# EQUITY-MINDED JOB DESCRIPTION REVIEW GUIDE

USC Race and Equity Center

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Our mission is to illuminate, disrupt, and dismantle racism in all its forms. We do this through rigorous interdisciplinary research, high-quality professional learning experiences, the production and wide dissemination of useful tools, trustworthy consultations and strategy advising, and substantive partnerships. While race and ethnicity are at the epicenter of our work, we also value their intersectionality with other identities, and therefore aim to advance equity for all persons experiencing marginalization.

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# EQUITY-MINDED
# JOB DESCRIPTION REVIEW GUIDE

## INTRODUCTION

The *job announcement* and *job description* are two major artifacts of the hiring process that are sometimes used interchangeably and are related, but serve different purposes.

The **job announcement** is a critical hiring artifact that communicates—explicitly and implicitly—the institution's priorities, a brief description of the duties of a position, and the knowledge and skills that matter. It is primarily a marketing tool, and therefore, it also highlights how a candidate might benefit from the organization and the position in hopes of attracting applicants. The job announcement is a worthwhile starting point for assessing whether the priorities, duties, and skills being sought align with racial equity and closing institutional racial equity gaps.

The **job description** is an artifact of practice that exists beyond the hiring process. In addition to informing the duties included in the job announcement, it is also an internal organizational document that dictates the day-to-day responsibilities of a position with more detail and formality. Therefore, it also permeates processes regarding employee experiences and retention after being hired, including performance reviews, tenure reviews, and the skills and professional development needed to enact the duties assigned.

This guide focuses on the job description. The importance of the job description in recruitment, hiring, and retention suggests it is also a critical artifact to align with an institution's racial equity goals and values. Therefore, a systematic review of the job description is necessary for preparation for the job announcement and beyond. This protocol is intended to guide practitioners through a race-conscious review of the job description to inform changes that will improve racial equity in the hiring process and success for Asian American, African American, Latiné/x, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and other minoritized students.

This guide is also designed to support practitioners at varying levels of knowledge and experience to engage in productive conversations about racial equity in hiring and retention. So it will intentionally focus on race and racism, not because other social identities like gender, sexual identity, or ability status do not matter—or that the intersection of these identities do not matter. **They do.** But we focus on race because racism and racial inequity are especially persistent [1] and people tend to avoid meaningful conversations about race and actions to address racism [2].

[1] Smedley, A., & Smedley, B. D. (2005). [2] Bonilla-Silva, E. (2003); Bonilla-Silva, E., & Forman, T. A. (2000).

**GUIDE GOALS:**

- Build an understanding of the ways race is made salient and racism can operate in job descriptions
- Support race-conscious inquiry as an institutional practice
- 'Uproot' and replace messages perpetuating or enabling racism with language and messaging that is **equity-minded** and enables responsibility for racial equity

**WHAT IS EQUITY-MINDEDNESS?**

According to Estela Bensimon and colleagues [3], achieving racial equity requires that practitioners develop equity-minded competence that is characterized as being:

- Critically race-conscious, recognizing that race has no biological reality [4] in determining skills or abilities but is still made salient due to racist ideas and the ways they have and continue to be built into institutional structures;
- Aware that practitioner beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, and approaches are racialized and can have racial consequences, whether intended or not, typically to the disadvantage of students from minoritized racial groups;
- Aware that norms, policies, and practices that are taken-for-granted in higher education can perpetuate racial hierarchies and inequalities, even in the absence of explicit racism; and
- Willing to reflect on racialized outcomes and exercise agency to produce racial equity.

Read Bensimon's **What is Equity-Mindedness** to learn more.

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[3] Bensimon, E.M. (2024); Bensimon, E.M. (2012); Dowd, A.C. & Bensimon, E.M. (2015). [4] Smedley, A., & Smedley, B. D. (2005).

