Improving Recognition Through Awards: How to Mitigate Bias in Awards

By Heather Metcalf, PhD

Regardless of whether one’s STEM career pathway is in academia, government, or industry, awards are important indicators of career success. Awards are influential in decisions regarding recruitment, hiring, promotion, recognition, and tenure. Despite their critical role in shaping career trajectories and attracting a diversity of young scholars to STEM fields, without careful attention, awards allocation processes may perpetuate gender stratification.

As part of our efforts to drive positive, systemic change in STEM through research and advocacy, the Association for Women in Science (AWIS) has conducted longitudinal research on awards allocation processes with 18 STEM disciplinary societies that have a combined membership of nearly 500,000 scientists and mathematicians. Our research shows that while women’s receipt of professional awards overall has increased in the past two decades, men win a higher proportion of scholarly awards, and women win a higher proportion of teaching and service awards than expected, based on their respective representation in the nomination pool. In addition, women won particularly few scholarly awards when “women-only” awards were available. The accompanying graphs illustrate these trends over time by disciplinary group.

The argument is frequently made that the reason so few women receive research and scholarly awards is that the pool of potential nominees is so small, but the data suggest otherwise. Instead, our data, paired with decades of research in the social sciences, suggest that unconscious biases are influencing gender equity in awards. These messages become internalized and manifest as biases that occur unconsciously, without malice or intention, yet they have significant consequences for women’s career outcomes in STEM. In just one example among dozens of empirical studies on unconscious bias, Yale University researchers asked science faculty to evaluate applications for a lab manager position. Applications that were randomly assigned masculine names were rated as significantly more competent and employable, were offered a higher starting salary,
and were presented with more career mentoring opportunities compared with identical applications that were assigned feminine names. Despite significant achievements of women in STEM over the decades, their lack of recognition for those accomplishments reflects and perpetuates these biased attitudes by making notable men in STEM the primary focus.

Gender disparities in scholarly recognition and feminization of teaching and service awards can hinder women’s advancement and leadership. To address these disparities, AWIS has worked with each participating society to develop contextualized strategies to address unconscious bias in their awards allocation processes and to pinpoint ways to mitigate its injurious effects. Here are a few:

- **Recognize unconscious biases:**
  Because we organize our social worlds by categorizing, everyone has unconscious biases. Recognizing our biases and bringing them into our conscious awareness allows us to intervene before those biases dictate our behaviors and to align our intentions and actions more mindfully. Research has shown that perceiving ourselves as objective, rather than being willing to see the biases that we carry, correlates with showing even more bias. Training workshops for committees and annual assessments like Harvard’s Implicit Association Test help identify bias before it has the chance to influence behavior, allowing for more objective outcomes.

- **Pay attention to language:** Small differences in language can have significant impacts. Gendered language in nomination materials, award titles, or solicitation phrasing might imply that an award is intended for one group and not another and may subtly discourage non-conforming nominations. Committees should carefully select their words, explicitly define evaluation criteria, and recognize gendered language in nomination materials. Nominators and nominees can be aware of how language in nomination materials could influence the evaluation process.

- **Develop a diverse pool of nominees:** Women and minorities are judged most fairly when they comprise at least 30 percent of the nominee pool. Disseminating materials through a variety of means and media and to diversity-related committees and caucuses can deepen nominee pools. In developing your nomination pool, pay attention to the role that gender socialization plays in self-promotion and self-nomination. Women are not only socialized to avoid self-promotion, but because of gender biases, they are also negatively evaluated by their peers for self-promoting.

- **Create clear, consistent, and transparent evaluation processes:** Clearly defining and prioritizing evaluation criteria helps facilitate
objective committee discussions during the evaluation process. Transparency in the evaluation process creates space for potential inequities to be addressed before final decisions are made.

Collaborations among AWIS and professional societies using research-based tips have proven effective in improving equitable outcomes. However, sustainable change requires persistent effort over time. As Figure 4 illustrates, without repeated and intentional efforts, it becomes easy to slip into unconscious patterns that have been part of the organizational culture for too long. Turnover on awards committees requires that lessons learned be passed along in meaningful ways so that changes in processes become the new cultural norm of the organization. As we continue this work, the visible shifts so far demonstrate the necessity and efficacy of these continued endeavors.

Heather Metcalf, PhD, is the director of research and analysis at the Association for Women in Science. For more information, visit awis.org.

CONGRATULATIONS
DR. AMY MOLL
DEAN OF THE COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING AT BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY, FOR BEING NAMED AMONG THE INSPIRING WOMEN IN STEM

President Barack Obama visited Boise State University in January 2015 and highlighted the culture of innovation evident in the College of Engineering.