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## ‘Unisectionality’ in the Faculty Line: Bonding Beyond Group Limits

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## **‘UNISECTIONALITY’ IN THE FACULTY LINE: BONDING BEYOND GROUP LIMITS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Undoubtedly, the well-being of each faculty member influences student learning and contributes to student development in college. This ethnographic study examines first-hand experiences of faculty from underrepresented groups teaching at predominantly white institutions. Representing a variety of diversity realms, faculty members shared their lived experiences through drawing their path of success. Offering recommendations for retention of faculty of diversity, findings showed campus life and climate; fairness; challenges and support mechanisms; and teaching as pivotal to faculty success.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, there has been an increase in attendance of higher learning institutes. . . Between 2001 and 2011, overall enrollment in higher education learning institutes increased from 32 percent, from 15.9 million to 21.0 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Furthermore, 79.1% of Asian, 59.3% of Black, and 59.9% of Hispanic citizens are choosing to enroll in higher education. Considering that 40 years ago, the percentage of non-White students enrolling in higher education institutions was approximately 15.3% (Kinzie et al., 2004). With this increase in a diverse student population, comes the need for an increase in a diverse faculty population.

While nearly 30 percent of undergraduate students around the nation are considered minorities, just over 12 percent of full-time faculties are minorities (Lynch, 2009). That number drops to around 9 percent for full-time professors of color. Though half of all undergraduate students are women, roughly one-third of full-time professors are women. There is a very high discrepancy between class diversity and faculty diversity. This could potentially give students the wrong impression of how diverse the career field they are pursuing could be. If all or the majority of professors for a specific program are white males, minorities could feel uncomfortable standing out in the profession. This high discrepancy illustrates the need for a more diverse faculty population.

## **PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH**

The goal of this research is to examine the factors that current minority faculty members recognize as strengths they possess that lead to their success in a predominantly white, catholic, and male higher learning institution. By examining these factors, further research can seek to discover whether these factors can be generalized to other institutions to then further increase faculty diversity. The questions this study seeks to answer are: 1) What factors lead to minority faculty success, defined as being hired by the institution over majority applicants; 2) How can higher-learning institutions retain and expand diverse faculty members?

## **BACKGROUND**

Historically, university faculty has been predominately associated with the majority; that is to say, white males. In 2011, full-time instructional faculty in the United States were as follows: 79% identified as White, 9% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 6% as Black, 4% as Hispanic, and less than 1% were American Indian/Alaska Native or two or more races. Of those faculty members, 44% were White males and 35% were White females (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics., 2014). Professors' ethnicity was very similar; 84% identified as White, 8% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 4% as Black, 3% as Hispanic, and less than 1% as American Indian/Alaska Native (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Of those professors, 60% were White males and 25% were White females. As these statistics show, the vast majority of full-time university employees are White males.

For the greater part of the history of the United States, places of higher education have been primarily run and attended by white males. The first females to attend college were not until the mid-1800s and those were primarily all-female institutions. By 1870, only .7% of the female population of the United States attended institutions of higher learning (Lowe, n.d). As of 2013, this number has grown exponentially to 68.4 percent for young women (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).). Over the course of 140 years, that is an increase of almost 10,000%. As of 2013, the number of young men enrolling in higher education programs is 63.8%

However, 79.1% of Asian, 59.3% of Black, and 59.9% of Hispanic citizens are choosing to enroll in higher education. Considering that 40 years ago, the percentage of non-White students enrolling in higher education institutions was approximately 15.3% (Kinzie, Palmer, Hayek, Hossler, Jacob, & Cummings, 2004). This brings us to the disparity between the percentage of minority students attending universities and the percentage of minorities represented in the faculty. The percentages of African American, Hispanic, and American Indian faculty in 2005-06 are well below the anticipated population of 2025. However, the percentage of Asian faculty has already surpassed the expected population of Asian students (Kinzie et al., 2004).

The creation of women's colleges began in 1836 and was shortly followed by the creation of historically black colleges in 1837 (Musil et al., 1990). However, it was not until the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, over 100 years later, for major U.S. colleges to open their doors to

students of color. The Civil Rights Act greatly increased the numbers of minorities attending universities across the country and raised awareness for the need to diversify. Along with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the Immigration Act in 1965 further diversified academic institutions by increasing the enrollment of students from Asia and Latin America.

### **Demographic Shift in the US**

With this overall shift in student diversity comes the necessity to increase faculty diversity as well. Universities have begun to address the factors involved with increasing and retaining diverse faculty and student populations and the barriers involved that prevent overall populations from diversifying. Diversity allows individuals to develop new understandings to cross boundaries and connect through differences, therefore allowing discovery of what it is to be innately human. In order to develop these new understandings, one must first cultivate broader knowledge of past events and challenge pre-conceived assumptions on what it means to be different and avoid perpetuating misunderstandings.