# JOB DESCRIPTION REVIEW GUIDE

You may have heard that racism and other forms of oppression are entrenched characteristics of colleges and universities. That means every practice, policy, and structure can serve to perpetuate racial patterns in our higher education institutions. Job descriptions are artifacts that uphold these practices, policies, and structures.

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Familiarize yourself with the forms that racism can take in job descriptions.
2. Locate a job description you want to review. You can review it on your own or with one or more colleagues.
3. Read/skim your job description and answer the reflection questions for each form of racism. If you are not able to answer all of the prompts, that is okay. Do note though when you are unable to answer a question and why: What information is still needed?
4. Identify possible job description changes based on your reflections. If applicable, be ready to discuss your observations and recommendations with others.

### FORMS OF RACISM IN HIRING

Bias in hiring and racial equity research points to four forms of racism that a job description can perpetuate. This is not an exhaustive list. It is a place to begin discussions on a not yet fully explored topic. This guide contains questions to help users reflect on how each form of racism may be rooted in the job description.

1. **COMMUNICATING RACIAL STEREOTYPES AND BIAS**
2. **EXCLUDING OR CONSTRAINING RESPONSIBILITIES FOR RACIAL EQUITY**
3. **UNREALISTIC AND UNBALANCED EXPECTATIONS FOR DEI POSITIONS OR EMPLOYEES OF COLOR**
4. **MISLEADING EXPECTATIONS OF A CULTURE OF EQUITY**

# 1 COMMUNICATING RACIAL STEREOTYPES AND BIAS

Job descriptions often contain language that can be biased or exclusionary. This language can signal that a job may be a better fit for specific groups, for example, white men. For instance, terms like "cultural fit" can be used to justify hiring decisions that favor a particular racial or ethnic group. Additionally, masculine descriptors such as "superior" or "assertive" coded language that dissuades women and racially minoritized groups who are more likely to be searching for communal and interpersonal cultures rather than traditional masculine cultures that signal competitiveness and hierarchy. These words can deter certain groups from applying to these positions and sets the stage for the culture of the organization [5].

Language that labels or signals a job as a “DEI position” can fuel stereotypes that the person who holds that position was hired because of their race, triggering stereotypes and calling into question their qualifications [6].

When job descriptions contain language that emphasizes student deficits rather than institutional factors as the cause of racial inequities, educators are also less likely to see it as their responsibility to address racial stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. To ensure these issues are effectively addressed, the responsibility must be explicitly stated in the job description, even when the job is not focused on DEI efforts.

**EXAMINE YOUR JOB DESCRIPTION FOR LANGUAGE THAT CAN COMMUNICATE RACIAL STEREOTYPES AND BIAS**

**YES NO**

1. Are there any terms or phrases in the job description that could be interpreted as exclusionary or biased? *(See list of deficit terms in Appendix A on page 16).*
2. Does the job description use terms like ‘cultural fit’, ‘superior’, ‘assertive’, or similar terms that communicate hierarchical, competitive, and traditional masculine cultures?
   a. If yes, how might these terms impact the perception of who a suitable candidate is?
   b. Who benefits as a result of the terminology in this job description?

[5] Collier, D., & Zhang, C. (2016). [6] Derous, E., & Ryan, A. M. (2019).

3. Does the job description contain language that highlights student deficits, painting students and other individuals as problems to be fixed, managed, or controlled? For example, ensuring student or employee compliance, emphasizing student or classroom 'management', and referring to students being "underprepared" or 'at-risk'?

YES NO

4. How does the job description ensure that it does not unintentionally favor historically privileged racial groups, particularly white men?

**ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR DEI-SPECIFIC POSITIONS**

YES NO

5. Does the job description contain language that might reinforce racial stereotypes, particularly in the context of hiring for roles perceived as "DEI positions"?

