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8 Practical, Sustainable Steps to a Diverse Faculty

The best practices for increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of your faculty are neither mysterious nor terrifically expensive

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When it comes to the hiring and retention of faculty of color, the situation across higher education is, as the saying goes, “déjà vu all over again.” Colleges and universities seem trapped in a time loop, issuing proclamations and statements similar to those made by our predecessors decades ago with limited success. Campus activists are wondering: Can academe live up to its promises this time?

Both of us are deans of communications schools at research universities and presidents of national academic societies in our field. Our institutions are decidedly different: One is a private, historically black university in the racially and ethnically diverse, densely populated city of Washington, and the other is a public university in ethnically diverse yet lightly populated, largely rural West Texas. Yet we have converged on a similar set of prescriptions for recruiting, hiring, and retention of faculty of color in academe.

Our suggestions are based on the following shared principles:

- The best practices for increasing faculty diversity are neither mysterious nor terrifically expensive. Just consider all of the money spent by elite and wealthy institutions on diversity programs that haven't produced much improvement in hiring over the years.
- It is common to say that we have to “listen to the voices demanding change.” But some of the solutions being proposed challenge the traditional systems we have in place for faculty hiring, promotion, and tenure. It's time we stopped ignoring those contradictions and settled them head on with reason and goodwill. Listening is good. Actions and timetables are best.
- Plans for increasing faculty diversity must be feasible and practical as well as idealistic and ethical. As administrators, we are charged with making things work, for the long term. If a problem occurs repeatedly, both the system and the culture that has accepted it need alteration. Otherwise change is unsustainable.

- Finally, and conversely, all administrators soon learn that every decision is a trade-off — often with each competing constituency viewing its cherished goals as vital, and even inviolate. The pie is not infinitely large; to gain one thing often means adjusting another. To create an equitable environment, the dynamics of the power structure must shift.

With those premises in mind, we offer the following guidelines on how to successfully increase diversity and inclusion in faculty-hiring practices. There are many others, but these are the ones that we think stand out as needing immediate attention.

Identify prospects and build your inclusive brand ahead of time. Loving, enduring marriages don't start with the ceremony.

One of the most common mistakes is treating diversity in hiring as an afterthought — rather than as a long-term relationship, complete with courtship and mutual commitment. Departments often assert, “We need more faculty of color,” and then embark on a search. But if it were that easy, those faculty members would be on board already. The search has to begin *before* the position is open, guided by these questions:

- What is your department doing to build its brand as a place welcoming to people who don't look like the current faculty, or research the same topics?
- How are you trying to secure a reputation now in ways that will smooth the path for recruiting in the years to come?
- Who are you as an institution? What are your culture and goals? How are they perceived externally?
- How does your locale read to outsiders?

More directly, build human bridges. Are you inviting faculty of color to be guest lecturers and speakers (virtually or in person) at your institution? Professors and administrators should not only network at academic conferences but also reach out to

faculty of color who are presenters and participants. The coffee klatch, panel, poster walk-by, and sit-down are more than introductions; they are openings to stay connected and to check in on someone's progress or status. Often, people do not know if they are ready for a change until someone asks.

The aim of these efforts: Your department, when it does announce a job opening, will have a positive image in the eyes of faculty of color in your field. Moreover, you will have friends already in place and be able to call upon external allies. The latter may recommend your department to colleagues within their own network, including new Ph.D.s.

Know what's appealing about you. Whether you are talking with faculty of color before or during a search, you need to paint a picture of what makes you attractive as an institution, program, and place.

To take a personal example, one of us is an African American woman who is a former journalist turned academic. Earlier in her career, she was recruited by the University of Wyoming for a job opening as a program director and a faculty member. Wyoming is not known for having a diverse population. But the university's faculty members and administrators reached out to her and effectively made the case: "You would be welcome here, and you would enjoy working with us."

Assume nothing about where candidates of color prefer to work and live. Some faculty of color prefer to work in a city, others like college towns; some want to work at a large university, some prefer a small liberal-arts college. Whether a candidate is from Oklahoma or New York, Maine or Alabama, you won't know who is willing to join your faculty until you give them a reason to do so.

So ask, show, and tell. Create an awareness and comfort with your institution and your local region. Diversity is a state of mind, not Noah's Ark counting two by two.

Encourage hiring committees to recruit — not just “open and advertise.” In most fields, departments have gotten used to passive recruiting: There are usually far too many candidates for too few openings. All you need to do to attract great candidates is take out an ad. Recruiting means contacting your friends, and extra effort means sending an email to some people you already know.

But recruiting candidates of color requires active, friendly, strategic recruiting. More academics and programs are starting to appreciate that anyone worth hiring is worth wooing. Unfortunately, we still need to work on the execution. It’s not enough to email a candidate (“We have a job open. You might think about it.”) or make a quick phone call to a friend at another university (“Let me know if any names come to mind.”).

Real recruiting entails cold-calling, repeated attempts, studied persuasion, and in-depth conversations. Potential recruits may not know you, have heard of your program, or even be “on the market,” but you might change their minds with enough time and effort. Don’t hold a cattle call; build a relationship of trust.

Widen your assumptions about the meaning of “qualified.” Faced with criticism for their poor hiring record, academics and leaders often insist: “Well, we tried, but there are just not enough qualified candidates who are persons of color.” A modern retort might be: Perhaps you are defining positional qualifications too narrowly.

In our field of media and communications, programs have stretched their wings in many instances by hiring clinical professors or professors of practice. These former industry practitioners bring a wealth of real-world knowledge and application to our programs. They also do not necessarily need doctorates to teach their skills, mentor individual students, advise student groups, and even run labs and centers.

