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# **Women of Color in Higher Education: Challenges in the Hiring Process for Prospective Administrators**

Demerris Brooks-Immel

## **Abstract**

Women of color face unique challenges and barriers in higher education due to longstanding bias that directly impacts how objectivity, meritocracy, individuality, and experiential knowledge are viewed and assessed. In *Women Faculty of Color in the White Classroom*, Vargas discussed the challenges women of color face in pursuit of faculty positions in higher education. This essay highlights similarities to, and provides examples of, comparable challenges for women of color in pursuit of management and executive positions in institutions of higher education. It also makes specific recommendations regarding current practices in the hiring process of one state university.

In the time I have worked at my current institution, to which I will refer as State University, I have served on a number of hiring committees; I observed that candidates of color are afforded more consideration when competing for jobs at the staff level than when pursuing management and executive-level positions. In the past month, the university has made great strides, hiring two women of color in executive-level positions, but not before first demonstrating on many occasions the ways in which administrators struggle in affording female candidates of color equitable opportunities for consideration based on professional experience, knowledge, and research accomplishments. University hiring practices will remain inherently biased until such time as administrators recognize that the goal of diversity cannot be met without first acknowledging personal and institutional biases.

## Listening to the Voices

In “The Failure of Social Education in the United States,” Chandler and McKnight stated, “As long as socially constructed notions of race and whiteness continue to define ‘normal’ in our institutions, they will also perpetuate privilege” (2009, p. 224). In many instances, the manner by which one determines position qualifications emphasizes academic achievement over transferable skills or experiential knowledge. Executive-level administrative positions often require a doctorate degree, evidence of depth of knowledge in a particular subject area and significant academic achievement that is not always relevant to the position. In *White-washing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society*, Brown wrote that race permeates institutions to an extent that members are unable to recognize the degree to which it is “lodged in the structure of society” (2003, p. 35). I believe this can also be said of gender, and both play a role in one’s assessment of candidates. For example, when the Vice President for Student Affairs (VPSA) position at State University was vacated due to the firing of an African American woman, the position was advertised as one requiring a doctorate. Vargas demonstrated, through the use of statistical data, that “minority women are still severely underrepresented in the academy” (2002, p. 23). The author connected the slow progress of women of color in higher education to some of the same factors that impact undergraduate student matriculation, retention, and graduation: the need for financial assistance, lack of mentors, and exclusion from influential networks (Vargas, 2002).

The same support networks and relationships that are critical to the success of undergraduate students of color are also critical to the success of White and minority women as graduate students, as new faculty, and, I would argue, as administrators. Therefore, by requiring a doctoral degree, the likelihood is increased that the candidate pool will consist of White men. This is not a decision based on conscious exclusion, but rather one that results from who one deems “experts” and the criteria one uses to make those distinctions. In *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, hooks described the ways race

“determines who we listen to” and “who we accept as authorities” (2003, p. 31). In the first of the searches for this position, a White male with a PhD in mathematics was hired as the VPSA over candidates with accomplished careers in Student Affairs who did not have doctoral degrees. It can be concluded that transferable skills and experiential knowledge of Student Affairs professionals were deemed inferior to the knowledge and skills of candidates who held doctoral degrees in unrelated fields and with little or no experience in Student Affairs. In a meeting with managers at State University, author Time Wise (personal communication, 2009), advised that if one were truly committed to the diversification of staff at all levels, they should strongly reconsider requirements that value doctoral degrees, often in an unrelated field, over experience or transferable skills. Chesler and Crowfoot (1989) offered such practices as examples of “subtle racism in organizational operations ... because of their lack of *appropriate* or traditional credentials ... or because they lack some attributes of white males that are assumed to be relevant for certain positions” (p. 442).

Several years later, the VPSA position was vacant again and the pool consisted of three candidates: two White men and one African American woman. This vacancy came at a time when state institutions were reeling from enacted and projected budget cuts. Therefore, the fact that the African American woman was VPSA at another state university was a benefit, in that she understood the complexities and challenges of the state university systems. Part of the interview process at State University is the “open forum,” in which candidates are asked to either deliver a brief presentation on a topic they are provided in advance or deliver a short overview of their experience and qualifications relevant to the position. After the presentation or summary statement, the candidate then fields questions from the audience for 30 to 40 minutes. For the VPSA position, there is a similar forum open only to managers in the Division of Student Affairs. During the hiring process for this position, I attended two of the three Division and campuswide open forums.

