



A Crisis in Higher Education: Minority Professors in Demand

By Shakyra Antoine

In the fall of 2016, there were 1.5 million faculty at degree-granting institutions and yet approximately 24% of all professors were from underrepresented populations. The trend in a lack of minority professors was noted by researchers Uma Jayakumar, Howard Tyrone, Walter Allen, and June Han, who found a correlation between campus climate and job satisfaction/retention amongst minority faculty. In their study, they found that the minority faculty who “perceived a hostile racial climate (44%) indicated a desire to leave compared to those who perceived a moderate/mild (30%) or a benign racial climate (27%)” (Jayakumar et.al., 12). Additionally, researchers have discovered that while an individual’s prior experiences have some impact on the retention of faculty of color, “the quality of experiences once the individual arrives at an institution have the greatest impact on retention” (Jayakumar et. al., 13). How do these faculty demographics compare to student demographics in America?

By the year 2046, the U.S is predicted to be a majority minority country for the first time in its history (Frey, 1). Marybeth Gasman, Director of the University of Pennsylvania’s Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions, observed the change in student demographics became apparent in 2014, in which the United States experienced a K-12 student population that, for the first time, had a greater proportion of nonwhite students than white students (Gasman, 1). Despite these

historic changes in the student demographics, the demographics of teachers have been unable to keep up, especially within higher education. These findings are important to recognize due to the greater implications they have upon students of color. Minority students seek advice, expertise, and understanding from faculty of color, but are often left searching due to the limited amount of minority faculty at higher education institutions.

Gasman further highlights the disparities between minority students and minority faculty, claiming that “our current faculty lacks expertise in working with students of color and our resistance to diversifying the faculty means that we are not going to be ready any time soon”. In the United States, a country in which the student population continues to diversify, we must ask ourselves what elements are necessary for our higher education system to foster positive school experiences for all of its students. I contend that a diversity of age, gender, and race is essential for the longevity of higher education. However, in order to combat the lack of faculty diversity, we must first understand what has been cemented into American universities.

A major contributor to the lack of minority faculty in institutions is the revolving door phenomenon, characterized as a replacement process of faculty of color as opposed to an incremental process. Within higher education institutions, it is not uncommon for newly hired minority faculty to be replacing minority faculty wishing to leave, resulting in an inability for growth and development of minority faculty networks. A great example of this is when, through studying the faculty makeup at top-tiered Duke University, researchers found that within a one-year period, while eighteen faculty of color had been hired, the final total for minority faculty by the end of the semester was eight (Culotta et. al., 1). Reporter, Audrey Williams June, of the *The Chronicle for*

Higher Education remarks how it is often difficult for minority faculty to remain at higher education institutions due to the overlooked burdens placed on faculty of color (1). Simply put, administrators are usually not aware of “some of the issues that minority faculty members face on predominantly white campuses--feelings of isolation, the burden of invisible labor, a hostile workplace environment[...], and how the overall campus climate heavily influences the retention of minority faculty (June, 1). Consequently, top college administrators have decided to confront the revolving door phenomenon.

While colleges have tried to combat this phenomenon with a number of initiatives, many have been met with criticism. One initiative met with criticism is a “target” of program, where colleges invest large funds towards finding, recruiting, and hiring applicants from underrepresented groups, such as minorities and women (Culotta et. al., 4). Such a program was implemented at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1990 with promising results. Between 1992 and 1993, nearly \$1 million dollars were spent towards recruiting new minority hires, resulting in nine of the one hundred new hires belonging to underrepresented groups (Culotta et. al., 4). Subsequently, other universities have picked up the practice with much pushback from current faculty of color. Although minority faculty acknowledge and appreciate the effort college administrators are putting on the hiring of diverse applicants, many would prefer if they were recruited and accepted through the same process as other applicants.

