REPORT FOR THE UNIVERSITY SENATE

Gender-Inclusive Language Committee

Brief History of Issue - why the issue is being considered:

In response to repeated observations of gendered and sexist language (e.g., chairman to refer to a department head) at UWEC, the Commission on the Status of Women at UW-Eau Claire suggested developing a language policy that would eliminate language that renders unmarked genders invisible or subordinate or that otherwise enables gender discrimination. In addition, UW Regents Policy Document §14-3 and §14-6 mandate the elimination of gender-based discrimination and the development of policies and procedures with respect to discrimination. Moreover, elimination of gendered and sexist language is necessary for our initiatives in equity, diversity, and inclusiveness and further supports our Centennial Plan gold arrow priorities of nurturing human resources and transforming learning. If the university’s official documents exclude certain members of the university community based on sex/gender, then we not only undercut our commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusiveness but also severely hinder our ability to recruit, retain, and nourish a diverse student body, faculty, staff, and administration.

Points Discussed by Committee:

We researched the prevalence of gendered and sexist language in UWEC’s public documents.
We conducted a literature review of scholarly findings on the deleterious effects of sexist language and the efficaciousness of using non-sexist and inclusive language; for example, the fact that language not only reflects but also reinforces and even creates gender differences (e.g., Berryman and Eman; Cameron; Spender).
Using an online survey and informal interviews, we gathered data from UWEC students, faculty, and staff about attitudes and experiences regarding gendered and sexist language.
We researched the successful implementation of non-sexist and inclusive language policies and practices by professional organizations and by universities in the US and Canada.
We discussed how our procedures for effecting policy change can provide a model for other campuses in the UW-System and elsewhere.
We concluded that it is important to note the distinction between the terms “gender” and “sex” by framing two separate policies. Though often used interchangeably, these terms refer to two different concepts: sex refers to one’s biological sex, which includes one’s sex organs as well as biochemistry; while gender refers to how one self identifies.

Pros of Recommendation:

This policy will make a significant contribution to enhancing the university’s efforts to promote inclusiveness on our campus. In light of UWEC’s EDI initiatives, including their prominence among the university’s centennial plan, providing the university with a set of models and resources to develop a gender-neutral language policy would be an important contribution to improving the inclusivity of the university. If the university’s official documents exclude certain members of the university community based on sex/gender, then we not only undercut our commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusiveness but also severely hinder our ability to
recruit, retain, and nourish a diverse student body, faculty, staff, and administration (cf. “Diversity Statement”).

This policy will begin to acknowledge and overcome the negative effects of sexist and gendered language that an impressive body of feminist and linguistic research over the past 35 years has revealed (e.g., Baron; Frank and Treichler; Nilsen et al). For example, supposed generic terms like he and man (also referred to as "false generics," "pseudogenerics," and "androcentric generics") are often interpreted to exclude women (e.g., Harrison and Passero, Schneider and Hacker) and language not only reflects but also reinforces and even creates gender differences (e.g., Berryman and Eman; Cameron; Spender). Anne Pauwels identifies one of the major motivations for language change as “a desire to amend the present language system to achieve a symmetrical and equitable representation of women and men”. We contend that awareness of inclusive language does more than affect the social dialect; it strives toward a reality where language use more accurately represents its referents.

UW-Eau Claire will be in line with publishers, professional organizations, governmental agencies, and non-profit organizations, and other universities (e.g., American Psychological Association, National Council of Teachers of English, UNESCO, Yale University, University of Virginia, University of North Carolina, and Columbia University) that have implemented non-sexist and/or gender-neutral language policies.

Cons of Recommendation:

For some this will require a cultural shift involving not only an acknowledgement of the exclusionary nature of sexist/gendered language, but also a change in seemingly unconscious language use. Negative backlash and resistance is a common response to inclusive language policies, including arguments that language is a trivial concern, especially in the face of more pressing social issues; that change is too difficult; and that inclusive language is a form of censorship. Hostility and ridicule toward proponents of change is likely (Mucchi-Faina 193-194).

Technology/Human Resource Impact:

None to negligible.

Committee Recommendation:

In accordance with the equal opportunity statement of the university and in order to develop and maintain a more inclusive environment, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire encourages its students, faculty, and staff to use non-sexists language in instances where sex is irrelevant.

In accordance with the equal opportunity statement of the university and in order to develop and maintain a more inclusive environment, the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire encourages its students, faculty, and staff to use non-gendered language in instances where gender is irrelevant.

It is important to note the distinction between the terms “gender” and “sex”. Though often used interchangeably, these terms refer to two different concepts: “sex” refers to one’s biological
sex, which includes one's sex organs as well as biochemistry, while “gender” refers to how one self identifies.

The policy is to be placed in the following documents:
  UW-Eau Claire’s policy page
  *Faculty and Academic Staff Policies and Procedures*
    III. V. D. Joint Personnel Policies and Procedures
    III. VI. B Instructional Policies and Procedures
  Dean of Students website
  *Your Right To Know*
  Dean’s syllabi recommendations
  In the documents of current faculty, classified staff, and students, policies and procedures