



Higher Education and Higher Inequality: Case Study

Emilee Roberts

Director of Strategy and Impact, Chances And Services for Youth, Indiana, USA

Elisabetta Vitolini-Mroski

Certified Executive Coach, CoachAgility, LLC Texas, USA

Abstract

Background: This case study focuses on gender inequality in a higher education setting. It involves both human resources and leadership management situations. By participating in this study, students will be able to do the following: critically examine a gender inequality case study; recommend a solution or outcome regarding a case of gender inequality in a global setting; and justify and defend their decision-making skills in uncertain and complex ethical situations and gender inequality. This case study is best suited for undergraduate students in a human resource, ethical leadership, or social change theory course. In addition, this case study is also appropriate for business professionals in the human resource field. **Objectives and Learning Outcomes:** Learning outcomes include: 1) Critically examine a gender inequality case study; 2) Recommend a solution or outcome regarding a case of gender inequality in a global setting; 3) Justify and defend their decision-making skills in uncertain and complex ethical situations and gender inequality; 4) Research examples of gender inequality in the workplace. Some information has deliberately been excluded from the case study to promote further research and discussion to give students an opportunity to give an end to the story. **Teaching Notes:** Teaching notes are available with this case study.

Keywords: Gender inequality, higher education, human resources, ethical leadership, social change theory, discrimination in the workplace.

Paper type: Instructional Case Study

Citation: Roberts, E. & Vitolini-Mroski, E. (2024). Higher Education and Higher Inequality: A Case Study. *Αρετή (Arete) Journal of Excellence in Global Leadership*, 2(1). 125-133. <https://doi.org/10.59319/arete.v2i1.843>

Case Description

This case is about Jane Patterson, who is celebrating six-months at her new job in Student Affairs, at a predominantly male college. As she adjusts to the new work environment, she is also learning how to adjust to comments from her new direct male supervisor. Jane is wondering if she is facing a case of discrimination in the workplace and is questioning next steps in the situation.

Case Synopsis

Throughout this case study, students will have the opportunity to consider and create various responses regarding the potential workplace gender discrimination situation of Jane Patterson. Students will be encouraged to answer the discussion questions and recommend a solution or outcome regarding a case of gender inequality in a global setting. Students will also be able to justify and defend their decision-making skills in uncertain and complex ethical situations and gender inequality.

Background & Case Story

Higher Education and Higher Inequality

Jane Patterson smiled as she opened the door to the Student Affairs office, with her warm coffee in her hand. This was officially her six-month work anniversary at Bayou University, a well-known higher education institution. Not only was Jane celebrating half a year at the college, but she was also still proud of being the first female in her residence life role at the college. Although Bayou University was a well-known college for academics, it was also well-known that it was not a very diverse campus. Jane knew that it was a continuous goal of the campus to continue to diversify, and she was hopeful for the future of her tenure and the impact she might be able to make.

“Hi David,” said Jane as she spotted her direct supervisor and dean of students in the conference room of the office, “what are you working on this morning?” she asked. “

We have a big reunion coming up for homecoming – and I am working on the invitations to the guys for it. Excited to have the men back on campus to see all the new changes!” stated David.

Jane sat down with excitement and started to help with the invitations. “That does sound really exciting! Do the men and women have different reunion groups?” she said with a confused look on her face.

David gave her a smile; “No, of course not. But this reunion is for a class that was here before Bayou University went co-ed. Now don’t get me wrong, I think BU has had some great benefits with being co-ed, but there was something so special about having this group of guys back. You’re certainly learning more about the traditions of Bayou, and this group of guys was really something special.” said David.

After helping David with the invitations, Jane left the conference room to work on an event for a global conference for women in STEM. She was excited to have a panel of influential female leaders visit to speak to the current students about their experience

in STEM and work worldwide. As she was working on the event, she couldn't help thinking about the comment that David made. Before she took the job at Bayou University, some trusted mentors had shared with her that BU used to be considered the "good ole boys" club, because they had been an all-male campus for all those years. But women had been allowed to attend for the past 25 years, surely things were different now.

Residence Hall Renovation... a few days later

"We should probably divide what roles and responsibilities we each want to take on with this project before we meet with David," explained Cody. The team of residence life professionals were meeting this Wednesday morning to discuss plans for the new residence hall renovation. Cody Ryan had been at Bayou University for six months, just like Jane, but he had graduated from Bayou and was a graduate assistant when he was a student. Due to being a graduate assistant, Cody had experience working within all the residence halls, both male and co-ed. Cody was an easy-going guy, and was the definition of a team-player. At the same time, Jane had gathered that he didn't love to ruffle feathers or rock the boat in uneasy situations.