As current university faculty are responsible for hiring new faculty, the attitudes of the former are always reflected in the hiring process (Wharton, 2009). In other words, if cultural diversity is seen as desirable by already existing faculty, more diverse faculty will then be hired. Wharton (2009) found that existing faculty perceived an increase in female and international faculty as desirable additions to university faculty. However, a report from the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (2014) found that full-time faculty on college campuses heavily favors White candidates (at just over 1 million) over Black (not even 100,000), Asian (86,000) and Hispanic (fewer than 60,000) faculty.

## **METHODS**

This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of faculty of multiple minority affiliations to reveal factors, players, challenges, and support mechanisms that the participants encountered during their journey in academe. Open ended interviews were conducted with faculty members from seven private institutions in Ohio. Snowball sampling was utilized to allow participants to nominate others across institutions. Transcriptions of the recorded interviews were analyzed and coded under a framework of emergent themes. Member checking and participant feedback were utilized as tools for data verification.

## **FINDINGS**

Findings generated three main themes: challenges, survival strategies, and positive campus reform. Under challenges several subthemes emerged like micro-aggressions where faculty felt that they are just of neutral values to those who practice micro aggression behaviors. Faculty also reported diminished levels of trust toward their colleagues, heightened tenure-related anxiety, and personal diminishment due to different understandings of institutional life. Participants also

reported a feeling of depersonalization where double consciousness split their personalities into two different dimensions: professional vs. personal. Within such dichotomy, the social and cultural identities are suppressed. They also shared a feeling of a pressing need for enacting legitimacy where they had to show aesthetic conformity, referencing others, explaining credentials, and masking their true culture as they felt they are easily misinterpreted by others when they act normally. They also noted how the cultural patterns of behavior conflict with reform efforts at their institutions.

Participants also shared their survival strategies where they reported looking within for personal and collective empowerment with an unweaning determination to succeed. Several of the participants reported their recognition that they cannot be all things to all people. Therefore, several referred to ways of prioritization and balancing their lives while picking their battles. Another survival pattern was building support networks to include faculty from different underrepresented groups within the institution.

Faculty reported a sense of bonding with others from different minority groups no matter what the difference are and what category the other group members belong to. This created an autonomous sense of solidarity as unity in the face of aggression. Faculty reported several relationships that originally were ruled out due to the different backgrounds. Hence, “Unisectionality” emerged as a new feeling that connected minority faculty of all groups and helped them achieve their goals and reach their potential in academia.

## CONCLUSION

Fries-Britt, Rowan-Kenyon, Perna, Milem, and Howard (2011) reported the challenges facing minority faculty at public institutions and called for a more generalized plan for increasing inclusion efforts for faculty of colors. The current study participants reported a flexible climate at their private institutions. However, they complained at the same time from a preservation strategy where their institutions were willing to “talk-the-talk” of diversity rather than walking the walk. As Baez (2000) called for a localized effort from the part of minority faculty rather than waiting for the top-down approach to initiate change in the academy, the study participants reported several individual initiatives to draw their trajectories for success like the mentoring system they devised for themselves. As Evans and Chun (2007) called for a dynamic conceptual framework to capture the fundamental dilemma underlying the struggles of underrepresented faculty several of the findings pointed towards a lack of resources and the slowness of improving the institutional climates to empower underrepresented faculty. Faculty ability to support one another created a counterspace that was essential for each member of the group to find voice for their “contextual experiences” (Garrison-Wade, Diggs, Estrada & Galindo, 2012). Participants in the current study were successful in seeking support across group boundaries that maximized their internal strengths and provided the needed group structure that would have been lacking otherwise if they depended on either their own group or the institutional structures in place. Minority faculty has been found to be more successful when internalizing a “bicultural way of thinking and behaving” rather than

suffering from marginality or losing one's group culture during assimilation (Sadao, 2003). The current study participants revealed similar traits when navigating sharing their different roles and exhibiting an understanding of when and how to act according to their several identities.

This study highlighted the need for innovative positive campus reform where formal and informal mentoring programs can take place with a strong support from university leadership. The process suggested for reform showed a circular multi-layered transformational approach where advocates for diversity are not recruited from within but rather from historically privileged groups. However, the study fell short from exploring the perspectives of newly hired minority faculty and adjunct instructors. Future studies may target such groups or aim for more generalizable results through a quantitative approach that would target a larger sample.

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