Perspectives on Facilitating Minority Faculty Success in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

In today's globalized market, students emerging from the university must be prepared to embrace difference and engage with diversity across a wide range of interactions. Primarily homogenous universities are ill-equipped to instill in their students the necessary acceptance and critical understanding they will need in the ever-changing, multicultural world. Minority faculty members play key roles in transforming majority institutions into more diverse learning communities thereby reshaping the makeup and climate of the institution. However, these minority faculty members face challenges beyond those normally encountered by all new faculty members as they try to acclimate into the higher education arena. These challenges range from a lack of meaningful mentorship and the internalization of negative perceptions to outright isolation and discrimination.

Northern Kentucky University's "New Faculty Collaborative" explores these challenges and confronts them in novel ways to foster a welcoming and collegial atmosphere that can assist in the recruitment and retention of minority faculty. In this paper, we share strategies for mentoring, supporting, and building a sense of community within a department. We suggest how to create a safe space and collaborative environment that stands in counterpoint to the traditional more individualistic and hierarchical model, helping new faculty of color to overcome the obstacles that they all too often face. All new faculty members must negotiate a new institutional culture but the incorporation of the support strategies described in this paper make our program unique as a learning community that includes everyone.

Introduction

Today's global marketplace calls for citizens who can work with people of different cultures and from a variety of backgrounds. One important component of preparing students to go out into the world and successfully interact with others is exposure to the diversity in our society. Within institutions of higher education, a commitment to diversity begins with a mission statement or vision to promote equity, tolerance, and social justice as well as preparing students to live and work in a diverse society (Dumas-Hines, Cochran, & Williams, 2001). Many schools have such statements supporting their declared belief in the importance of recruiting and welcoming both students and faculty of color into the learning community. The challenge becomes putting the mission statement into practice as clearly indicated by Shinnar and Williams (2008), "[Our] administration … is strongly committed to diversity. This commitment has led to…a series of efforts directed toward that goal" (p. 47). This paper describes the challenges faced by faculty of color as well as possible solutions for fostering an inclusive environment. Creating a diverse learning community is a key factor in preparing learners for the world that lay before them.

Challenges Faced by Faculty of Color

New faculty may find acclimating into institutions of higher education a challenge; however, faculty of color face an

even wider range of challenges. Barriers occur at varying levels including departmental, institutional and national (Turner, Gonzales, & Wood 2008). Challenges include isolation, occupational stress, and devaluation of research interests, bias in recruitment and retention practices, and perception from colleagues that they may be less qualified as the "token" person of color (Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2008; Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1999).

Faced with overt-or covert-racism and stereotypes, faculty of color struggle with meeting the expectations of others. Both colleagues and students may challenge their capabilities and qualifications. Poor teaching evaluations come from students who may consider faculty of color less than adequate instructors primarily due to misconceptions and stereotypes based on age, gender and race (Stanley, 2006). In addition to delivering academic content, there is often an added expectation that classroom activities and PowerPoint presentations need to entertain students, not only in an effort to gain students' approval but also for minority faculty to avoid being labeled as lazy and/or incompetent (Maynard & Watts, 2006). There is a sense that they need to "prove and over prove their presence and worth in the academy" (Stanley, 2006, p. 715). In addition to the discrimination issues faced with students, faculty of color contend with being perceived as an affirmative action hire (Maynard & Watts, 2006) by their colleagues. Misperceptions may arise within the institution that the faculty of color may be less than competent or may be receiving preferential treatment simply to fill the diversity void.

There is an implicit expectation that faculty of color either serve as minority representatives or fade into the background of academia. One persistent theme that permeates the research literature is the feeling of isolation (Turner, Gonzales, & Wood, 2008). Feelings of invisibility may arise because they make the conscientious choice not to conform to the dominant cultural expectation. Attempting to decipher the assumptions and expectations of colleagues, students, and the institution as a whole, faculty of color may feel suspicious or internalize negative perceptions, thus impacting their identities as alluded to by Hooks (1990), "[W]e developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both" (p.149). Part of a successful work climate may be taking on a positive, strength-based attitude, but other factors remain outside of the control of individual faculty members.