**IN CONTRAST TO ABOVE...**

6. Is there language that moves the culture surrounding the position towards a more communal and interpersonal work space that is welcoming and inviting of racially minoritized groups, women and other minoritized identities?
7. What intentional structures and messaging are being put in place to ensure the position is not marginalized, under-resourced, and over-committed?
8. What messages will be sent to counteract the idea that this employee is a 'diversity hire'?

**PROVIDE EQUITY-MINDED CHANGES ADDRESSING LANGUAGE THAT COMMUNICATES RACIAL STEREOTYPES AND BIAS HERE OR ON THE JOB DESCRIPTION DOCUMENT:**

# 2 EXCLUDING OR CONSTRAINING RESPONSIBILITIES FOR RACIAL EQUITY

Job descriptions can perpetuate racial invisibility, silencing, marginalization, and isolation when they leave out key information about the position's responsibility for addressing racial inequities [7] and contributing to the institution's racial equity goals (and minority-serving status, if applicable). While there are ways to constrain responsibilities even for DEI-related positions, this is especially pernicious when left out of positions that are not specific to DEI. Without explicit responsibility for racial equity gaps, it is more likely that leaders and practitioners can say, "racial equity is not my job [8]."

Most institutions are interested in closing racial equity gaps as it improves institutional and departmental goals for diverse student enrollment, completion, and persistence/retention. Job descriptions can also signal that contributing to the department's DEI and racial equity goals is insignificant or peripheral to the job [9]. Job descriptions usually include color-evasive (a.k.a. color-blind) duties, knowledge, and skills that are meant to tangentially mitigate risk [10]. Similarly, job descriptions may have boilerplate language about compliance with non-discrimination policies that are also meant to mitigate risk.

The exclusion of DEI responsibilities in most roles or constraining racial equity in job descriptions to only compliance does not signal a value or responsibility to a diverse, equitable, inclusive institution for Asian/Asian American, Black/African American, Indigenous, Latinx/Latiné, or Pacific Islander students. Furthermore, this exclusion makes it harder to hold practitioners in these roles accountable for racial equity change. This is true for both academic and non-academic positions.

### EXAMINE YOUR JOB DESCRIPTION FOR EXCLUDING OR CONSTRAINING RESPONSIBILITIES FOR RACIAL EQUITY

| | YES | NO |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Are racial equity and DEI responsibilities excluded from the job description? | ☐ | ☐ |
| a. If included, are they vague and peripheral? | ☐ | ☐ |
| b. If included, are DEI responsibilities secondary or optional? | ☐ | ☐ |
| 2. Does the job description use race-evasive language that avoids directly addressing racial inequities? | ☐ | ☐ |

[7] Castrellón, L. E. (2021). [8] Hernandez-Hamed, E. (2024). [9] Dowd, A.C. & Bensimon, E.M. (2015); McNair, T. B., et al (2020). [10] Jabaily, A. (2008).

| | YES | NO |
|---|---|---|
| 3. Does the job description use generic or boilerplate language (ex. language that focuses on compliance with non-discrimination policies or risk mitigation concerning diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts)? | ☐ | ☐ |

**IN CONTRAST TO ABOVE...**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 4. Does the job description explicitly include responsibilities related to addressing racial inequities and/or contributing to the institution's strategic goals related to racially minoritized communities/students? | ☐ | ☐ |
| 5. Does the job description mention relevant metrics for which the employee could receive data disaggregated by race/ethnicity to inform decision-making? | ☐ | ☐ |
| 6. How does the job description signal the importance of DEI and racial equity within the role? | | |

**PROVIDE EQUITY-MINDED CHANGES ADDRESSING LANGUAGE THAT EXCLUDES OR CONSTRAINS RESPONSIBILITIES FOR RACIAL EQUITY HERE OR ON THE JOB DESCRIPTION DOCUMENT:**

# 3 UNREALISTIC AND UNBALANCED EXPECTATIONS FOR DEI POSITIONS OR EMPLOYEES OF COLOR

Unrealistic and unbalanced expectations and work conditions can lead to racial trauma and exploitation.