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The first candidate I observed was the African American woman. In her Division forum with Student Affairs managers, she spoke eloquently about her journey through higher education and a career in Student Affairs. She was the daughter of African American migrant farmworkers, the only of her siblings to go to college, and the first in her extended family to earn a degree. She discussed her challenges and difficulties as a student and the individuals employed at her institution who made her journey possible and supported her each time she wanted to quit. She also discussed the topic of her dissertation research, the recruitment, retention, and graduation of African American and Latino men in 4-year institutions. Her story and work resonated with me, as her background and experience were reflective of the State University student population, and the topic of her research was the specific challenge that State University had been both struggling with for over 10 years and will be accountable for in 2015 under the Chancellor's Retention and Graduation Initiative, which is focused on closing the achievement gap for underrepresented minority students.

The candidate seemed to be a good match for the Division, given her ability to relate to students and their challenges, her long experience in Student Affairs, her knowledge of the challenges of California institutions, and her research. However, as I left the Division forum, I was stunned by my colleagues' reaction. Their assessment of her presentation was that she talked too much, talked about herself and her accomplishments to the point of sounding arrogant and out of touch, and did not have enough experience to lead the Division. Hooks (2003) examined the "myriad ways White supremacist thinking shapes daily perceptions and how race determines who we listen to and who we accept as authorities" (p. 30) and explained that many, if not most, White people have rarely been in a position where they have had to listen to a Black person for an extended period of time. The likelihood is even less, hooks asserted, that that Black person was a Black *woman* (2003, p. 31).

Vargas (2002) identified the issues that faculty of color in higher education are forced to address, such as professional status, campus climate, and lack of recognition, which I believe are also relevant concerns for women of color in administrative positions. As Vargas asserted, the perception of a woman of color as “other,” not only by students, but also by her peers, has a dramatic impact on perceived effectiveness (2002, p. 30). Vargas’s study was supported by the research of Bernal and Villalpando (2002), who applied critical race theory to evaluate the way knowledge and culture are assessed and valued by the dominant culture in a society. In “An Apartheid of Knowledge in Academia: The Struggle Over the ‘Legitimate’ Knowledge of Faculty of Color”, they discussed the themes of objectivity, meritocracy, individuality, and experiential knowledge, and evaluated how higher education institutions often fail to recognize the value of cultural resources rather than “welcome, engage, and encourage” these perspectives and scholarship (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002, p. 177). Vargas (2002) addressed how systems of societal inequality reproduce themselves in a predominately White classroom in which the authority or expert is a woman of color, and analyzed the ways student resistance to diversity impacts the process of teaching and learning. I contend that these same systems of inequality reproduce themselves in the hiring process when the expert is a woman of color.

Later that same day, as a part of the on-campus interview process, the African American VPSA candidate presented to the community in her campuswide open forum. It is not often that a woman of color is a candidate for a high-level administrative position and people of color already employed on the campus came out in full force to observe, and one might assume, support. The first three questions were asked by African American male faculty members, all of which related to her research about the academic challenges faced by young men of color at State University; one question in particular made reference to her research and asked that she address the issue of State University’s diversity efforts in the context of student achievement. I felt that she

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handled the questions thoroughly and completely and was effective in connecting her responses to her research and to practice.

Vargas (2002) discussed the difficulties that a woman of color encounters when attempting to teach or discuss social-justice issues. When instructors of color push the limits of “cultural comfort zones” (Vargas, 2002, p. 41), they are perceived as lacking objectivity, requisite knowledge, and professionalism, and their “otherness” is perceived as a barrier instead of a resource (Vargas, 2002, p. 42). In the open forum, the candidate was then asked, as the fourth question, to “elaborate on her definition of diversity.” Each time she tried, the person asking the question, a White woman, interrupted and asked her to begin again, claiming that she was not answering the question she had been asked. What the questioner was trying to elicit from the candidate was acknowledgement that “diversity” included more than African American and Latino. It was clear that the candidate understood this and when, after several attempts, she finally decoded the question, she acknowledged that when speaking of diversity, she meant ethnic background, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and other perceived differences. She clarified however, that she understood the question about diversity to be in reference to her research and responded in kind. The questioner cut her off and said both forcefully and with absolute condescension, “I don’t think you want to pick a fight with me on this, not here.”