A positive work environment is associated with receiving support from administrators and the presence of collegial support and a network of colleagues (Turner, Gonzales, & Wood, 2008). Lack of support and mentorship perpetuates feelings of dissatisfaction, which may in turn influence productivity. Implicit and informal mentoring of faculty from the dominant culture by senior faculty leaves faculty of color on the outside looking in. Some expectations and rules regarding tenure and promotion are unwritten and are part of the institutional culture (Stanley, 2006).

Potential Solutions/Recommendations

Recommendations include creation of a supportive welcoming environment as a key factor in the success of faculty of color (Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1999). At our institution, the department administrators created the New Faculty Collaborative (NFC) in a conscientious effort to foster positive interaction and provide explicit support for new faculty. The NFC consisted of semi-structured monthly meetings that

lasted two hours in duration. All faculty members who were hired within the last three years were invited to the NFC; however, attendance was not mandatory. The topics covered in NFC sessions included administrator generated topics such as expectations for faculty at our institutions regarding teaching, scholarship, and service as well as to any topic proposed by the participants. The semi-structured nature of the NFC sessions and voluntary attendance policy created opportunities for new faculty to get to know each other, familiarize themselves with institutional expectations, and form relationships; and thus become a learning community and professional support system for new faculty. The NFC also helped create an environment in which all members had equal value, regardless of personal or professional background and experience. In fact, the title, "New Faculty Collaborative," was exactly that – a place or collaborative where participants were encouraged to contribute to the discussion through the sharing of ideas and their experiences. All participants, regardless of color, race, gender, or rank, were learners and source of knowledge or expertise. Thus, critical to the success of the NFC is the development of a collaborative environment, where the ways participants interact with each other are in contrast to the traditional professional roles in higher education based on tenure status, seniority or organizational hierarchy (Soled, Jones, Doerger, Gilbert, & Eisenhardt, 2009).

Creation and promotion of mentoring programs is another recommendation for support of faculty of color (Turner, Gonzales, & Wood, 2008). In our institution, all new faculty members are assigned a tenured faculty member who functions as his or her official mentor. Unfortunately, the majority of our institution's tenured faculty staff are not faculty of color and tenured faculty often have more than one mentee

due to the lack of available tenured faculty within our college. Another problem with mentoring may be that assigned mentors may neither meet the needs of minority faculty nor be a good fit. The "one-sized fits all" model does not acknowledge varying goals, needs, and beliefs of individuals (Stanley, 2006). Even mentoring programs identified as exemplary may lack funding or evaluation and often tend to be the isolated efforts of departments rather than systemic and progressive changes put into place by the institution (Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1999).

For many, mentoring may occur through other formal or informal networks. An example of formal network mentoring is a developmental and collaborative approach to peer evaluation of teaching effectiveness. The policy within our college is for all non-tenured faculty to receive three peer reviews of their teaching from their colleagues. Any faculty member can serve on the peer-review committee and provide feedback on the non-tenured faculty member's teaching. These peer reviews can provide effective mentorship as the committee members share teaching ideas and feedback. The semi-formal structure assures the observation of non-tenured faculty and feedback by their committee members. The intent of these peer reviews is to allow designated time to bounce off new ideas, discuss observed strategies and posed questions, and brainstorm solutions to teaching struggles; thus facilitating professional growth and the networking of teaching ideas. The key to success of peer-review committees is creating an open and safe atmosphere. One way to ensure such an atmosphere for faculty of color would be to construct the committee to include both minority and nonminority faculty members while carefully considering individual and group personalities. Another recommendation is to include opportunities for "individual

expression, collegial networking and cross-disciplinary collaborations and trainings on issues faced by faculty of color" (Turner, Gonzales, & Wood, 2008, p.151). Informal mentoring for faculty of color can naturally occur when there is a mechanism, such as NFC, that fosters a faculty's frequency of contact with each other. Higher education institutions can be a place of isolation for faculty as they are left to prepare for their new courses, learn the new culture of the institution, establish their scholarship and service make new friends, and get to know the new community. The NFC, because it is a monthly occurrence with the same faculty, provides information about other faculty, new or not so new to the institution. As new faculties - especially faculty of color - get to know other faculties professionally and socially, there is a higher likelihood of collaboration and networking. Something as simple as finding out shared taste in food or music, can lead to increased interaction as well as further intellectual conversations and collaborations. Building one-on-one relationships is the building block for future interaction and collaborative work based on shared research interest or knowledge regardless of faculty's color. Another support component is a commitment to dialogue and becoming educated about issues of diversity. At our institution, faculty of color led sessions focusing on diversity issues. These sessions were open to all faculty and staff within the department. The goal of these diversity sessions was to institutionalize diversity awareness and sensitivity for both students and faculty by exploring self-identity, the impact of one's own values on teaching, and the differences and similarities between each other. As Stanley (2006) noted, "Diversity is everyone's responsibility" (p, 730). Thus, we must systematically work together to achieve these goals. The administration, faculty, students and staff must all be involved, rather than placing the responsibility for diversity education solely on the faculty of color. Based on survey results of our department faculty, we know that faculty have already had their perception of students impacted, and have made progress in raising diversity awareness in their own teaching.

