Avoiding Bias & Conflicts of Interest Training

Krista Anderson, Systemwide Title IX Coordinator
Sean Flammer, Assistant General Counsel
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Agenda

1. Title IX Intro
2. What is Bias?
3. Types of Bias
4. Conflicts of Interest
5. Strategies for Mitigating Bias & Conflicts of Interest
6. Objective Criteria Example
7. Hypotheticals
Introduction

Key Concepts & Framework

Title IX

Sex Discrimination
Sexual Harassment
Retaliation
Institutional Sexual Misconduct Policy (Example)

Prohibits sex discrimination, sexual harassment, retaliation, and other prohibited conduct under the policy, including:

- Sex Discrimination
- Sexual Harassment
  - Sexual Assault
  - Dating Violence
  - Domestic Violence
  - Stalking
- Retaliation
- Sexual Exploitation
- Other Inappropriate Sexual Conduct
- False Information & False Complaints
- Interference with the Grievance Process
- Failure to Report (for Responsible Employees)

Policy Differences Note: For the purposes of this training, the UTS Model Policy for Sexual Misconduct will be the primary policy reference. UT Institutional policies may have some differences.

Source: UT System Model Policy for Sexual Misconduct (2021)

1. Stop & prevent behavior from continuing or escalating
2. Remedies: Supportive measures & resources
3. Formal grievance process
Key Pillars: Title IX Process

For all of the participants in the process:
Complainants
Respondents
Witnesses
Third-party Reporters

Serving Impartially in your Role

- Must avoid prejudgment of the facts at issue
- Must avoid conflicts of interest
- Must avoid bias

Source: Title IX Regulations (2020)
Principles for Title IX Process

- Must maintain **complete neutrality & impartiality at all times** in investigating alleged conduct violations of institutional policies.
- Understanding bias & whether it exists: Need to take an “**objective, common sense approach to evaluating whether a person serving in a role is biased**.” *(Title IX Preamble (2020))*

Avoiding Bias

- **Must not** treat a party differently:
  - On the basis of the person’s sex;
  - On **stereotypes** about how men or women behave with respect to sexual violence; and/or
  - On the basis of the person’s **characteristics**: sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, immigration status, financial ability, socioeconomic status, or other characteristic.

*Source: Title IX Preamble (2020)*
What is “Serving Impartially” in your Role?

**Impartial**
State of mind or attitude where there is no biased influence, perceived or real

**Independent**
Free from outside influence

**Objective**
Absence from any personal or professional interest that affects a person’s ability to be fair & impartial to all parties involved

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What is *Bias*?
What is Bias?

**Assumptions**
- Thoughts, Generalizations
- Limited or inaccurate perception of others

**Stereotypes**
- Overly simplified Ideas
- Limited or inaccurate perception of others

**Prejudices**
- Beliefs, Feelings, Attitudes of liking or disliking someone or something
- Limited or inaccurate perception of others

**Sex/Gender-Based Examples**

- Beliefs in **strict gender roles**
- Hostile attitudes toward a person on the basis of sex/gender (including gender identity & expression) or sexual orientation
- Accepting attitudes of IPV
- Assumptions that a person is **superior/inferior** on the basis of sex/gender (including gender identity & expression) or sexual orientation
- Beliefs in **historical/societal gender norms**
Beware: “Trust Your Gut”

- Subjective (personal point of view)
- Emotional response
- Based on limited information
- Inherent “blind spots”
- Influenced by our filters or past experiences (limited, anecdotal lens)
- Can be influenced by our biases

Cognitive Ease

Source: Thinking, Fast and Slow (Daniel Kahneman, 2011)
Implications of Bias

**Assumptions**
- Thoughts, Generalizations
- Limited or inaccurate perception of others

**Stereotypes**
- Overly simplified Ideas
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**Prejudices**
- Beliefs, Feelings, Attitudes of liking or disliking someone or something
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**Prejudgment of Facts**
- Premature Analysis or Decision-making
- Can be influenced by Assumptions, Stereotypes, and/or Prejudices of others

**Prejudgment Examples**

1. The Complainant (CP) was consuming alcohol at the time of the alleged incident, so the decision-maker relies solely on this information to determine the CP’s statements regarding the incident are not accurate or reliable.
2. The Respondent (RP) is alleged to have committed sexual assault. The RP identifies as a man, so the decision-maker, without any other relevant evidence to inform whether there was consent, concludes that the RP committed sexual assault.
3. The Complainant (CP) and Respondent (RP) were in a consensual sexual relationship at the time of the alleged incident, so the decision-maker relies solely on this information to determine that the CP consented to sexual activity regarding the specific conduct at issue.
Other Implications of Bias

Assumptions
- Thoughts, Generalizations
- Limited or inaccurate perception of others

Stereotypes
- Overly simplified Ideas
- Limited or inaccurate perception of others

Prejudices
- Beliefs, Feelings, Attitudes of liking or disliking someone or something
- Limited or inaccurate perception of others

Discrimination
- Harassment
- Retaliation

Actions
- Can be influenced by Assumptions, Stereotypes, and/or Prejudices of others

Types of Bias
**Types of Bias**

**Gender Bias**
Having a preference, favoring for or against one gender over another.

**Beauty Bias (Appearance Bias)**
Associating a person’s appearance with their personality; making judgments based on a person’s physical appearance.