Chandler and McKnight stated that “race shapes the classroom as a cultural space in which whiteness is privileged” (2009, p. 223), but I believe this also applies to spaces and processes outside of the classroom. This candidate, and her audience, received the message that her expertise was not particularly valuable and she was not above being belittled in a public forum when perceived as feeling a bit too confident and knowledgeable. She, as Vargas stated, pushed the limits of some “cultural comfort zones” (2002, p. 41) and was, therefore, treated as lacking objectivity, requisite knowledge, and professionalism; her “otherness” became a barrier instead of a resource (Vargas, 2002, p. 42).

After this incident, a modification was made to the question and answer part of the open forums. It was determined by the Office for Equal Opportunity that all questions asked in any forum would be written down, given to the member of the hiring committee facilitating the question and answer session, and asked only if deemed appropriate by that individual. That practice was in place for a short time, and has since been abandoned. Chandler and McKnight asserted that colorblindness hampers the ability to develop as critical, socially conscious citizens by never addressing institutional racism, structural inequality, and power (2009, p. 221) and, furthermore, contended that the “national narrative” of meritocracy “fails to make explicit the contradictions” between words and deeds (Chandler & McKnight, 2009, p. 233). Because the university tried to put a rule in place to avoid future instances of what this candidate experienced, without addressing the attitudes and assumptions that made it acceptable, the probability of future occurrences remained high.

Most recently, State University hosted campuswide open forums for Provost candidates. The first two candidates were White men, one external candidate and one internal candidate. The third was an Asian woman, currently the Vice Provost of another state university campus. I attended all three open forums and, again, witnessed a very unsettling incident as the female candidate detailed her professional experience and research, and fielded questions from the audience. Near the end of her question-and-answer period, a male faculty member asked her a question that was unintelligible to the entire audience. She patiently asked for clarification and he repeated the question, which no one could understand. She finally stated that she was having great difficulty understanding him and was not sure she would be able to answer his question, at which point he stated, “I am asking it in Mandarin.” The candidate paused for a moment and stated, “I don’t speak Mandarin—I’m Korean.” He began to apologize profusely but the damage was done and the stage was set. The candidate did a remarkable job of maintaining her composure, but, in an attempt to dissipate the discomfort in the room, she began



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to chronicle the times in her past when such misunderstandings had occurred. She explained that she grew up in the Midwest and that, although, she did not speak any language other than English, was frequently complimented on her ability to speak so clearly, without a hint of an accent. The equity concern in this instance is that she was asked a question that would not have been, and was not, asked of the other candidates. In doing so, she was put in a position where she was forced to unpack past experiences, many of which were likely painful, frustrating, and maddening, to put the audience at ease and maintain contention for the position. I am pleased to say that she was named the new Provost of State University beginning January 2012, but I know that she will remain cognizant of how this leg of her journey began.

In “An Organizational Analysis of Racism in Higher Education,” Chesler and Crowfoot (1989) provided a framework to examine the extent to which the organizational elements of a university contribute to supporting institutional racism. This framework examines practices involving the mission, culture, power, structure, and resources of an institution and how these elements have been used to maintain the status quo. As a result of these two experiences with the hiring process, I have made two specific recommendations to the State University Assistant Vice President of Human Resources. First, I suggested that any participant in an open forum be required to read and acknowledge the same nondiscrimination policy that is required of every participant on a search committee, detailing the types of questions that are permissible and delineating topics that violate a candidate’s equal-opportunity rights. I also suggested that, in the event that a member of that audience speaks or behaves inappropriately, the search-committee member moderating the forum is charged with intervening. I have been assured that these suggestions will be discussed with both the Human Resources staff and the coordinating council charged with providing representation of the various State University divisions.

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