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Campus Climate and Coalition Building for Faculty of Color

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I look at everyday classroom events as capable of revealing the subtle mechanisms by which larger society's systems of inequality (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, ableism, etc.) reproduce themselves.

—Vargas

Introduction

It is common practice for colleges and universities to tout the diversity of their faculty, staff, and students in marketing materials and mission statements, but one must look beyond the shiny veneer of websites and brochures to understand the daily challenges faculty of color face in academia. In 2000, people of color comprised only 12.9% of full-time faculty (Diggs, Garrison-Wade, Estrada, & Galindo, 2009). The texts *Faculty of Color: Teaching in Predominantly White Colleges and Universities*, edited by Stanley, and *Women of Color in the White Classroom,* edited by Vargas, are collections of reflections by faculty members of color on their experiences in academia. Although the Vargas (2002) text focuses specifically on women faculty of color and the Stanley (2006) text on both male and female faculty of color, there are two main themes that surfaced time and time again: the impact of campus climate on faculty of color and the impact of coalition building, which is critical to the success of faculty of color. The consideration of these two common themes allows a better understanding of how campus climates can be modified to improve the experience of faculty of color and which coalitions are most effective in supporting faculty of color in higher education.

Originally this analysis was to be focused primarily on the experiences of women of color, but in analyzing both texts, there were similar recurring themes in the reflections of both male and female faculty of color. These same themes appeared repeatedly, whether

the faculty participants identified as male, female, African American, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay, or straight. The themes of alienation and marginalization were so evident among faculty of color, that one must wonder how this could be such a profound problem when the concept of diversity is pervasive in academia. In comparing the two texts, it is incredibly profound to see that so many of the faculty reported similar stories. These recurring similarities are evidence that the isolation of faculty of color is not simply anecdotal, but rather a systemic problem that cannot be addressed simply by holding diversity workshops and reaching a certain percentage of "diversity" faculty, students, and staff on a college campus.

Campus Climate

As mentioned previously, some of the common themes that presents itself in these two texts are the "campus climate" or how welcome faculty of color felt in their particular academic setting; how inclusive and diverse their campuses are; the quality and tenor of their interactions with faculty, staff, and students; the level of support and mentoring they feel as faculty of color; and the available opportunities to publish, serve, and eventually become tenured. Under the auspices of "campus climate," faculty members reported many recurring themes as significant to how welcome they feel in an academic environment. Faculty in both anthologies were from a multitude of social, cultural, geographic, and linguistic backgrounds and were employed in a variety of academic settings. These settings ranged from rural to urban, small liberal arts colleges to leading research institutions. Some faculty reported high diversity among faculty and students at their institutions, whereas others reported being one of the few people of color on the faculty with a fairly homogenous student population. Although the demographics of the faculty and the institutions represented in these texts are quite diverse, the problematic experiences of the faculty of color are not.

Campus climates offer a variety of recurring themes. These include the sentiment of alienation faculty of color feel from majority faculty,

illustrated by a female faculty member reflecting on her transition from Howard University to Texas A&M University:

> Having just left Howard University I was accustomed to an atmosphere where people spoke to and acknowledged each other's presence. This was not, however, the atmosphere in my department, which made me often feel as if I were invisible. I longed for opportunities to go to lunch with my colleagues and discuss the department and research. (Stanley, 2006, p. 118)

Widespread tokenism was also reported by many faculty members. Such tokenism manifests itself in a variety of ways. From not being noticed at all, to becoming "celebrity faculty" and being "showcased," this tokenism seems to be prescribed for faculty of color. Many essayists suggested that faculty of color should be oriented to understand the nature of tokenism, expect this kind of treatment, and be guided on how best to handle it. One faculty member of color gives this advice for others like her:

> You should expect to be called upon to be the spokesperson or token for the group to which you belong. Decide from day one how you will handle the situation. In my case, I never took on the role of spokesperson for my entire race. (Stanley, 2006, p. 38)

With only a handful of minority faculty members on campus, faculty of color reported being called on to mentor, serve on minority-specific committees, and serve as minority-student-group advisors more often than their majority counterparts. Although faculty of color recognized the importance of service, they also felt that too much service could hurt them in their quest to attain tenure (Baez, 2000).