**Affinity Bias**
Favoring others who share one’s own qualities or qualities of someone you like.

**In-group Bias**
Responding more positively toward one’s own “in-groups” than from “out-groups”

**Confirmation Bias**
Searching for evidence that backs up one’s preconceived opinions or theories; can lead to selective observation or overlooking information that is also relevant.

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**Types of Bias (Cont.)**

**Anchoring Bias**
Relying on the first piece of information received about a matter, regardless of its relevance or whether substantive in nature.

**Contrast Effect**
Assessing two or more similar things and comparing them with one another, rather than looking at each component based on its own merit(s).

**Halo Effect**
Relying on a perceived “positive” impression about a person and overlooking other information or aspects.

**Horns Effect**
Relying on a perceived “negative” impression about a person and overlooking other information or aspects.
Types of Bias (Cont.)

Attention Bias
Focusing on certain information while ignoring other information that is relevant or substantive in nature.

Affect Bias
One’s emotional state influencing one’s decision-making; one’s positive or negative feelings may affect one’s perception of information or meaning(s).

Motivation Bias
Assuming someone’s motivation(s) based on their current behavior; a form of emotionally biased reasoning that isn’t considering all of the evidence.

Overconfidence Effect
Relying on one’s subjective confidence in their own judgments rather than considering the objective accuracy of those judgments.

Framing Effect

- Relying on the way information is presented when making judgments or decisions.
- Equivalent information can be more or less attractive depending on how the information is delivered.

Examples:
1. Presenting information through empirical research findings vs. a person’s anecdotal personal experience or opinion
2. Providing feedback in an “angry, raised voice” vs. a “more-balanced emotional posture”
• Limited or lack of information to base one’s decisions or judgments.

Examples:
1. Evidence may be interpreted multiple ways
2. Gaps in witness statements (e.g. memory gaps, lack of testimony)
3. Unfamiliarity with the subject matter

1. The Complainant (CP) was consuming alcohol at the time of the alleged incident, so the decision-maker relies solely on this information to determine the CP's statements regarding the incident are not accurate or reliable.

2. The Respondent (RP) is alleged to have committed sexual assault. The RP identifies as a man, so the decision-maker, without any other relevant evidence to inform whether there was consent, concludes that the RP committed sexual assault.

3. The Complainant (CP) and Respondent (RP) were in a consensual sexual relationship at the time of the alleged incident, so the decision-maker relies solely on this information to determine that the CP consented to sexual activity regarding the specific conduct at issue.
Conflict of Interest

What is “Serving Impartially” in your Role?

**Impartial**
State of mind or attitude where there is no biased influence, perceived or real

**Independent**
Free from outside influence

**Objective**
Absence from any personal or professional interest that affects a person’s ability to be fair & impartial to all parties involved
What can cause a Conflict of Interest?

- Lack of Independence in your role
- Lack of Objectivity in your analyses
- Lack of Impartiality in your decision-making

Strategies for Mitigating Bias & Conflicts of Interest
Mindset Throughout the Process

- Fairness and appearance of fair.
- Parties need to be heard and feel heard.

Remember: This is likely a major life event for both the Complainant & Respondent.

Check Your “Gut”
Mitigating Bias

• Identify the **objective criteria** for the investigation or adjudication.
• Focus on the **relevant facts** and **evidence gathered**.
• Remind yourself that **individuals** are **complex** and **diverse**.
• Investigate the allegations fully, gathering **ALL** of the **relevant facts** and **evidence** available/accessible from the parties involved.

Mitigating Bias (Cont.)

• Be open to & obtain **outside input & feedback** on your analyses, explanations, or justifications for conclusions.
• Remove **distractions** and reduce sources of **stress** when considering analyses or decision-making.
• Recognize **ALL** possible **outcomes**.
Mitigating Bias (Cont.)

DO NOT pass judgment on the allegations presented by any of the parties or witnesses.

DO NOT pass judgment on the individual parties or witnesses.

DO NOT jump to any premature conclusions & avoid early hypotheses.