Aaron Lucas stretched his arms over his head and stifled a yawn. "Well, you know I do enjoy taking on a creative role when possible – so I'm happy to help with any piece of build and plan that makes sense for that." Aaron had been in residence life for a few years longer than Cody and Jane, and he graduated from Bayou University. Aaron loved creating new programs and experiences for students and was certainly the brainstormer of the group for new ideas. Jane was learning that Aaron could also go with the flow, but certainly was passionate about specific areas. While Cody would be a team player about anything; it was evident that Aaron drew clear boundaries about what he felt was his concern to address, and what wasn't.

"What about you, Jane? Anything specific you feel your strengths lend well within this project?" said Cody, as he leaned into the discussion.

Jane thought about it for a second before responding. Clearly, residence life was new for her – but this wasn't the first time she had helped with a building plan or renovated a building space. In her previous job, she had helped fundraise and strategically plan for a renovated historical building for a nonprofit. She was excited about this opportunity in her new position, too. "I would love to be able to help manage the overall pieces of the project finance and help with the budget, if possible. Given my previous experience and organization skills, I think that would be a good fit."

"Perfect" stated Cody, "I will keep us on track with routine meetings and next steps, Jane will ensure budgetary pieces and communication with facilities on each piece of the project to make sure it works, and Aaron will work on the creative pieces and even design aspects. I think we are set for our meeting with David!"

The Team Meeting.... a week later

A week later, the residence life team is sitting in David's office, getting ready to meet about the new residence hall renovation. There was clear excitement in the room from the three young professionals because this was the first big project they would

get to tackle together as a team. “Alright kids, let’s talk about residence hall renovations. Oh Jane, would you be a doll and take notes for us? Thanks!” said David.

Jane nodded in to accept the note-taking role but felt herself bristle slightly under that comment. Although she had only known David for six months, she couldn’t shake the fact that he would make comments like that, but not to Cody or Aaron. Not to mention, David never asked them to take the meeting notes. It is probably nothing, she thought to herself. David was a beloved staff member in Student Affairs and had given many years of service to the college, he surely didn’t mean anything by it.

“Okay, pitch me your proposal” stated David.

Both Aaron and Jane looked at Cody, “Well, we met last week, and spent some time thinking about what strengths we each had, and interesting areas of the project we felt passionate about,” said Cody. As Cody was explaining the roles, Aaron and Jane would pipe up with additional information when needed.

“Yeah, you know I love coming up with creative things, David. And I feel we could do something neat with the design of the residence hall to make it more interactive for the students,” expressed Aaron with excitement.

“And David, I know I mentioned this in my interview – but I do have background experience with managing the budgetary and collaboration aspects of a project, and also pitching in when needed” shared Jane.

David thanked the group for their contributions and for spending time thinking about this project. He asked the group to let him marinate on the roles, and they would follow up on Monday for the next steps within their roles and the project.

New Week, New Responsibility

It was the start of the week, and Jane was feeling accomplished and confident. The Global Leaders Panel that she had planned with Lisa in Student Activities had gone so well over the weekend, and the feedback from students was extremely positive. They even asked to host more female panelled events, to talk about experiences in their STEM-designated fields and share their global experiences. Plus, Jane got to spend some time at Coffee Corner on Sunday, the local coffee shop, putting together an itemized spreadsheet with thoughts and considerations for the residence hall project, including a budget and an estimated timeline of the project. She felt particularly confident because she had also planned a proposed ribbon cutting around the reunion that David was planning for, so graduates could see how campus residence halls were changing and improving.

“Thanks again for your ideas and brainstorming last week,” said David, to kick off the meeting. I spent some time over the weekend thinking about next steps and roles, and I think we have a good plan.” Jane could feel herself smile. This was such a neat first big project to work on. “With that being said, I have made some changes in the responsibilities for some of you, as I think it just makes more sense.” Aaron, Cody, and Jane all looked up from their notepads, and waited to hear what those changes may be.

