RACIALIZED GATEKEEPING SYSTEMS: Guidance for Navigation & Transformation

IGEN
Inclusive Graduate Education Network

USC Rossier
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INTRODUCTION

This document distills takeaways and input of 200+ attendees of webinars held by the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) and the NSF INCLUDES Alliance: Inclusive Graduate Education Network (IGEN) in March 2023. In these events, panelists and participants discussed the newest NASEM report *Advancing Antiracism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in STEMM Organizations: Beyond Broadening Participation* (ADEI), and research findings from studies conducted by members of the IGEN Research Hub.

Design and experiences of current gatekeeping systems were major cross-cutting themes, particularly in light of pending US Supreme Court decisions in *SFFA vs. Harvard College* and *SFFA vs. UNC*. We discussed how prohibiting race-conscious admissions won't eliminate race or racism from admissions and other academic gatekeeping situations. They are deeply woven into the system of preferences and practices through which excellence is assessed and opportunities are given.In the pages that follow, you will find lessons that emerged from the IGEN research, the NASEM report, and our discussions about:

1. Managing race and racism in the design and transformation of gatekeeping systems, and
2. Navigating racialized gatekeeping systems

We hope you find this advice is a useful a conversation starter with colleagues and peers.

For more information about the studies featured here visit the IGEN Research Hub website.

ADVICE FOR MANAGING RACIALIZED GATEKEEPING SYSTEMS

Here are 10 ways race and racism show up in selection, other than race-conscious admissions, and steps that you can take toward creating more equitable evaluation and selection systems:

	How Race and Racism Show Up in Gatekeeping Systems	What We Can Do About It
1	Applicant pools often reflect the inequalities we are trying to reduce.	Recruit from schools that many minoritized students attend. Assess your website: Does it present a welcoming picture, and how? Assess the application requirements: Are there elements of your admissions process that present barriers to minoritized students?
2	Preference for elite institutions to which minoritized students have limited access.	Recognize that pedigree also represents opportunity. There are many reasons students attend the schools and colleges they do, many of which are unrelated to their potential. Document the origins of each year's cohort.
3	Bias against applicants whose names sound like they could be a person of color.	Learn to recognize and check your biases. Consider masking names in key documents.
4	Bias against students who have a record of social activism.	Learn to recognize and check your biases. Remember organizing is great leadership experience, and that our institutions need students who understand DEI issues and how to create positive change.
5	Judgments that exoticize students of color or focus on personal challenges over academic.	Rubrics help focus reviewers' attention on relevant aspects of applicants' records. Do not ask applicants to disclose personal difficulties or traumas that they may wish to keep private.
6	Disparate access to resources that create what we recognize as a strong application.	Provide ample information on your website to demystify what you are looking for. Eliminate application requirements that depend on outside support (e.g., test prep).
7	Over-reliance on metrics that are unequally distributed by race.	Eliminate or downplay criteria that are unequally distributed by race. Remember that student records represent not only potential, but also the opportunities one has had and assets it takes to succeed in higher education, which are more than academic.
8	Judgments of applicant profiles are rooted in stereotypes or memories of select cases.	Admitting a diverse cohort of students yearly may reduce your own and the organization's stereotypes about excellence and who can be successful.
9	Slower or non-response to people of color who reach out during application season.	Develop a standard response that can be easily sent to all prospective applicants who reach out. Be clear you are using a standard response to avoid bias.
10	Stereotypes and racialized language in letters of recommendation.	Be mindful as a letter reader of what to look for. Learn to recognize racialized language. Bring it to the attention of colleagues.

ADVICE FOR NAVIGATING RACIALIZED GATEKEEPING SYSTEMS

Here are 7 ways race and racism may show up in STEMM gatekeeping systems and questions that you can ask yourself as you navigate those systems.

This advice is not meant to be prescriptive; please take into account how your social locations intersect with your institutional contexts.

	How Race and Racism Show Up in Gatekeeping Systems	What We Can Ask Ourselves in Navigating those Systems
1	Individuals may hide aspects of their authentic selves or only reveal acceptable aspects of their social identities to adhere to dominant norms.	How am I showing up in STEMM spaces? Do I compromise parts of myself that are central to my identity? How would it feel to show up as my authentic self and allow others to do the same?
2	Individuals are expected to identify with and measure their worth by their role, status, productivity, and accolades.	Do I inherently know that my worth and value aren't tied to my ability to navigate these systems?
3	Applicants are asked to share challenges or obstacles they have overcome to demonstrate resilience in the selection and hiring processes.	How can I honor myself by sharing my own story? How do I share what is challenging without re-traumatizing myself? How can I share what motivates me to overcome obstacles or what brings me joy related to research, academia, and STEMM?
4	Mentees rely solely on their faculty advisor for academic guidance, research opportunities, and general guidance. The advisor may not share the same social locations as the mentee and not know how to navigate all situations.	Have I assessed my developmental network (or mentoring map)? Who can I go to for mentorship, sponsorship, or endorsement? Does my list include faculty, peers, and other professionals in and outside of my organization?
5	Some individuals are asked to serve in service roles and equity roles more often than others.	What are the consequences (academic, research, etc.) of saying yes? What boundaries will I maintain by saying no?
6	Faculty and students may in some cases be asked to sign a contract not to discuss the qualifying exam with other students.	How can I share the good and bad aspects of my experience of the qualifying exam with others? How can I share resources and tips with others to make the process less stressful?
7	The scientific enterprise is race-neutral.	What racialized assumptions do I hold about STEMM organizations? Do I know how race shaped my organization's history?