One of the most troubling recurring observations was the general lack of respect shown by majority faculty, students, and staff toward faculty of color. Signs of lack of respect were illustrated in microaggressions such as being referred to as *Ms.* instead of *Dr.* or *professor,*

being kicked out of a classroom late at night by a security guard who did not believe a person of color might be a faculty member, being issued campus identification cards that listed them as staff instead of faculty, and students questioning their lack of objectivity because of their personal backgrounds. The Stanley (2006) text noted that "students can be hostile toward our goals and identities" (2006, p. 102); it can be inferred that this may be true of some majority faculty as well. This general lack of respect reported by faculty of color was also manifested in the feeling that they were constantly forced to prove their intellectual capabilities and credentials:

> For many faculty of color, the constant need to list their scholarly accomplishments just to establish some sense of agency and authority as an academic is an unfair but necessary means of survival. … What I view as one of the distinct differences is that somewhat like their African American colleagues, white faculty members do have experiences in which their authority is questioned. Yet, unlike their African American counterparts, white faculty members do not have experiences (i.e., to the degree of faculty of color) in which their competence is questioned. (Stanley, 2006, p. 85)

Similar stories of a generally weak trust of credentials of faculty of color by majority students, faculty, and staff were repeated time and again throughout both texts and in numerous narratives. From parents of students calling a faculty member to question their qualifications to grade their child, to students questioning the ability of an Indian woman with a heavy accent to teach English, faculty of color in both texts were continually subjected to microaggressions that caused undue stress and uneasiness in their respective academic settings.

One interesting contrast between faculty members of color who contributed to these two texts is between faculty who felt it was their obligation to educate students about racism and those who felt it was their job to educate students about the subjects they taught, but chose not to directly address the racist attitudes some of their students

hold. The contrast is illustrated in the following two statements from faculty of color:

> Referring to my own experience and to the work of others writing about teaching and identity, I argue that Other teachers must teach our students about White identity and privilege before we can continue with a larger discussion of race. (Vargas, 2002, p. 73)

> Scholars and teachers of color have been asserting for some time now that it is not our responsibility to educate whites about their personal racism. It is also not necessarily our responsibility to teach them about institutional, societal and civilizational forms of racism. … As people of color discussing race and racism with our students, asking them to examine their privilege we are in a position where we need to convince them that the racist institutionalized practices that have benefitted them … (and to which they are oblivious) need to be overturned. It is the equivalent of asking the victors of wars past to return the bounty to which they have laid claim. (Stanley, 2006, p. 106)

Faculty of color who choose to address racism and privilege with their majority students must tread carefully, as research has shown that majority students may have adverse reactions to being introduced to concepts such as White privilege and racial differences (Ford, 2011).

Coalition Building

There are also many recurring themes in the texts that center around the subject of coalition building. Coalition building is mentioned as a key tool to navigate the hostile campus climates discussed in the previous section. Although the role of coalition building was noted by many faculty members as being critical to their sense of inclusion and engagement, there are very few formal institutionally supported programs to promote coalition building and mentoring. Most coalition building and mentoring takes place in informal settings and

is often instigated or sought out by the faculty member in need of guidance. Coalition building occurs not only among faculty of color in particular university departments, but also across the university, interinstitutionally, and among students as well.

Faculty of color described themselves as having to make an extra effort to engage majority faculty, when trying to establish themselves in a new academic setting.

> To strengthen these relationships, I often asked colleagues to tag along if I saw them going to lunch. When the lunchtime bridge group met, I asked them to teach me how to play and joined right in. … From these seemingly inconsequential social encounters, I was eventually able to create more meaningful and sustained relationships with colleagues. (Vargas, 2002, p. 35)

Additionally, many faculty members mentioned diversity in the student body as meaningful to them as faculty of color. These faculty of color many times see students of color as allies who would "get" them and understand their point of view as a person of color (Vargas, 2002, p. 197). Some faculty members cite their attempts to also build coalitions with White students they taught by providing a "safe" environment in which they could express their feelings about race. One of the techniques the essayists mentioned to facilitate this understanding was to ask students to think about a time when they felt helpless, or like an outsider.