David continued, “Cody, I think it still makes sense for you to plan the weekly or bi-weekly meetings concerning the project. We want to ensure we all stay on track with what is expected. Aaron, I know you like being on the creative side, but for this project, I would like you to work more directly with facilities about next steps. Given that you have been here longer, I think you have a more established relationship with them.” Although Jane could feel a little disappointment, she could see how that may make more sense in terms of length of relationship. She hoped she would still get to help with the budget items and overall planning pieces.

David continued, “Jane, although you have worked on financial pieces of renovations before in previous roles, I think for this project it makes more sense for you to be on the design part of the project - picking out colors of paint, carpet, and furniture pieces. Plus, girls like that kind of stuff, right? Leave the budgetary pieces and numbers to us and Bayou University grads, since we know the campus best.” Aaron and Cody looked at her, with weary smiles on their faces. “Let’s do this team!” exclaimed David. And with that, the meeting was over in a flash.

Jane walked back to her office, trying to shake the confusion from her face. Why would David have made that switch, and why would he have assumed that because she was a girl, she would like that part of the project?

Design or Destruction

As Jane dropped into her chair in her office, she suddenly felt uneasy about the situation and less confident in her role. As she thought through the comments David had made directly or in passing in just the past week, she started to wonder if she was overthinking it, or not thinking about it enough. She took a sip of her lukewarm coffee and began to wonder why she didn’t speak up in that meeting and advocate more for herself.

Jane spoke under her breath, “Well, I need to remember I’m the first female in this role, and it’s only been six months. But certainly, David knew better, or maybe he was just joking? But it certainly didn’t feel like a joke to me” she thought to herself.

As she continued to reflect on conversations, she reminded herself that David was beloved in the office, and that he had some great leadership qualities. However, whether his comments were or were not a joke, would it make sense for her to say something?

She continued to think out loud: “On one hand, I don’t want to rock the boat because I’m new and am still learning about the office. Plus, at outside of work events, David and his wife Shelby, the HR Director of Bayou University, were always so kind and welcoming to me. On the other hand, if I never speak up about how the comments make me feel, how can I expect change or seek further understanding?” Jane continued to go back and forth in her own thoughts about the interactions as a whole.

As Jane continued to sit in her office and puzzle over the situation, Achilles Angelos, the Vice-President of Student Affairs, stopped by her office. Achilles, who was an expatriate from Greece joined Bayou University at the beginning of the academic year and was a new addition to the leadership team of the school. He

recently relocated to the US from Greece to follow his wife, who was appointed as the Chief Executive Officer of a world-renowned hospital in Houston.

“Hey, just wanted to check in on how everything is going...” suddenly Achilles’ voice trailed off. “Hey, is everything okay? You look like you might be a little upset or troubled by something.”

Achilles, who, among other things, was in charge of the newly created mentorship program for the school and had quickly grown into an excellent mentor for Jane, showing her the ropes of Bayou University and ensuring she had everything she needed in her new career with the team. Jane took a deep breath and then another sip of coffee. She wasn’t sure how Achilles would respond to what she was about to share.

Learning Outcomes

By participating in this case study, students should be able to do the following: critically examine a gender inequality case study; recommend a solution or outcome regarding a case of gender inequality in a global setting; and justify and defend their decision-making skills in uncertain and complex ethical situations and gender inequality. Students should also be able to utilize social change theory and additional research or case studies to develop their responses and actions to this type of potential gender discrimination.

Case Study Questions

- What are the central issues that need to be addressed in this case study?
- How do you define gender equality?
- Discuss the ethical considerations of the actions taken by David.
- What is the impact of segregated events on an organization's goal of equality? For example, Jane is disappointed that there aren't more activities for women planned for the reunion because David thought that the all-male school was "something special." But the next week she was excited that she had been asked to host more women-only events. Discuss why this may be?
- What do you think Jane will share? Would you advocate for her to tell Mr. Achilles Angelos about the comments made by David? Why or why not?
- What actions do you propose Mr. Achilles Angelos take in response to the situation presented in the case?
- If you were Jane, would you have gone to HR about this situation, even if the Director of HR was David's wife? What are some key ethical considerations regarding this decision?
- Why or why not do you believe Jane should or shouldn't speak up and advocate directly to David?

- If you were Aaron or Cody, how would you respond to the situation presented in the case?
- Justify and defend your decision and solution to this situation.

