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ESOL 52

15 November 2019

Where are the Professors Who Look Like Me? Increasing Minority Faculty in Higher Education

I have been attending Laney College to learn ESL for four years. During those semesters, I have had many different classes, but one thing was the same. Almost all of my professors have been white. I live in a very diverse city, so that felt strange to me. My situation is not unique. While almost 75 percent of California Community College students are people of color, only about 40 percent of the professors are people of color (Peele and Willis). The situation is similar across the United States. Clearly, minority faculty members are underrepresented compared to students on their campuses and society at large, and this has serious implications for colleges. Although minority faculty members play an important role on campuses, their contributions are often not recognized and colleges should find more ways to support and retain them.

First of all, although there are relatively few faculty members of color, they actually bring many benefits to their campuses. One way is in how they support students of color. Students of color are more likely to graduate if they have more minority faculty (Stout et al). Research “looking at community college classrooms found that performance gaps of minority students can close by 20% to 50% if faculty more closely resemble students” (Davis and Fry). This is an enormous benefit and should cause colleges to rethink their policies. If some students are not succeeding, perhaps it is not the students who are the problem, but what their campus is like. This may be because students see these professors as role models (Davis and Fry). In other words, minority faculty can inspire students and show them a path forward. On the other hand, students who lack these role models will have negative effects. One Latinx student,

Jesus Cendejas, who studies at a community college where 79% of faculty are white, “feels a sense of erasure and uncomfortableness” on campus (qtd. in Peele and Willis). We can infer that Jesus and students like him would feel less “erased” if they could see that more of the instructors teaching them shared their background. However, it is not just minority students who benefit from having diverse faculty. A racially and ethnically diverse faculty exposes all students to diverse perspectives and helps them work in a multicultural society (Paganelli and Cangemi). For these reasons, it is essential that students have diverse faculty teaching their classes.

Despite everything they bring to the campuses, faculty of color actually have a more challenging job because they are often asked to take on extra responsibilities. Many people might assume the minority faculty teaching in universities have the same responsibilities as the white faculty generally do, but minority faculty members have other roles, in supporting minority students. In fact, they may also need to be expert advisors on diversity, serving on committees that are related to diversity, and translating for English learners (Cleveland, et al). In other words, as more and more minority students enroll in colleges and universities, the role of supporting them and promoting equity and diversity falls disproportionately on minority faculty members. These jobs are essential for helping students, but they also add a lot to the workload of professors. It would be fair to show these faculty extra support because they are doing so much for students.

However, the extra responsibilities and challenges faced by faculty of color are not always recognized by colleges. First of all, the fact that faculty of color take on so much extra work directly leads to problems for them. Adalberto Aguirre, a professor at the University of California Riverside, reports that the extra responsibilities of faculty of color are “ignored in the faculty reward system, especially the awarding of tenure.” In other words, the diversity education and mentoring work that faculty of color do is often not recognized when their work is evaluated.

This is because faculty are generally promoted based on their research or classroom teaching, not because of other things they do to benefit the campus. In fact, doing these extra jobs takes the faculty's attention away from research and teaching, so it can actually harm them in their evaluations. This may lead to more faculty getting overwhelmed and dropping out of the academic field.

In addition, faculty of color face additional stress when they are working at campuses that are majority white. According to Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy of Arizona State University, and colleagues, "faculty of color feel alone and often invisible when they are the only scholar of color in departments or colleges" (87). They argue that these professors often face "unwelcoming and unsupportive work environments" from the time they are first hired up until they are promoted, and that their pay is often unequal (Jones et al). Basically, we can assume that all of these experiences have a strong negative impact on faculty and that they may choose to leave the academic job field or not even enter it to begin with.

While these are serious issues, universities can work to improve them by working to provide a more supportive and equal work environment for faculty of color. The first step is for universities to acknowledge these problems, but that is not enough. As Insoon Han and Jacqueline Ariri Onchwari of the University of Minnesota, Duluth, state, "the significance of nurturing and sustaining productive and fulfilled employees of color cannot be overstated. Yet, providing such an environment sustainably remains elusive" (4). In other words, just saying that minority faculty are important is not enough. Campuses need to really work to develop policies "directed toward eliminating the 'chilly climate' and solving the problem of turnover in order to enrich the lives of minority faculty" (Johnson and Scafide). These are big and difficult changes that campuses will have to make. However, having an inclusive environment for minority faculty will better attract them to stay on the campus.

One promising way to improve the situation could be by developing more support and community for faculty of color. This could be especially important on campuses where most of the faculty are white. One example of this is at the University of Minnesota, which developed a culturally responsible mentoring program that helped nonwhite faculty feel more community on campus (Han and Onchwari). In addition to providing social support, the mentoring program gives faculty members the chance to work together “to reach out to and collaborate with the university administration, with the purpose of getting our voices heard and the necessary institutional changes implemented” (Han and Onchwari). As this quotation suggests, individual people may know what needs to be done to make changes, but they might not “reach out” and ask for changes if they don’t have social support. This mentoring program is only one example of the kind of program that will really change the campus environment for faculty of color and encourage them to remain as teachers, but it shows colleges what kind of programs can lead to change.

In conclusion, colleges and universities in the United States do not have enough faculty diversity to support students. If this situation is not fixed, the rate of enrollment and graduation of minority students may be lower, which will perpetuate the same situation. One of the main challenges is that colleges do not recognize the extra contributions of minority faculty and provide enough community. This situation must change. From my own experience, I have had many strong professors but I will keep hoping to have more in the future from the same background as me. I hope to find some more role models who I can follow, so that I myself can eventually become a role model for the next generation of students.

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