REPORT

ADVANCING ANTI-RACISM, DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION IN STEMM ORGANIZATIONS: BEYOND BROADENING PARTICIPATION

STUDY DIRECTOR & PRESENTER: LAYNE SCHERER

GOALS

- Review the literature on bias and racism in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine workplaces.
- Review approaches to increase racial and ethnic diversity, equity, and inclusion in STEMM organizations (e.g., universities, nonprofit organizations, and industry).
- Offer best practices and policies for DEI and antiracism initiatives, as well as outline goals for relevant, future research, and organizational strategic planning.

RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT CAN LEADERS DO?

- Develop and implement an inclusive, multi-faceted plan to support people from minoritized groups at all levels of the organization.
- Create team conditions to support positive performance outcomes and reduce interpersonal bias.
- Collect data on gatekeeping decisions, include ADEI responsibilities in leadership roles, and develop systems for more inclusive decision-making.
- Fund grants to understand and translate policies, programs, and practices of Minority Serving Institutions (MSI's).
- Anticipate resistance to ADEI efforts, and design your work with resistance in mind.

CONCLUSIONS

- ADEI is not a set of goals that organizations can meet and declare the work concluded. It should be thought of as a work in progress.
- History and Black STEMM leaders' stories can complement and provide context for the research-based recommendations. We need multiple types of knowledge.
- Attend to the climate and culture of your organization, recognizing the differences.
- Specific actions are needed for admissions, hiring, and promotion systems
  - Address reliance on standardized test scores and other criteria that privilege groups who are already advantaged.
  - Explore who is making key gatekeeping decisions, and try to maximize diversity in this group while avoiding adding to the uncompensated service burdens many minoritized scholars experience.

DOWNLOAD A COPY OF THE REPORT OR AN INFOGRAPHIC SUMMARIZING CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

RESEARCH

STORYTELLING ON OUR TERMS: NARRATIVE SELF-CONSTRUCTION IN BLACK WOMEN AND FEMMES' PERSONAL STATEMENTS TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

PRESENTERS & AUTHORS: AIREALE J. RODGERS AND MARTHA KAKOOZA

GOALS

"Our project explores how Black women and/or femme-identified (BWF) applicants to PhD programs resist or re-inscribe racialized and gendered institutional discourses in their personal statements."

Research Questions:

1. How do BWF applicants to PhD programs engage in storytelling in the construction of their personal statements?
2. What do BWFs' narratives reveal about their perceptions of the institutional culture of academia?

IMPLICATIONS: WHAT CAN APPLICANTS DO?

Take time for a pulse check and think about telling stories on your terms.

- What stories 'count' as currency for admissibility in your discipline or field?
- Who supports you in crafting your stories for academia? How do they cultivate space for your authentic voice in your writing?
- How do you feel when you're writing your stories for academia?
- How do you feel about the stories you produce?
- What forces/perspectives impact how you tell your story/stories in academic writing?

"I DIDN'T WANT TO FOCUS ON TRAUMA BECAUSE A LOT OF TIMES WHEN WE TALK ABOUT BLACK KIDS OR KIDS OF COLOR GETTING AHEAD, THEY ALWAYS WANT TO SAY HOW DID YOU SHOW GRIT? HOW DID YOU PERSEVERE?"

CONCLUSIONS

- "Black women and femmes deserve to tell full, authentic, and self-determined stories beyond the damage-centered confines of the white imagination."
- Personal statements are an important site of study for scholars who are interested in destabilizing systems of inequity in higher education.

RESEARCH

2 LEGIT 2 QUIT: RACIALIZED LEGITIMACY IN BLACK PHD CANDIDATE EXPERIENCES OF QUALIFYING EXAMS

PRESENTER: GLORIA ANGLÓN

AUTHORS: KAYLAN BAXTER, AIREALE RODGERS, JULIE POSSELT, ISAIAH SIMMONS, AND GLORIA ANGLÓN

GOALS

"Our project examines qualifying exams as a gatekeeping structure of doctoral education with consequences for racial equity and wellbeing of students from all backgrounds. Inform conversations of PhD programs revisiting these exams by centering the experiences of Black PhD candidates."

Research Questions:

1. What features of candidacy exams are salient in Black doctoral student experiences?
2. How do Black doctoral candidates describe the sources of their legitimation?

IMPLICATIONS: WHAT CAN CHAIRS DO?

- IGEN research by Liera, Rodgers, Posselt, & Irwin found that even in the most selective PhD programs in physics, high-stakes qualifying exams can be abolished in favor of activities that are more closely related to the research and professional activities expected of scholars.
- Programs that are far from abolishing exams may use evaluation rubric to make evaluation more transparent and accountable.
- Faculty should make explicit the otherwise hidden curriculum about what success entails.

> "I WAS ALSO BEGINNING TO LOC MY HAIR. AND HE WAS SAYING, 'YOU MIGHT WANT TO CUT THAT, TO TRY TO PRESENT A PICTURE OF SOMEONE WHO LOOKS THEY BELONG IN THE DEPARTMENT, THAT'S TYPICAL OF WHAT THEY HAVE HAD BEFORE'."

CONCLUSIONS

- Being recognized as intellectually and professionally legitimate involves racialized performances. We may never fully extricate performance from social life, as there are very few people in life for whom there is no performative element.
- But there are things we can do to improve systems for students:
  - We can do internal equity checks by asking how our assumptions about excellence and who belongs may be racialized & even antiBlack.
  - We can also improve gatekeeping systems by increasing transparency.
  - We can re-evaluate the necessity of high-stakes qualifying exams as a component of the transition to candidacy and refocus activities on ones that actively develop students' skills and a portfolio of scholarly activities.

MESSAGES IN A BOTTLE

As a closing activity, we offered attendees the chance to offer candid advice to two groups: 1) Presidents and deans with the power to influence change and 2) Peers or younger family members who may follow in their footsteps. We asked them to imagine these important people stumbling upon a message in a bottle, and we present their words to you unedited:

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