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Panelists: Awareness of bias can bring change

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The impacts of unconscious bias can be pervasive, affecting interactions with others at school, work and within the community, according to a panel convened by the Monmouth County Human Relations Commission.

“An unconscious bias is like a lens that people view the world through and they may not even realize that they are doing it,” said Sondra Cannon-Harris, one of the panelists, in an interview Oct. 7.

“It is those factors that you bring into a situation that are just kind of wired into you based on upbringing, on the community that you are in ... but it is not a deliberate act, compared to a conscious bias that is deliberate. It is something that is happening almost automatically because of the way you’ve been wired or the culture you’re in.”

Cannon-Harris, manager of diversity, inclusion and compliance at Brookdale Community College, took part in “Diversity Dialogue on Unconscious Bias” on Oct. 5. Panelists tackled the issue of, and discussed ways to foster, positive approaches to mitigate the influence of unconscious bias in society and community institutions.

Others on the panel were Thomas Huth, senior litigation counsel and assistant prosecutor for Monmouth County; Darryl Hughes, manager of cultural diversity at Meridian Health; Nina Anderson, director of the Office of Equity and Diversity at Monmouth University; and Mary Lee Gilmore, Monmouth County Fair Housing officer.

“It is a difficult concept to kind of get your head around, but one of the things that is important is to recognize that there are stereotypes that we all bring to the table,” Cannon-Harris said.

“There are things that we accept as reality just because that is what we have been taught or trained to do and it doesn’t make you a bad person ... but until we are taught otherwise, until we experience otherwise or until we acknowledge that, ‘I may be acting on something that is flawed’ and actively work to change it, especially if it has a negative impact on somebody else, unconscious bias will remain.”

Hughes, manager of cultural diversity at Meridian Health, said unconscious bias is not deliberate, but is a hidden discrimination that is based and influenced by upbringing, identity, culture and mass media.

“Unconscious bias is really almost a reflex people have when they respond to things that are different in their environment than what they are used to,” he said.

Unconscious bias based on triggers such as gender identity, height/weight, foreign accents, sexual identity, introversion/extroversion, marital status, disability status, hobbies/extracurricular activities, race and ethnicity, Hughes said shapes the way people view and behave toward individuals who are different from them.

“The biggest challenge of unconscious bias is that it is pervasive,” Hughes said. “There is no group, race, ethnicity, culture that is immune to it ... but being aware of it, makes us then begin to understand that it can influence us and the way we are reacting to people and we’ve seen that not only on an individual level, but on an institutional level.”

Huth provided a real-world example of how unconscious bias can impact the relationship between law enforcement and the community.

“Oftentimes when a police officer arrives at a call the first thing he/she has to do is ensure his/her own safety and the safety of the public and more often than not that involves seeing where the individual’s hands are,” Huth said.

“Commands such as, ‘Put your hands where I can see them’ can be spoken abruptly and that one interaction is how people can get an unconscious bias about law enforcement officials.

“Often times those commands are not going to be perceived as being friendly, or courteous, but are perceived as being disrespectful,” he said. “Law enforcement is now in a paradigm shift where we are realizing that if we do not engage with the community we are losing a valuable resource and that resource is information.

“We are only as good as the information that we get from the citizens who we serve and over the last 15 to 20 years or so, law enforcement has faced a significant challenge with the lack of information that has come in from our citizens.

“A lot of it has to do with intimidation at the street level, but a lot of it also has to do with our citizens, the people that we serve, not knowing who we are, and I think if we are going to build a level of trust people have to know personally, who we are.”

Monmouth University’s Anderson discussed unconscious bias at the educational level, noting that for students it is about teaching respect and inclusion.

“Students are our main focus and we try to focus on inclusion and making sure that students understand that they need to be inclusive of everyone and need to be accepting of other people,” Anderson said.

“Ask somebody about themselves and . . . care about what they say and actually delve into it a little bit and share about yourself. You don’t have to become best friends with everybody, but you have to be respectful.”

Cannon-Harris said that for institutions, minimizing and eliminating unconscious bias begins with asking what type of culture has been established within the institution, what is valued and what is in mission statements regarding the issue of diversity, inclusion and respect.

“It starts with the realization that unconscious bias exists and that the institution has a responsibility to create an environment where its effects are mitigated and that people recognize what it does,” she said.

“What it is about is building awareness and making people aware and making them accountable for not only the decisions that they make, but making them accountable for making certain that others aren’t doing that as well.”

Hughes agreed, adding that unconscious bias should be addressed on an individual level as well, adding that this can be as simple as asking people about their culture.

“Challenge yourself by getting to know people and understand the perspective of people who may have a different viewpoint from you,” he said

“Sometimes people feel that they don’t want to pry or disrespect others, but most people are proud of their cultures and where they come from and are very, very happy to talk about it,” he said.

“Getting to know and make friends with people with cultures different from your own can broaden your experiences and openness to differences no matter where they come from.”

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