Advance at UNM

Writing bias-free letters of recommendation

As a faculty member, you'll be asked for many letters of recommendation for students and colleagues. This can be a tough and time consuming task, and research shows that letter writers often allow gender and other biases to show up in their letters, often unintentionally. This hurts good candidates seeking jobs, promotions, grants or awards.

So, how should you write a recommendation that's free of bias? Best practices recommend you acknowledge that bias is part of the process, and consider it in the way you approach your letters.

Here are some concrete ways to make sure your letters are as bias free as possible:

😬 Doing this might show bias	😄 Consider this instead
Referencing an applicant's personal life.	That information is generally irrelevant. Focus on accomplishments and successes related to research, for example.
Including gender-related information such as "For a working mom, Sarah is doing well."	Focus on the candidate's work and accomplishments
Writing shorter letters for women.	Aim to write letters that are comparable in content and detail for similar types of recommendations
Including adjectives that aren't directly related to the job, i.e. "Maria is friendly and caring with students."	Include the candidate's work, i.e. "Maria is an advisor for three PhD candidates in our department."
Inadvertently casting doubt on a candidate, i.e. "With only two years of experience in our department, Tania is doing well so far."	Consider: "Tania has accomplished many things in her two years in our department. They include…"
Emphasizing how hard a candidate is working, i.e. "Rachel is very dedicated to her research."	Include the candidate's accomplishments instead, i.e. "Rachel has recently been published in a key journal in her field."
Not being consistent about the way you write your letters.	Consider your collection of letters over time. Do they reflect comparable levels of information for candidates for similar positions or awards?