Testing & Detecting Bias

Test to address any potential implicit bias.

- What is the essence of potential policy violation?
- Create hypothetical that includes those elements. Then flip or change the genders.
- You must have fair & consistent considerations, regardless of gender.

When developing your analysis, making your decision(s), or coming to your conclusions:

- List out the evidence favorable to both sides to ensure evidentiary support (as opposed to biased influences).
1. Is your first impression of someone subjectively influencing your analysis or judgment? Are there other considerations of that person that counter the first impression?
2. Would your view of the person or their statements change if they were different or similar to you?
3. Are you rushing to judgment? Have you considered ALL the key factors & elements?
4. Are there missing perspectives or exceptions that may be relevant to consider? (Play devil’s advocate.)
5. Could you be wrong about your analysis?
6. Are you oversimplifying your conclusion?
7. Are you distracted or hyper-sensitive to an emotional element?
8. What are your reasons for your analysis or decision? Is your analysis sound? (Write out your rationale, then think critically about it.)
9. Do you have sufficient time to consider your analysis or decision(s)?
• Avoid any actual or perceived conflicts of interest.
• Even the appearance of a “conflict” can undermine the perceived fairness of the process or proceedings.
• Don’t take “conflict” allegations or concerns personally.
• Be open and considerate, even if you may disagree with the “conflict” allegations or concerns.
• Avoid an Overconfidence Effect from impairing your judgment on any “conflict” concerns with your role.
• Recuse yourself when appropriate or necessary.

Conflict of Interest Checklist: Questions for Decision-Makers

1. Do you have a direct or personal relationship with any of the parties or witnesses that could compromise your objectivity?
2. Have you played a decision-making role in the matter previously or will you play a decision-making role later in the process?
3. Are you aware of any other facts or circumstances that might be viewed as undermining your ability to render an analysis or decision that is fair, impartial and unbiased?
Engaging in a course of conduct directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to fear for his or her safety or the safety of others or suffer substantial emotional distress.

For the purposes of this definition:

- **Course of conduct** means two or more acts, including, but not limited to, acts in which the stalker directly, indirectly, or through third parties, by any action, method, device, or means, follows, monitors, observes, surveils, threatens, or communicates to or about a person, or interferes with a person’s property.
- **Reasonable person** means a reasonable person under similar circumstances and with similar identities to the victim.
- **Substantial emotional distress** means significant mental suffering or anguish that may, but does not necessarily, require medical or other professional treatment or counseling.
Engaging in a (1) course of conduct (2) directed at a specific person that would (3) cause a reasonable person to fear for his or her safety or the safety of others or suffer substantial emotional distress.

For the purposes of this definition:

- **Course of conduct** means two or more acts, including, but not limited to, acts in which the stalker directly, indirectly, or through third parties, by any action, method, device, or means, follows, monitors, observes, surveils, threatens, or communicates to or about a person, or interferes with a person’s property.

- **Reasonable person** means a reasonable person under similar circumstances and with similar identities to the victim.

- **Substantial emotional distress** means significant mental suffering or anguish that may, but does not necessarily, require medical or other professional treatment or counseling.

**Burden of Proof on the Institution**

**Preponderance of the Evidence Standard**

Whether the greater weight of the credible evidence establishes that the Respondent engaged in the alleged policy violation.

**Note:** The Respondent is presumed not responsible.
Evidence is relevant if:

- The evidence has any tendency to make a fact more or less probable than it would be without the evidence; and
- The fact is of consequence in determining the action.

Another way to frame it:

- Exculpatory evidence: Evidence tending to excuse, justify, or absolve the person of the alleged conduct.
- Inculpatory evidence: Evidence that places responsibility on the person of the alleged conduct.
### “Stalking” Elements Breakdown (Example)
**Respondent’s Disputes & Responses**

**Complainant’s Statements**

| Course of Conduct | Directed at a Specific Person | Cause a Reasonable Person to  
|---|---|---|
| 1. Phone call  
2. In-person confrontation | Complainant (CP) | 1. Respondent (RP) implied watching and following the CP from personal residence to their transportation and other places only the CP would reasonably be accessing or visiting (work location, parent’s house, CP’s friends).  
2. RP “begging, crying, pleading” with CP to return to the relationship, & “can’t live without CP.”  
3. RP doesn’t want to be “alone,” is worried about self-safety, and is having self-harming thoughts. |