Job descriptions set the expectation of workloads and delineate how to distribute time on management, coordination, research, teaching, or service. Sometimes, excessive workloads are visible in the job descriptions. There isn't enough time in a day, week, or academic year to adequately carry out the duties listed. This may be the case for some DEI roles that carry the majority of the responsibility for achieving equity goals at their institutions. Roles specifically related to DEI are more likely to be held by employees of color. If the job description includes unrealistic workloads and expectations, it can set racially minoritized candidates up for failure, making it easier for others to exploit their efforts and take credit for their work [11].

However, job descriptions sometimes do not accurately capture all practitioners' work. Research suggests that employees of color (whether in DEI roles or not) are generally called to do more service (e.g., committees, mentorship, leading professional development for their peers, representing diversity to the outside community, etc.) [12].

**EXAMINE YOUR JOB DESCRIPTION FOR UNREALISTIC AND UNBALANCED EXPECTATIONS FOR DEI POSITIONS OR EMPLOYEES OF COLOR**

| | YES | NO |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Does the job description clearly delineate the expected workload across different responsibilities (e.g., management, coordination, teaching, research, service)? | ☐ | ☐ |
| a. If yes, are these expectations equitable, particularly against duties assigned to similarly compensated roles? | ☐ | ☐ |
| 2. Are additional service activities (e.g., committee work, mentorship, leading professional development) disproportionately assigned to the role, particularly if it involves DEI? | ☐ | ☐ |
| a. If yes, how are these expectations balanced with other duties? | | |

[11] Franklin, J. (2016); Rodgers, A. J., & Liera, R. (2023); Zembylas, M. (2024). [12] O'Meara et al (2018); Jimenez et al (2019).

| | YES | NO |
|---|---|---|
| 3. Are there any unrealistic expectations in the job description that could lead to burnout or failure, particularly for racially minoritized candidates? | ☐ | ☐ |
| a. If yes, does the description address the support and resources available to meet these expectations? | ☐ | ☐ |
| **IN CONTRAST TO ABOVE...** | | |
| 4. Are there mechanisms in place to ensure that the workload is manageable and that the candidate has opportunities for professional growth and advancement? | ☐ | ☐ |

**PROVIDE EQUITY-MINDED CHANGES ADDRESSING LANGUAGE THAT COMMUNICATES UNREALISTIC OR UNBALANCED EXPECTATIONS FOR DEI POSITIONS OR EMPLOYEES OF COLOR HERE OR ON THE JOB DESCRIPTION DOCUMENT:**

# 4 MISLEADING EXPECTATIONS OF A CULTURE OF EQUITY

If the job description sets the expectation that the work culture is positively race-conscious, but that does not match the reality, it sets the stage for racial gaslighting [13] and further exploitation [14].

We don't want job descriptions to set up racially biased environments that perpetuate racial invisibility, silencing, marginalization, and isolation. However, we also don't want job descriptions to portray an institutional environment that is free from racial bias and is positively race-conscious when this is not the case. This can happen if the job includes racial equity terms or duties but does not provide the support or accountability structures to follow through with racial equity priorities.

What we do want are job descriptions that contribute to an environment where racial bias and racial inequities are not ignored or dismissed but instead can be adequately addressed. To ensure racial inequities and racial harm are addressed, we want to have job descriptions that ensure racial equity is a priority and contain routines and material practices that make it a responsibility to which employees can be held accountable.

### EXAMINE YOUR JOB DESCRIPTION FOR MISLEADING EXPECTATIONS OF A CULTURE OF EQUITY

YES NO

1. Is there a potential mismatch between the stated expectations of a positive, race-conscious culture and the reality of the institution's environment?

2. Is there an expectation to fit into an existing framework or culture without room for innovative or transformational change?