Concluding Thoughts

In explicating the possible solutions for successful inclusion of faculty of color, similarities with support necessary for success of all faculty members arise. All new faculty must acclimate themselves to a new institutional culture and need support with research, teaching and service opportunities and expectations. New faculty need to develop a trusting collaborative relationship with colleagues in whom their ideas are respected and valued and their needs are met. Opportunities to work on projects or tasks, in which they are to take the lead, without feeling obligated or overwhelmed, may be useful. All new faculty members may benefit from opportunities to safely discuss and receive training related to diversity.

Administrators can work with new faculty to grow leaders by creating opportunities for project innovation and implementation. Departments can work to create an environment that fosters open communication among colleagues. All faculties benefit from the provision of timely feedback regarding progress and opportunity for discussion and goal setting. There are some issues, however, which may be unique to faculty of color. We have provided examples of differentiation among the support strategies in the following table.

All new faculty members, regardless of their backgrounds or experiences, must negotiate a new institutional culture and establish relationships with colleagues.

Table 1. Suggested Support Strategies for New Faculty and New Faculty of Color

Support Strategies for New Faculty	Support Strategies for New Faculty of Color
Assign mentors to facilitate opportunities for collaboration and networking.	Assign mentors who are culturally sensitive, aware of individual needs, and can help guide faculty of color towards other support networks. This may be same race or cross race mentoring.
Provide time for one-on-one support.	Provide mentorship both on and off campus that supports the specific and individualistic needs of the faculty of color.
Utilize opportunities for team teaching and collaboration for both modeling and mentorship.	Find allies to collaborate and team teach multicultural courses as well as other courses that encourage diversity and social justice.
Get to know the culture of the institution and the area surrounding the institution.	Get to know the culture of the institution and the surroundings in an effort to uncover the biases and diversity issues.
Provide training on new faculty issues.	Provide training and support on issues faculty of color may face (Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2008).
Provide opportunities for social, teaching and scholarly support.	Provide inclusive opportunities for social, teaching and scholarly support that meet the needs of a wide range of faculty members.
Provide opportunities to serve on committees based on interest not only to meet service requirements, but also to network.	Provide opportunities to serve on committees based on interests and expertise without the assumption that diversity is the only value or area of expertise (Stanley, 2006).

The model below illustrates the New Faculty Collaborative (NFC) as a model for inclusive support strategies.
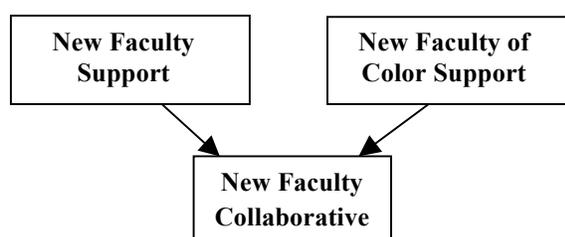
Thus, creating a welcoming, supportive, and positive environment for all new faculty members (including faculty of color) requires institutions working to combine the support strategies for new faculty and new faculty of color at the departmental or college level. Rather than being treated as the "other" or an afterthought, administrators and senior faculty would build supportive strategies for new faculty of color from the onset.

In addition, the incorporation of the support strategies described in this paper to foster the growth and success of new faculty *and* new faculty of color made NFC unique as a learning community that is inclusive of all faculties. The NFC facilitated a sense of community and a positive climate for all

new faculty, especially faculty of color, which resulted in making diversity an transforming into a more open, supportive and welcoming setting for cross-program collaborative projects and social

agenda for and a part of our department's culture. Our department's culture is no interactions, regardless of one's racial or ethnic background.

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