurate assessment of achievement.

## **Scholarship Recruitment Networks**

Griffin and Muniz (2011) suggest that informal networking is important for student recruitment. When students are recruited for scholarships, scholarship information may have biased language and also may not be shared in spaces that are inclusive (Slay, 2020). This biased approach leaves BIPOC students excluded from opportunities that they do not know exist (Slay, 2017). This is important at historically White institutions where BIPOC administrators are low in numbers and while they are invested in the success of students, they are often tapped to serve in many roles (Harper, 2012). In being more intentional in sharing information in a variety of

places and languages, more students of diverse backgrounds could receive access to scholarship opportunities (Slay, 2020).

### **Intervention Strategy**

The literature suggests that implicit bias could impact the scholarship application process (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Broh, 2002; Knoester & Au, 2014; Slay, 2020). The intervention strategy focuses on how financial aid administrators interpret names of students, review test scores as a proxy for merit, understand extra-curricular activity in evaluations, and create recruitment strategies (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Broh, 2002; Knoester & Au, 2014; Slay, 2020). The intervention strategy was developed using a logic model (see Appendix A). To address implicit bias in scholarship awarding, the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Office of Student Financial Aid (OSFA) developed a website with resources on implicit bias, conducted an annual meeting with the campus scholarship community to discuss bias in scholarship awarding and is working towards creating online training modules. To integrate the strategy into practice, administrators are expected to review the website and training modules prior to the annual meeting to contribute towards a campus-wide best practice discussion.

### **Intervention Website**

Creating an implicit bias awareness website leveraged our financial aid website to add a page: <https://financialaid.wisc.edu/types-of-aid/scholarships/inclusive-practices/> ("Inclusive Scholarship Practices, 2021). The site is compiled with national resources and has the following sections: understanding unconscious bias, unconscious bias and the review process, and addressing unconscious bias. The site hosts a variety of mediums for varying learning styles with articles, books, film, and webinars. Lastly, the site links to additional campus events so scholarship administrators can connect with trainings hosted at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I caution that the website is not all-inclusive, but adaptable to allow for suggestions through our contact information.

### **Annual Campus Administrator Meeting**

Scholarship administration at the University of Wisconsin-Madison is decentralized. Each school, college, department, and program maintains oversight over their individual scholarship funds. OSFA provides campus technical support and administers the contract for our scholarship management tool known as the Wisconsin Scholarship Hub (WiSH). As the platform managers, OSFA hosts an annual meeting with all scholarship administrators to discuss process improvements, best practices, stewardship, and fund management. OSFA utilized this meeting in spring 2021 to promote the implicit bias website and facilitated a conversation on the impacts of implicit bias in scholarship administration. We provided research on implicit bias in the key fields: names of students, test scores as proxy for merit, extra-curricular activity evaluation, and recruitment efforts (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Broh, 2002; Knoester & Au, 2014; Slay, 2020). OSFA assists scholarship administrators review their applications for implicit bias and have currently reviewed 3 departmental applications. We will bring this topic back to the annual

meeting in 2022 to discuss examples of implicit bias we addressed in 2020-2021.

## **Developing Online Training Modules**

The University of Wisconsin-Madison offers training on implicit bias for employment committees. Participants work to uncover their own biases, discover the underlying concepts and language used in the psychological and social psychological literature to describe such processes, participate in interactive discussions about the potential influence of implicit or unconscious bias in their department/unit, and learn evidence-based strategies for reducing the application of these biases (“Breaking the Bias,” 2020). The workshop team is interested in expanding their training to include specific information on scholarship administration and OSFA will collaborate with the workshop team in 2022.

## **Outcomes and Assessment**

This intervention provides scholarship administrators the ability to understand their implicit bias through the website, annual scholarship meeting topics, and holistic training modules. The University of Wisconsin – Madison Breaking the Bias workshop team are experts in implicit bias and will be asked to review the effectiveness of the intervention strategy, outcomes, and assessments. The outcomes for the intervention occur in short, medium, and long-term segments. An assessment plan will be applied to determine outcome success. Throughout the process adjustments can be made in response to feedback from scholarship administrators described below.