Principle concerns from minority faculty can be due to the heavy burdens placed upon them once they are hired. A common yet unspoken practice is the “invisible labor” on minority faculty, in which new hires are recruited to either join or head committees aimed at diverse groups on campus (June, 1). While rewarding, these new hires are immediately slammed with stress in

both their academic and personal lives, leaving many frustrated by their current institutions. Moreover, these diverse hires may only be within certain subfields such as African - American or Latin - American studies, leaving other aspects of institutions - like the chemistry or engineering department - nearly vacant of minority faculty members. These drawbacks have left college administrators scrambling for solutions on how best to recruit and retain diverse applicants.

By implementing more policies within colleges focused on improving campus life, faculty of color will be more likely to both accept job offers and remain in their institutions. One component that needs to be addressed in higher education are the hiring practices, particularly through reducing biases within hiring committees for minority applicants to be given an equal opportunity for employment. Furthermore, colleges must begin to develop a greater sense of community for new hire to feel welcomed and appreciated in their new institutions. Finally, college administrators must start facilitating a program for experienced faculty of color to mentor newly hired faculty of color to improve retention rates of minority hires.

Hiring committee members are the first individuals who can advocate for minorities, and yet these committee members are often the biggest roadblocks for minority applicants. A common misconception is that members of college search committees are actively seeking out diverse applicants, but that is not necessarily the case. Pauline Kayes, director of the nonprofit *Diversity-Works*, observed that this misconception falsely assumes that hiring committee members prioritize diverse hiring when “in reality many have never even discussed, let alone agreed upon, the institutional and departmental advantages of a diverse faculty and staff”[...] thus reducing the chances of search committees paying closer attention to minority applicants (Kayes, 1).

Furthermore, search committees universally lack any formal training to aid in recognizing and reducing their implicit biases. One such example is aversive racism, in which committee members subconsciously find reasons to not hire minorities (Kayes, 2). Search committees often seek out applicants who are the most “familiar” to them “in terms of educational background, social skills, values, and behaviors”, and are more likely to reject applicants with an “[educational background], experiences, or research interests [that] deviate from the traditional academic mold” (2). Consequently, while committees may be able to hire applicants of color, they may have traits more synonymous with the Anglo-Saxon applicant, and thus could be casted as an “Afro-Saxon” or “Hispanic-Saxon” (2). This leaves institutions lacking faculty who genuinely understand the circumstances faced by students of color, potentially leaving such students vulnerable to academic and social isolation.

There are many ways in which this issue can be tackled, however the most effective tactic is through integrating a training program for faculty serving on hiring committees. Individuals within hiring committees may find difficulty in understanding applicants from differing backgrounds, and thus are less comfortable hiring such individuals. For that reason, it is crucial for committees to focus training sessions on exposing the biases individuals may possess without their own awareness and begin breaking down such biases to view diverse applicants in a more positive light. Most important, throughout these training sessions participants must begin to understand the importance of hiring diverse applicants within their colleges. Kayes found that once participants of diversity training sessions began to “articulate reasons for diverse hiring, the collaborative, problem-solving tone of the discussion begins to disarm the kind of defensiveness [...]” often experienced by white committee members who feel forced to hire diverse applicants (3). Through

mandating a training program for members of hiring committees, minority applicants will have a greater likelihood of making it through the committee and joining the institution.

New hires seek to be welcomed into a community but are more likely to feel isolated within their new colleges due to the demographics. College towns have historically been the location of predominantly white institutions, making the transition difficult for minority hires hoping to adjust to their new settings. This is most evident in academic departments, the first “community” that new hires are thrust into. Faculty of color have noted this occurrence in their transition to new institutions, claiming that “an academic department is supposed to feel like a home, and yet it's one of the first places where underrepresented-minority scholars tend to report feelings of isolation” (June 3). Subsequently, minority hires undergo isolation via their department members, as nonwhite department members may feel uncomfortable interacting with minority hires, particularly in fields such as STEM. One chemistry professor of color noted that minority faculty overall feel a sense of discomfort from their white colleagues, as those without much experience with minority colleagues find it noticeably “harder to relax [and] converse about a variety of topics - among them science” (Culotta et. al., 4). Consequently, it is more difficult for minority faculty to feel comfortable around their colleagues when they are constantly aware of how their presence may bring discomfort to those in their institution.

