Reflections From a Minority Faculty in a Majority Institution

Cheryl B. Leggon

My reflections and recommendations are from the perspective of a participant-observer in professional roles as consultant and scholar. This chapter first discusses my professional experiences and insights and then presents recommendations to increase and enhance the participation of underrepresented minorities on faculties of predominantly white colleges and universities (PWCUs).

Experiences and Insights

When I received my Ph.D. in 1975, African-American faculty at PWCUs were scarce; as I write this chapter 30 years later, African-American faculty are still scarce. Very little has changed insofar as the proportion of African-American faculty at PWCUs is about the same as it was in 1979—that is, 2.3% (Trower & Chait, 2002). African Americans in general and African-American women in particular continue to comprise a miniscule percentage of faculty in colleges and universities in the United States. In 1979–1980, women comprised 26% of all full-time faculty in higher education, African Americans comprised 4%, and African-American women only 2% of all faculty (see Figure 16.1). In 1999–2000, of all full-time college and university faculty in the United States, women were 38%, African-Americans were 5%, and African-American women were 3%. When focusing on African-American women as a percentage of all African-American faculty, the numbers appear to be somewhat encouraging. For example, Figure 16.2 shows that between 1991 and 1999, African-American female faculty as a percentage of...
all African-American faculty increased from 47% to 50%. However, during that same period, the percentage of all female faculty comprised of African-American females decreased from 15% to 14%. It is important to note that the base numbers are small and, consequently, any decrease is not insignificant. Data indicate that during the 20th century, most faculty of color—African Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans—worked at Minority Serving Institutions: Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, including Puerto Rican universities, and community colleges (Harvey, 2002). Between 1991 and 2000, the percentage of all faculty comprised of African-American women increased very slightly from 2% to 3%. These data refer to all types of institutions. The situation is much less encouraging for African-American faculty in PWCU.

Given the paucity of African-American faculty at Research I institutions, the situation will get worse as current full professors retire because there are insufficient numbers in the lower ranks to fill these vacancies (Nelson, 2005; Trower & Chair, 2002). For example, the top 50 research institutions in sociology in 2002 have only 30 tenured African-American full professors (of whom only 7 are female) and 21 African-American tenured associate professors, of whom 11 are female. This means two things. First, that the few current African-American full professors have few replacements from the next level (associate professor). Second, that the gender distribution among African-American tenured/tenure-track full and associate professors does not reflect the gender distribution among African-American postsecondary students.

In academic year 1975–1976, the job market was an employer’s market; that is, there were many more newly minted Ph.D.s than there were tenure-track positions available. In fact, the market was so tight that my department (which was number one in rankings at the time) posted the names of students who got job interviews. While checking the list, a classmate (non-Hispanic white female) told me that I got interviews because I am both black and female; of course, it had nothing to do with my strong academic performance in the top-rated sociology department. Initially, I attributed such attitudes to fears of not getting a job in a market characterized by a glut of applicants coupled with departments that were over-tenured. If this were the case, then such attitudes should disappear when the job market improves. However, experiences throughout my career indicate that these attitudes remain firmly entrenched regardless of the supply and demand configurations of the job market. These attitudes stem in part from the erroneous belief that diversifying the faculty means ipso facto decreasing the “quality” of the faculty. In other words, many non-Hispanic white faculty believe that diversity and meritocracy are polar opposites; this belief intrudes into the faculty recruitment preference (Jackson, 2004).

In response to student demonstrations during the mid-1970s, many colleges and universities in the United States began actively recruiting African-American faculty and establishing a department or programs in African-American or black studies. These newly established entities were interdisciplinary in two ways: within broad fields (such as combinations of courses from history and language in the humanities) and between broad fields (such as combinations of courses from education, social sciences, and humanities). However, these combinations did not include natural sciences, physical sciences, or engineering. Many African-American faculty in education, the humanities, and social sciences entered PWCU through the newly created race and ethnic studies programs. At some institutions, these positions were viewed as separate and apart from “real” academic appointments, and the people in these positions were viewed as “nontraditional” (read: non-Hispanic white male) faculty.

My first full-time position was a joint appointment between black studies and sociology in a “Seven Sisters” institution. I had very little trouble adjusting to the institutional climate, as I had graduated from another Seven Sisters institution. Although research indicates that many academics’ first full-time job is in an institution similar to their undergraduate institution, this was not the case for African Americans until recently. I was fortunate to have a superb mentor, the chair of black studies, who socialized me into an academic career. He emphasized the importance of maintaining professional mobility and maximizing professional options by publishing frequently in refereed sociology journals as well as in refereed black studies journals. Moreover, he insisted that all of my courses be listed as sociology courses as well as black studies courses, because he was aware of the racism prevalent in academe and that some scholars from “traditional” established disciplines categoize as “second rate” or “marginal” interdisciplinary research in general and, in particular, ethnic studies and women’s studies.

