2024 Public Description of Work for
Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in
Higher Education

Harvard University

Uncovering Accent Bias at Harvard: A Call for Change

Relevant Rubric Area(s):

1. Prevention: Civility and Respect Promotion Programs
2. Prevention: Identifying and Reinforcing Community Values
3. Prevention: Embedding the Values of Diversity, Inclusion, and Respect into Recruitment, Hiring, Admissions, Retention, Promotion, and Advancement

Description of Work:

An accent can signal various aspects about a person such as their geographic origin, social class, educational background, age, ability, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, cultural identity, gender, and languages. Accent bias is a form of prejudice based on how someone speaks or signs, rather than based on their qualifications or character. The problem of accent bias is a complex one that necessitates further exploration and understanding. Studies have found that accent bias has a direct impact on both the recruitment and retention of those with diverse accents, thus leading to a lack of diversity within the institutional environment. This lack of diversity can lead to numerous issues, including difficulty in cultivating an inclusive and supportive culture, as well as *reduced* access to different perspectives and ideas that can help spur creativity and promote innovation. Accent bias contributes to a lack of representation among disparate groups across many sectors, which can have significant and long-lasting implications on their social mobility and overall well-being. With this knowledge of accent bias and its influence on access, recruitment, and retention, etc. this project speaks directly to the rubric area focused on *embedding the values of diversity, inclusion, and respect into recruitment, hiring, admissions, retention, promotion, and advancement.*

The problem of accent bias can have an even more insidious effect on the Harvard community, as it can lead to racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, linguicism, regional discrimination, and classism. This encourages a culture of exclusion that can be damaging to those directly affected by accent bias and those who are not affected but do witness it. This project also speaks directly to the rubric areas that identifies and reinforces the community values that the Harvard University community wishes to uphold and promotes *civility and respect*.

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It is difficult to detect accent bias unless there are tangible steps taken to identify systemic patterns of exclusion and patterns associated with accent bias. Additionally, even if these patterns are identified, they may still not be addressed properly due to lack of resources or institutional support towards creating tangible solutions that can address this issue at its root cause. To effectively reduce accent bias, the project team has developed comprehensive resources that educate stakeholders on how accent bias operates as well as provide them with practical solutions tailored for their respective roles within the university context.

Uncovering Accent Bias at Harvard raises awareness of this issue that can negatively impact a community by taking the work of "Unconscious Bias" a step further with the creation of a video series focused on educating the community on this specific faction of bias. This project is a 2024 recipient of Harvard University's Culture Lab Innovation Fund (CLIF) grant from the Office of the President, highlighting its importance and ability to foster a culture of inclusion and belonging on campus. After completing the videos, which feature Harvard community members, in May 2024 and holding initial focus groups, the next phase of the project will be to host a public, community event in the summer of 2024 to publicize this work to the broader Harvard community and direct community members to the repository of educational videos.

Although focus groups are still ongoing, preliminary data reveals that the Harvard community, comprising individuals from eight different Harvard schools so far, is aware of the existence of accent bias but uncertain about how to tackle it. Notably, participants' comments consistently indicate that the videos have been eye-opening, helping them gain a deeper understanding of accent bias and its effects on hiring, recruitment, and retention, as well as the broad implications for today's society. Moreover, the videos have led to a significant improvement in participants' awareness of accent bias (21.6%), their understanding of its impact on the Harvard community (22.8%), and their confidence in identifying and addressing accent bias (30.8%). Although data collection will continue until the project's completion, the preliminary findings already demonstrate considerable potential for informing and inspiring future research on accent bias, as well as informing the development of targeted training programs and personal and professional strategies to mitigate its impact.

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