### IN CONTRAST TO ABOVE...

3. How does language in the job description reflect the institution's culture and values?

[13] Wood, J. L., & Harris III, F. (2023). [14] Rodgers, A. J., & Liera, R. (2023).

| | YES | NO |
|---|---|---|
| 4. Are there provisions in the job description that allow the candidate to shape or influence the racial equity aspects of the role? | ☐ | ☐ |
| 5. Does the job description outline accountability structures for identifying and addressing racial equity gaps? | ☐ | ☐ |
| 6. Are sufficient resources, decision-making power, and the power to hold others accountable for racial equity allotted to the position, especially if it is specifically related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion? | ☐ | ☐ |

**PROVIDE EQUITY-MINDED CHANGES ADDRESSING LANGUAGE THAT MISLEADDS EXPECTATIONS OF A CULTURE OF EQUITY HERE OR ON THE JOB DESCRIPTION DOCUMENT:**

# ABOUT THE JOB DESCRIPTION

The following questions to learn more about job descriptions as an institutional artifact. These questions can help us "make the familiar strange," allowing participants to let go of any assumptions about the job description so that we can adequately question its role in racial equity and take appropriate actions to change it.

Answer the following questions individually, then discuss your answers as a group.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR JOB DESCRIPTION

1. Where can you (or someone else) find this job description?

2. Do you know the origin and history of this current job description? (e.g. who created the job description? when it was last updated?)

3. When and how often are job descriptions reviewed and updated? Are there routine procedures to update your job description?

4. Who can make changes to this job description? What is the process?

5. What is the racial composition of those who have held/hold this position/title?

6. What is the racial composition of the field/department/office?

7. If applicable, why did previous employees leave this position?

# WHAT SHOULD I DO NOW?

Thank you for engaging with this tool as an initial step to identifying what job descriptions communicate about college and university employees' role in racial equity. Now what comes next? Below is a list of recommendations. Choose to take the next step as a way to intentionally support racial equity at your institution!

1. The purpose of this job description guide is to provide an opportunity to find areas of improvement in our job descriptions.
    - Were there particular gaps that stood out to you?
    - Are there areas that you would need more information to answer (e.g. data from the institutional research office or HR, a survey, or other form of inquiry to inform the answers to the questions in this guide)
    - How open is the institution to allowing the candidate to reshape the job description or expectations based on their experiences and the realities of the work environment?

2. Engage with a community of practitioners to discuss what job descriptions have to do with racial equity. Provide a summary of recommendations.
    - What should the priorities be?
    - What changes need to happen in the document and beyond the document?

3. Now that you have recommendations, who do they go to? It's time to use the questions in the About the Job Description section to ensure recommendations are being discussed with the person or parties responsible for discussing, updating, and approving job descriptions.

4. Ensure you stay well-informed with the latest research and trends on racism in recruitment, hiring, and retention.

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# APPENDIX A

### DEFICIT LANGUAGE

Economically disadvantaged
Poor
At-risk
Underprepared/disadvantaged
Untraditional/non-traditional
Underprivileged
Learning styles
Achievement gap/attainment gap
Classroom management
Superior
Assertive
Strong
Enforce
Discipline

### DIVERSITY LANGUAGE

Equity
Culture / cultural
Diversity / diverse
Underrepresented / underserved
Multicultural
Students of color
Minority Serving Institution
All Students/ students/ student
Minority
Working class
First-generation
Disproportionately impacted

### EQUITY-MINDED LANGUAGE

Racial equity
Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), AANAPISI, HBCU, PWI, Tribal Colleges
Ethnicity
Race
Latinx/ Latiné / Latino / Latina/ Hispanic
African American / Black
Asian/ Asian-American
Pacific Islander/Southeast Asian/ Alaskan Native
Native American/ Indigenous
Low-income/ income
Equity-minded
Culturally relevant/ responsive/ sustaining pedagogy
Social justice
Anti-racist
Racism
Inequality
Minoritized
Socioeconomic status