An additional obstacle preventing minority hires from feeling a greater sense of belonging is the lack of minority faculty currently present within institutions. The revolving door has become a prevalent practice amongst many institutions, causing minority applicants to become replacements, as opposed to additions, to the current number of faculty of color at their new colleges. Further, new minority hires have a limited amount of experienced faculty to turn to, as experienced faculty of color are often poached by other institutions seeking higher salaries and more research

opportunities. With a mass exodus of expertise and experience in higher education, new minority hires face additional responsibilities soon after starting their positions.

Minority hires are often encouraged to either join or become the head of committees focused on increasing diversity, immediately adding pressure to new hires (Culotta et. al., 2). Further, with the small number of minority faculty in higher education, students of color tend to gravitate towards faculty of color for advice, limiting the time minority faculty can spend on work within their field. Researchers summarized these frustrations by asserting that [newly hired minority Faculty “find themselves burdened with committee assignments as a ‘minority representatives,’ overwhelmed by feelings of isolation on mostly white campuses and undersupplied with graduate students” seeking apprenticeship (Culotta et.al., 2) While these hires feel honored to play such an important role within the institution, they often feel overwhelmed by the number of responsibilities they take on in comparison to the rewards received from their work.

One proposed solution in decreasing the isolation felt amongst faculty of color is the introduction of a mentoring program within college departments. Only recently have departments begun to develop mentoring systems for new minority hires, connecting them to more experienced faculty of color to seek advice in academic pursuits in addition to advice on personal issues within their new institutions. Similar to the practices implemented to assist new executives in business settings, “many [college] departments are now making new faculty mentoring a formal responsibility of caring senior faculty members” to increase the connections established amongst faculty of color (Tapia, 3). A 2009 study found that mentoring had made a difference in “the emotional, cultural, and social adjustment to the isolation they may feel while employed at predominantly White institutions” (Abdul-Raheem, 2). By implementing a mentoring program between new minority hires and experienced faculty, new hires will feel greater support from their institutions

and will be more likely to remain. Additionally, the experienced faculty will feel a greater sense of purpose, as they are both equipped and capable of improving the campus climate of their fellow faculty members of color.

Another solution that has picked up momentum has been cluster hiring, in which a group of minority applicants are hired “in a single department or a cross-disciplinary research area” so new minority hires feel a greater feeling of autonomy and inclusion (June1). The implementation of cluster hiring in higher institutions will additionally increase the community desired by minority faculty and encourage potential minority hired to consider positions in such institutions (June, 1). However, one potential setback from this form of hiring is the unequal balance of minority faculty in fields outside of the humanities, such as biology or engineering. While any progress made to increase the number of minority faculty in higher education is commendable, it is more important to make changes that will impact the entire institution than to focus your efforts on one department.

In spite of the debates on how best to combat the lack of minority faculty, it is important to remind ourselves why it is important to invest our time and efforts in hiring minorities. Minority students, already marginalized before entering college, experience intense isolation from their fellow college students at higher education institutions. Students of color desire a faculty member to go to for advice, comfort, and advancement opportunities, and instinctually tend to gravitate towards minority faculty. Moreover, minority faculty can impact non-minority students, exposing white students to individuals from varying backgrounds who can help begin and continue discussions concerning race that white students often feel uncomfortable participating in.

Similar to their impact on students, faculty of color can also improve the lives of their colleagues and school administration, as they are capable of providing a perspective that is integral

to adopting important policy changes that will improve the entire campus community. Finally, as the demographics of the United States continue to lean towards a majority minority population, it is crucial for the faculty in higher education to more accurately reflect the demographics of their students so that our education system is truly a reflection and model for our students.



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