Other disciplines should explore ways to be similarly expansive. After all, not everybody in chemistry has to be a grant-winning researcher. Full-time teaching

positions can be starter places for diversifying your faculty. Even departments at research universities don't need every faculty position to be 100-percent focused on research. It's not an either/or situation. In STEM departments, faculty members whose focus is on teaching, student engagement, and service can bring in grant money, too. Across disciplines, an increasing pool of state and private funding is available for projects related to public service, diversity enhancement, and community engagement.

Enlist allies to promote your search. Candidates from underrepresented groups will want to assess the viability of living in your town and whether they will find valuable relationships outside the department. Faculty of color from other departments can help by serving on the search committee (just don't ask them too often) or simply by chatting with candidates about what it's like to live in northeast Ohio or the Pacific Northwest. Real-estate agents talk about staging a home to appeal to buyers. That approach applies here: You are showing off your campus and locale as a place candidates and their families can call home — personally and professionally.

Likewise, seek assistance off campus. No matter where you are located, there will be organizations serving communities of color, with leaders eager to help. They will be knowledgeable about houses of worship, food options, social life, family life, dating, and “giving back” causes. You have more local allies than you think, but first you have to approach them, build mutual trust, and ask for help in a common cause.

Rethink the role of students in searches. Here's where clashes between academic culture and activists' demands will hit hardest and fastest in the years to come. In reviewing the specific requests made by Black Lives Matter groups on campuses, we found one statement that was widely repeated yet, revealingly, often not discussed in academic discourse about diversity. That is: Students feel completely disengaged from the hiring and promotion-and-tenure processes.

If we, as academics, assert that “student voices must be heard” on this front, then it’s time for an open conversation that includes students. To wit: Can we find ways to involve them more deeply in hiring than just putting a graduate student on the search committee as a nonvoting member (the typical “solution”)? What about expanding their role in tenure decisions, or even annual evaluations (beyond the indirect avenue of student course evaluations)?

We don’t take a position on these matters here because we don’t have a simple, universal answer for all institutions and situations. Fair-labor practices, union or faculty-senate rules, operating procedures, and legal issues abound. But a dialogue needs to start on each campus, and your students should not — and no doubt, cannot — be disregarded.

Redefine the notion of “fit.” The oldest and deepest tradition in academic hiring is the inclination to hire people who we think “fit” our culture, mission, and even locale. This is not necessarily a faulty or malicious tendency. Faculty at an R1 university will understandably balk if a job candidate for a tenure-track position that is expected to bring in a lot of research grants sounds reluctant to articulate a research program. Likewise, a department chair at a small, rural liberal-arts college will raise an eyebrow if, at dinner, a candidate says, “I’m sort of a big-city person. It looks like there’s nothing to do around here after work?”

In such moments, questions and doubts mount: Can this candidate earn tenure here? Will this hire be able to connect with our students? Is this a colleague in for the long haul? Or someone who will leave in a few years for a “better” fit at another institution?

So “fit” applies — within reason. But it can also be a pernicious and prejudicial variable, lazily applied. It can be used to exclude people “who are not like us” and to discount a candidate of color who “might not relate” to the student body, town, or culture of the institution.

In 2020, those apprehensions can be turned into positives. Our job is not to train students to work only with, and for, people exactly like them. Faculty members who don't really fit the home-grown community can offer all students the skills they will need in our socially and culturally complex world. New lines of research, new ways of teaching, and new perspectives on issues may be exactly what your department should be looking for in a new hire — for your students, your mission, and your future.

Lay out the path to long-term success and not just the start-up package. The news media have reported story after story of faculty of color being denied tenure at elite institutions — the same places that loudly proclaim how much money, time, and effort they have invested in diversifying their faculty. We are not privy to the details of these cases, but there are enough headline-grabbing instances of reversal of fortune to indicate that something is askew — perhaps the system itself.

Take, for example, the recent news that Paul C. Harris [will earn tenure](#) in the counselor-education program at the University of Virginia, after [an initial denial](#) in January. In July, his dean reversed that decision, going against a faculty vote and signaling another clash in the governance-culture tradition.

It's no wonder, then, that a major question for candidates of color is, "Will I be supported after I'm hired?" Unfortunately, we tend to highlight the benefits of the start-up package but are habitually vague when candidates ask questions about their future prospects, such as:

- What is your mentoring system?
- What do you offer for faculty development?
- What is your record of retention and promotion of faculty members from underrepresented groups?
- What protections do you have in place to prevent faculty of color, and women, from being overburdened by service commitments?

- What is the attitude of the tenured faculty toward the new hire’s area of research and teaching?

The suspicion of faculty of color that you seek to hire them “just to check a box” will be fed if you don’t have good answers, detailed plans, and concrete examples.

The next few years will tell whether we are really at a tipping point in the diversification of the faculty at America’s institutions of higher learning.

Certainly, the changes demanded by student activists will require institutions to make some marked adjustments to the ways academics are used to operating. For example, in June, the Black Student Union at the University of California at San Diego said it sought “an increase in the percentage of Black faculty to 10 percent of the overall tenured/tenure-track faculty by 2025. Again, 10 percent is in accordance with both the statewide and national Black population. This target must include all departments, particularly STEM programs.”

The truth is: Our hiring systems — left unchanged — are unlikely to achieve such a goal. So we need to work together to identify and carry out practical, achievable, sustainable solutions that work in day-to-day reality and don’t just sound good as a tweet. Maintaining the status quo, in our view, will entail greater danger to the stability of colleges and universities at a time when we can ill afford more division and discord.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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