**Respondent’s Disputes & Responses**

| Cause a Reasonable Person to  
|---|---|
| (a) Fear for his/her/their safety or the safety of others; or  
(b) Suffer substantial emotional distress | 1. RP denied implying “watching” or “following” CP. RP asked CP where they’ve been going, but it was a casual question and not specific in anyway to watching or following the CP.  
2. RP admitted to saying, “I can’t live without CP,” but it was a “figure of speech.” RP admitted to wanting to “get back together” with CP but RP claims that CP is “exaggerating.” RP’s emotional state and how RP “presented” in that moment.  
3. RP denied saying anything about “self-harming” thoughts or being worried about their own “safety.” RP said they have a hard time “living alone,” as in not having other roommates or others around. RP’s always had roommates and siblings growing up. |
In Making Your Decision, or Developing Your Analysis:

- Assess witness credibility:
  - Ex: Demeanor, personal knowledge, bias

- Consider the strength of the relevant evidence:
  - Credibility of the relevant evidence
  - Weight of each exhibit
  - Persuasiveness of the evidence

Tips for Evaluating Witnesses: Credibility Considerations

- Are there inconsistencies? Is an explanation plausible?
- What did the witness do? What did they not do?
- Are there motives for the witness to be less than truthful?
- Are there motives for the witness to frame the event in a way more favorable to themselves? Are they lying to themselves?
- Is there an opportunity for a good faith mistake?
Potential Pitfalls

- You must let the **evidence** lead you to the **conclusion**, rather than making the evidence “fit” your pre-formed conclusion.
- Focus on the **relevant evidence**.
  - Hint: It’s **not** all relevant.

A **Good** Decision Analysis & Decision:

- Demonstrates the care and attention given to the **factual findings** and **weighing of the evidence**.
- Shows that the institution reached a **reasoned, good faith conclusion**.
  - It’s not enough to reach a conclusion. You must be able to “**show your work.**”
- Serves as a **framework** for all future proceedings.
Revision Stage: Focus on Clarity

• Focus on **relevant facts** in your factual findings. If it is part of the reasoning, say it. Don’t omit it.

Revision Stage: Focus on Clarity

• Look at your draft with a **critical eye**.
• Pretend the person who will be most unhappy with your decision is in the room with you reading the draft with you. With each sentence or paragraph, consider:
  
  “**What would that person say?**”

• Then revise.
Reminder on **Fairness & Appearance of Fair**

Deal with facts *contrary* to your decision:
- If you don’t, it looks like you didn’t consider or hear the argument, that you weren’t paying attention, or that the process is unfair.

*Hypotheticals*
The Respondent (RP) says that they didn’t sexually harass the Complainant (CP) because the RP didn’t find the CP “attractive.” The decision-maker doesn’t find the CP “attractive” in a “typical” way either, so the decision-maker relies solely on this perception to determine the sexual harassment allegations are unsubstantiated.

Hypothetical 1

The investigator has an early hunch that the Respondent (RP) is responsible for stalking the Complainant (CP) based on CP’s initial statements and text message evidence submitted, even though RP later submitted possibly compelling responses and explanations to the allegations. The investigator says that CP’s evidence seems very convincing and authentic upon first view.

Hypothetical 2
A witness describes the Complainant (CP) as “spiteful” because the Respondent (RP) ended the relationship with the CP a week prior to the CP filing a report of dating violence. Without any evidence or basis, the witness says the CP was “jealous” of RP’s new date. The RP is dating someone new; this fact is not disputed. The decision-maker is concerned with this impression of the CP and uses only this information to justify the allegations are unsubstantiated.

A decision-maker expresses more skepticism of transgender and nonbinary complainants (CP’s) that allege sexual assault than of other CP’s reporting the same type of allegations, including asking questions that could be perceived as “victim-blaming.”

An example: “Why do you wear certain clothes and pick your hair style? It seems to ‘stand-out’ and calls more attention to you. Why create a target for yourself?”
An Advisor that’s been provided by the institution has been assigned to a Complainant (CP). The Advisor meets with the CP and learns more about the general timeline of the investigation and circumstances. Afterwards, the CP sends the Advisor a copy of the Investigation Report, and the Advisor recognizes the Respondent (RP) to be someone they’ve assisted with in the residence hall the previous year regarding a roommate issue.

The Complainant (CP) provided graphic testimony about their domestic violence experiences, including injuries & emotional trauma. The decision-maker has an emotional reaction listening to the statements; eyes visibly watering. The decision-maker is aware that they are in a “heightened emotional state.”
Contact Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Krista Anderson</th>
<th>Sean Flammer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Systemwide Title IX Coordinator</td>
<td>Assistant General Counsel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of Systemwide Compliance UT System (Austin, TX)</td>
<td>Office of General Counsel UT System (Austin, TX)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone: 512-664-9050</td>
<td>Phone: 512-579-5106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:kranderson@utsystem.edu">kranderson@utsystem.edu</a></td>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:sflammer@utsystem.edu">sflammer@utsystem.edu</a></td>
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