Character List

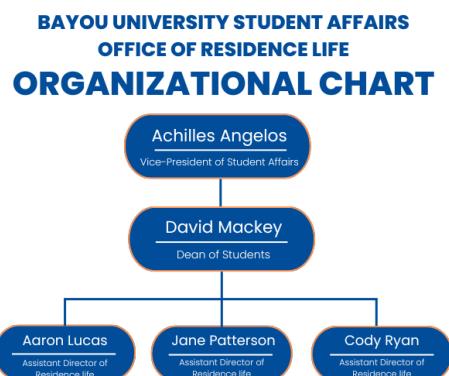
- *Jane Patterson*: Protagonist of the story and has been in a new role at Bayou University for six-months.
- *David Wilkins*: Direct supervisor of Jane Patterson. Has worked at Bayou University for several years and was a graduate of the college as well.
- *Cody Ryan*: Co-worker and teammate of Jane.
- *Aaron Lucas*: Co-worker and teammate of Jane.
- *Achilles Angelos*: Vice-president of the Student Affairs division, and mentor to Jane.
- *Shelby Wilkins*: Director of HR and married to David Wilkins.

Teaching Materials

Teaching materials are available upon approval by emailing the journal at arete@smwc.edu. The request for teaching materials should be from a valid instructor. You can show validity by linking to your faculty directory or copying your badge or identification. Teaching materials include potential answers to the discussion questions, a suggested schedule, suggested teaching strategies, and an epilogue.

Figure 1

Bayou University Student Affairs: Office of Residence Life Organization Chart



References

- Bateman, K., (2022). *15 strategies helping to close the gender gap around the world*.
<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/03/gender-gap-strategies-parity-diversity/>
- Brimm, L. (2018). *The Global Cosmopolitan Mindset. Lessons from the New Global Leaders*.
Palgrave. MacMillan
- Dixon-Fyle, S. et al., (2020). *Diversity wins: how inclusion matters*.
<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters>
- Duke, S., (2017). *The key to closing the gender gap? Putting more women in charge*.
<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/11/women-leaders-key-to-workplace-equality-closing-the-gender-gap/>
- International Labour Organization (n.d.). *Theory of Change towards a transformative agenda for gender equality in the world of work*. <https://www.ilo.org/resource/brief/theory-change-towards-transformative-agenda-gender-equality-world-work>
- Mallinckrodt, V., (2021). *4 ways to address the gender finance gap and empower women*.
<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/09/4-ways-address-gender-finance-gap-empower-women>
- Rosen, J., (2014). *Gender and Political Representation*. https://socwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Rosen_Gender_poliRep_factsheet.pdf
- The Global Goals (2020). *The Road to Gender Equality | Malala's Story | Nations United*. [Video].
YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jnSFAECLzM>
- The World Bank. (n.d.). *The World Bank in Gender*. The World Bank.
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/gender/overview>
- United Nations (n.d.) *Peace, dignity, and equality on a healthy planet*. <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/gender-equality>
- United Nations (March 7, 2024). *UN News. Global perspective Human stories. 5 Ways to Accelerate Women's Economic Empowerment*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147357>

About the authors:



Emilee Roberts is a seasoned community engagement partner, with a love of connecting individuals and organizational development through enthusiastic and positive leadership. Her passion is within nonprofit organizations, navigation of leadership challenges, and helping nonprofits prepare for next steps and succession plans. Emilee is known for helping such organizations have the crucial conversations they need to grow and improve.

Currently, Emilee serves as the Director of Strategy and Impact for Chances And Services for Youth (CASYS) in Terre Haute, IN and is a third-year doctoral student at St. Mary-of-the-Woods College. She was selected to be a member of the inaugural cohort at the historic 200-year institution, and currently serves as a Program Engagement Graduate Assistant in the Ph.D. in Global Leadership program. Over the past 10-year journey of her career, Emilee has served with a passion of dedication to program development, community connection, organization storytelling and overall organization visibility. Throughout her career, she has led teams through leadership changes, financial deficits, organizational structure challenges, group dynamics, crucial conversations, and self-assessments for organizational and individual growth.



Elisabetta Vitolini-Mroski is a certified executive coach with a background that includes 20 years in senior finance roles both in the United States and abroad.

Her work focuses on accelerating personal and professional change through leadership coaching in organizations across the globe.

Living and working in Italy and the United States inspired Elisabetta's study of global leadership in which she is currently pursuing a Ph.D.

Elisabetta is the founder of CoachAgility, an executive coaching firm.