



Avoiding Implicit Bias: Best Practices for Award Selection Committees

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Advancing Ways of Awarding Recognition in Disciplinary Societies (AWARDS).*

Significance of awards¹

Disciplinary societies give awards to recognize excellence in teaching, writing, scholarship and service. Those distinguished for their contributions become role models and leaders in a field, so it is important for award selection committees to recognize the achievements of a diverse group, reflecting the breadth of individuals in a profession. Diversity in recognition awards demonstrates a society's commitment to equity, and most selection committees strive for fairness in selecting award winners. However, studies have shown that unconscious associations or assumptions – the phenomenon known as *implicit bias* – can unintentionally influence judgment.

Data gathered across many professional societies² show that women do not receive scholarly recognition (awards and prizes for research) at a rate commensurate with their numbers in a discipline. While there are probably many factors contributing to this outcome, the widespread pattern suggests implicit bias may be one significant factor. The following guidelines may help award selection committees reduce subjectivity and minimize implicit bias,

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Assembling committees

Appoint diverse selection committee members. Several recent studies demonstrate that more diverse groups with a greater breadth of perspectives make better decisions. In addition, diverse committees provide access to a wider set of networks for cultivating nominations. Do not expect committee members from under-represented groups to advocate for diversity – it is everyone's responsibility.

¹ While these guidelines were developed in the context of awards and prizes, they should be helpful to many society committees at all levels, including inviting speakers, assembling committee membership, nominating officers, etc.

² For specific data on our society, see Appendix A





Establish criteria for each award

Define and prioritize desired attributes. Prepare a list of criteria to be used in identifying the best nominee *before* reviewing any dossiers. Rank these in order of importance. Consider implementing a check-list of qualifications for the ideal candidate.

Promote a large and diverse pool of nominees

Review and discuss practices for building an ideal nominee pool. If the number of nominees seems inadequate, discuss why this might be so. Are newcomers not entering the field? Does the definition of eligibility for the award need updating or broadening? Examine the lists of nominees from prior years for individuals who frequently appear on the short list. Is there a historical pattern of members of underrepresented groups being eliminated at late stages? Is the proportion of members of underrepresented groups nominated over the past 5-10 years consistent with the proportion of winners who are from underrepresented groups?

Consider including those whose qualifications are strong but whose work may be less widely known. If prestige is considered important, it should be included in the prioritized list of criteria. If a letter of recommendation from an eminent scholar or leader will be given more consideration than a letter from a less well-known society member, nominators should be informed of this.

Review the descriptions and guidelines for awards periodically. Particular attention should be paid to the language used in describing the award, e.g., are the adjectives and verbs used associated more often with males than females?³ Are there age or time restrictions that could disproportionately affect individuals who take time off for family care?

Invite minority and women's caucuses/committees to help generate suggestions for nominees. Consider assembling a team of experienced society leaders who are willing to prepare dossiers for these nominees.

³ For examples, see AWARDS video 3.





Publicize the criteria and deadlines for awards widely. Increasing awareness of the award among all society members has the added benefit of increasing interest in the award and making the selection process more transparent and inclusive.

Selecting award winners

Discuss the process and criteria *before reviewing nominations*. Make sure your prioritized list of attributes matches the public criteria for the award. Research has shown that implicit bias can enter via inadvertent “criteria shifting” after nominees are discussed.

List your personal top nominees *before hearing the recommendations of others*. This can help mitigate the undue influence of one member and ensure that the committee’s list of viable candidates will be as large as possible.

Create short lists using *inclusive* rather than exclusive methods. Select candidates for consideration because they are outstanding, rather than finding reasons to eliminate candidates.

Ensure that every committee member’s voice is heard. Budget adequate time to make a decision and moderate selection discussions to include all members. Studies show that implicit bias is lessened when committees have time for thoughtful reflection and discussion.

Make sure that all members know the society’s conflict of interest policy. Committee members should make clear any connection with a person under consideration for an award so that the committee can come to a decision with respect to participation in further discussions.



APPENDIX A: SOCIETY FOR XXXXXXXXXX AWARDS AND PRIZES (PAST TEN YEARS)

A. RESEARCH & WRITING AWARDS	2001-2010				
	Total #	Women	Minorities	% women	% minorities

B. SERVICE & TEACHING AWARDS	2001-2010				
	Total #	Women	Minorities	% women	% minorities

C. EARLY CAREER AWARDS	2001-2010				
	Total #	Women	Minorities	% women	% minorities