The short-term outcomes will occur in the first year of the website launch and include increased awareness of how implicit bias impacts decision making, an introduction to biases fields in scholarship applications, and an understanding of recruitment for scholarships can lead to biased networks. Awareness is a critical component of reaching the short-term outcomes and the website will accomplish this goal by introducing resources aimed at moving subconscious thinking into conscious awareness (Staats, 2015). A survey will be sent to the scholarship administrators after the first year in to assess if the website increased their awareness of implicit bias.

The medium-term outcomes in the second or third years after the website launch will combine conscious awareness of biases with training. Conscious awareness of our biases in conjunction with training can significantly reduce our implicit biases (Thornhill, 2019). The resulting outcomes from this timeframe will allow scholarship administrators to incorporate rubrics to reduce bias in their decision-making processes, allow scholarship applications to be evaluated as well as updated to remove biased fields, and more intentional advertising and recruitment of scholarships. I will assess whether rubrics are being used through a survey to scholarship administrators and I will audit the scholarship applications in WiSH to determine if biased fields had been removed from applications. I will then present my findings to the scholarship administrators at their annual meeting.

Long-term outcomes after three years will seek 50% of departments at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to incorporate the implicit bias website and training modules in their individual onboarding for scholarship application administrators. A survey will be developed to assess if the scholarship evaluation training module has been used and how frequently. If it is

determined that it is not being used as an onboarding tool, I will discuss with the WiSH Executive Team. The WiSH Executive Team provides vision and direction to their departmental scholarship administrators. If the WiSH Executive Team is supportive, they can mandate the incorporation of the training modules into their onboarding.

## **Conclusion**

Equitable outcomes in scholarship administration are important because White students receive a disproportionate amount of scholarships compared to their BIPOC peers (Kantrowitz, 2011). I hope that this intervention leads to an examination of scholarship application processes, but the larger goal is for individuals to consider how their implicit bias impacts all of their professional interactions. Scoffone and Williams (2020) suggest that scholarship administrators balance multiple job duties in addition to scholarship processing. As a result, it is important to view scholarship administrators through an intersectional lens. Scholarship administration is one function, but implicit bias awareness can impact all job duties in which subjective judgment is required. This intervention is designed to assist scholarship administrators understand implicit bias and incorporate it into all their scholarship and non-scholarship work.

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Klink: Addressing Implicit Bias in Scholarships

Appendix A

Program: Scholarship Administrator Intervention Logic Model

**Situation:**

Data suggests that White students receive a disproportionate amount of private scholarships compared to their BIPOC peers (Kantrowitz, 2011). Scholarships are important to funding higher education because research shows that BIPOC people graduate with more loan debt than White students (Mishory et al., 2019). My project will address this problem through understanding how implicit bias impacts scholarship reviewers.

Inputs	Outputs		Outcomes -- Impact		
	Activities	Participation	Short (1 year)	Medium (2-5 years)	Long (5+ years)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time</li> <li>• Money</li> <li>• Equipment</li> <li>• Partnerships</li> <li>• Staff</li> <li>• Knowledge</li> <li>• Technology</li> <li>• Data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop curriculum</li> <li>• Access implicit association test</li> <li>• Create website</li> <li>• Maintain website</li> <li>• Conduct meeting to create awareness</li> <li>• Facilitate</li> <li>• Partner</li> <li>• Gain support from leaderships</li> <li>• Rely on networks for dissemination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Campus Scholarship Leadership Team</li> <li>• Campus Scholarship All Users Team</li> <li>• Campus Scholarship Executive Sponsors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased awareness of how implicit bias impacts decision making</li> <li>• Increased knowledge of how scholarship application fields may introduce bias</li> <li>• Increased understanding about bias in scholarship advertising or recruitment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjusting scholarship reviews to include rubrics</li> <li>• Removing biased fields in scholarship applications</li> <li>• Increased intentional advertising and recruitment for scholarships</li> <li>• Reviewing implicit bias training annually to create awareness which lessens bias</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scholarship awarding culture shifts to provide equitable outcomes for all students</li> <li>• BIPOC students graduate with less loan debt because of equitable scholarship awarding</li> </ul>

**Assumptions**

Scholarship application reviewers experience bias and want to address their biases; BIPOC students at UW-Madison are receiving inequitable scholarships because of biases; People have the time to dedicate to annual training; Website will be maintained in perpetuity.

**External Factors**

Extremely high staff turnover in the scholarship administration teams on campus; Departmental priorities do not align with reducing bias; Low numbers in scholarship applications (i.e. Only one student who qualifies/applies)

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