> This exercise transcends the classroom. After completing the exercise, most students are able to realize the following: We can all be powerless at some time or another; we are not always responsible for this condition: being powerless in one situation is not being helpless in all situations. (Vargas, 2002, p. 285)

Faculty also suggest that the general student population should be shareholders in ensuring the university understands the importance of recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty. Although faculty of color

are the focus of both texts, contributors also suggested that a natural group of faculty to build coalitions would be female faculty. Faculty of color who find themselves one of the few women of color at their universities often partner with White faculty members who are familiar with navigating a male-dominated faculty culture (Stanley, 2006, p. 118).

Last, faculty members suggest that mentoring opportunities should be sought outside of particular academic departments and at other universities. Faculty members recommended that faculty take advantage of service opportunities to become further integrated into the university environment. One faculty member described her interdepartmental relationships with,

> It also helped that I had a support structure outside the small circle of the department. Having worked previously for the Academic Computing Services department in the institution certainly helped cultivate friendships outside the department. I could rely on these friends and colleagues for moral support whenever the going got rough. (Vargas, 2002, p. 155)

Another professor noted the importance of having a strong university-wide coalition of faculty of color in a similar fashion.

> The black faculty at UNL have a strong sense of community—a world of our own beyond the university. We support each other both professionally and personally, providing social outlets with people that we recognize physically and culturally. … We interface with both undergraduate and graduate students of color so they too have a network of faculty of color that they can rely on. (Stanley, 2006, p. 37)

Recommendations

The vast majority of faculty who contributed to the texts offered recommendations for improving the experience of faculty of color in higher education. These recommendations varied quite widely as

they pointed out that there is no "one size fits all approach" to ensuring that faculty of color are recruited, supported, and retained at the university level. Faculty acknowledged that although many faculty of color face similar challenges at the schools where they teach, pressing issues may vary widely, depending on the individual. What is most salient for a particular faculty member may depend on that particular person's race, gender, class, sexual orientation, nationality, or even religion. In some cases, faculty of color, while counted as a minority, may not even see themselves as part of the minority faculty group (this is especially true of international faculty members of color; Stanley, 2006, p. 185). In spite of these differences, some recommendations offer ways to improve the experience of faculty of color that were mentioned by multiple contributors. The most common recommendations follow.

- Coteaching controversial courses by a majority faculty member and a faculty member of color
- Recognizing there may be conflict between different faculty-of-color groups and working to bring these groups together (coalition building)
- Creating formal mentoring programs for faculty of color. One recommendation was to hire well-respected or senior faculty of color to guide and support newly hired faculty through the tenure process
- Creating a critical mass of faculty of color to combat isolation, which will eventually lead to changing perceptions of majority faculty and students
- Hiring faculty of color in groups to prevent this isolation and create communities
- Continuing diversity training as it is helpful in ensuring that the importance of diversity is not overlooked
- Placing the onus of ensuring a campus climate that supports and promotes diversity ultimately on the university
- Preparing faculty of color to handle the loneliness, isolation, and hostility they may face.

Although these recommendations are helpful and would likely work toward improving the experience of faculty of color through these texts, it is clear that universities must take a holistic view of diversity. It is not enough that universities focus their efforts on hiring faculty of color; they must also be equally committed to the retention of faculty, staff, and students of color. Administrators cannot assume that faculty of color who are true stars will be hired away and want to leave as soon as they establish themselves. Universities should strive to create a supportive environment that will focus on maintaining an inclusive campus culture. To aide that process, the university should provide monetary incentives for faculty of color to pursue tenure-track positions and allocate resources for faculty of color to conduct their research. Universities must understand that recruitment of faculty of color is just the first step to ensuring a diverse faculty. A more holistic approach that also addresses mentoring, retention, promotion, and tenure is critical to ensuring that they are successful in sustaining that diversity (Thompson, 2008).

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