MIT Sloan program puts real-world racial, gender issues on table

LAST MONTH, MBA STUDENTS at the MIT Sloan School of Management explored issues of race and gender in sports. They analyzed the effectiveness of the Rooney Rule and racial bias in red cards. They looked at the structural and cultural barriers women encounter when climbing the coaching and front office ranks in men’s sports. They developed a business plan for a professional female athlete.

It was all part of the school’s three-day Sloan Intensive Period (SIP), where short workshops offer an opportunity to teach in innovative ways and dive deep into special topics. The main learning objective: Examine social issues faced by a range of sports decision-makers and give students an opportunity to think analytically and problem solve. It was a chance to apply data, strategy and innovation to situations that involve race and gender and raise questions about inequality and inclusivity.

“People learn from the individual example,” said Reagans. “You can use that to help them see the central tendencies.”

The SIP provided a glimpse of the grassroots way academic institutions can encourage a data-driven, solution-oriented dialogue on race and gender issues. Judging from what happened with Seidel, a live case study with a female protagonist helped reframe the way students see women in sports.

The SIP workshop moved from frameworks and data to real-world scenarios. The team of instructors involved — Ray Reagans and Ben Shields from MIT Sloan, Chris Rider from Michigan’s Ross School of Business and myself — wanted to address the business implications of diversity and inclusivity and practical application mattered.

“When you make the business case, it forces you to really focus on root causes,” said Reagans, a professor and associate dean for diversity and inclusion at Sloan. “Framing these things in terms of business forces people to engage in a way that they’re more likely to make a difference.”

For women’s sports, the business case changes perspectives. It focuses attention on systemic facts. It shifts the conversation toward equality in a more subtle, potentially more effective way.

When students see the issues faced by women in sports as a problem-solving exercise in a business context, it creates a common, equal denominator for women’s and men’s sports. The quest for better sponsorship deals, better coverage, better revenue opportunities or better jobs becomes a business challenge. And it’s a business challenge as engaging, motivating and deserving of close attention as any other. Maybe more so. In a Zoom classroom full of mostly male MBA students, that becomes evident.

The challenges surrounding gender and race in sports often require creative thinking, opening a wide path for innovation and new strategies. That creates another benefit inside and outside the classroom.

“If we can encourage students to think about gender and race issues, even if the existing data do not always lead to clear or immediate answers, they’ll become better, more empathetic leaders when they leave MIT Sloan,” said Shields, a senior lecturer at Sloan who focuses on leadership, data-driven decisions and processes — promotions to leadership, resource allocations — that generate racial inequality because we, as fans, observe many of the processes — promotions to leadership, resource allocations — that generate racial gaps,” said Rider, a Ross School of Business professor who studies how strategy shapes societal inequality. “Sports analytics help us understand why gaps exist, what can be done to close them, and how those efforts can inform other organizations.”

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There are many avenues available to tackle inequities in sports and develop leaders better equipped to problem solve. Classrooms with future business leaders provide an often underutilized place to explore the challenges faced by women in sports, innovate and try out new approaches. The lesson: Don’t underestimate the power and influence of that experience.

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