My professional career has been atypical in that I have worked in both academic and nonacademic sectors. According to the traditional career trajectory (based on the careers of non-Hispanic white males), once a person leaves academe, they are not expected to be able to reenter—especially in a tenure-track position. For nine years, I was a staff officer at the National Research Council (NRC), the operating arm of the National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine. In addition, during the last three of those years, I was an adjunct associate professor in the sociology department of a Research I institution. In both positions, my experiences were atypical. Rather than being “time out” of academe, my work at the NRC enhanced my professional development. It was at the NRC that I
developed a research interest in human resource issues in the science and engineering workforce focusing on underrepresented groups—African Americans, Hispanics, and non-Hispanic white women. The executive director of my NRC unit, the Office of Scientific and Engineering Personnel, actively encouraged my scholarly activities, including publishing. He understood academe and did everything he could to facilitate my return to the classroom. He was extraordinary, as this was most unusual at the NRC at that time.

My adjunct experience was not typical of that for most adjuncts insofar as I was not only invited by the chairperson to attend faculty meetings (which I did), but was encouraged to play an active role in the department (which I also did). Some academic employers delineate separate hiring pools for full-time faculty and part-time and/or adjunct faculty. Some academics believe that a person can go from the part-time pool to the full-time pool. Indeed, some take part-time positions hoping to get an advantage when full-time positions become available. Usually, part-timers must apply for full-time positions just like anyone else. Many institutions no longer convert temporary positions to full-time positions, and many adjunct faculty are treated as second- or third-class faculty citizens. They are made to feel on the margins of the department and are often forbidden to attend faculty meetings and be active in department affairs outside the classroom. My colleagues seemed to accept me as a full-fledged colleague rather than as "just an adjunct." Undoubtedly, this experience facilitated my return to the classroom full-time.

Throughout my professional career, I published in scholarly journals to prevent gaps in productivity. In addition, I actively participated in professional organizations at the regional, national, and international levels. Not only did I present papers at meetings, I also served on committees, which enhanced my professional visibility and enabled me to continue to be (and to feel) connected to academe.

I returned to the classroom full-time in a tenure-track position as an associate professor at a private elite university in the South and earned tenure within two years. Earning tenure was greatly facilitated by mentoring from a full professor in the department (from whom I learned a great deal about the department in particular and academe in general), and from other mentors outside the university. During this time, I began consulting activities that took me to various campuses across the country. Some of my consulting experiences revealed the extent to which racial and gender diversity are valued in academe. Some chairpersons think that their departments are diverse because of the number of foreign-born scientists they have. Such chairpersons are "out of tune with the demographics of this country" (Jones, 2002, p. 217).

Through research and consulting, I discovered that at some universities the dean or provost gives money to departments to fund a "minority" and/or woman faculty hire. Theoretically, such financial arrangements are predicated on the assumption that a department is more willing to hire a faculty member from an underrepresented group when the money does not come from the department's budget; this is tantamount to getting a "free" hire. It is important to note that non-Hispanic white women have largely benefited from these hiring practices as well as from spousal hires. Contrary to theory, in practice some departments will not accept the money so that they will not "be forced" (as they perceive it) to hire a minority or female faculty member. Such experiences illustrate the extent to which the academy is still racist, sexist, and territorial.

Territoriality has implications for programs targeted to increase minority women faculty at PWCU's. Specifically, these programs should not be add-ons or tangential to the institution's structure. Such programs should be an integral part of an institution's structure and standard operating procedures (Erazkowitz, Kemelgor, & Uzzi, 2000; Leggon, 2003). This means that one criterion that should be used to measure the performance of department chairs and deans is the extent to which they have been successful in diversifying their faculty. Holding chairs and deans accountable makes it clear that diversity is an integral part of an institution's goals and gives the administration leverage to enforce its commitment to diversity. There is a precedent for this: some funding agencies already include diversity among the criteria used to award grants. In Research I institutions, grants entail some overhead that goes to the institution; this requirement could serve as a powerful incentive for administrators to use in persuading departments to diversify their faculty.

The literature on mentoring has basic aims: 1) to document the valuable role that mentoring plays in an individual's career, and 2) to provide suggestions for the mentor. Some recommend a formal mentoring program in which mentors are assigned. However, this may not be the most effective practice insofar as the mentoring relationship depends largely on how comfortable both parties feel interacting with one another.

Recommendations

Individual Level

- Maximize marketability. First and foremost, young faculty should maximize their marketability (and mobility): publish, publish, publish. Remember, contrary to what some people may say, there is no substitute for publications in refereed journals and books; nor are research and good
teaching “naturally” antithetical. Even in an institution that focuses on teaching, publications are critically important for tenure and promotion. Indeed, there is a synergy between being a good teacher and being a good scholar: each enhances the other. Keep up productivity to be marketable. One should not stay at an institution because low productivity precludes other employment options, nor should one have to leave an institution because of low productivity.

- **Professional socialization.** It is incumbent on the individual to learn the rules for tenure and promotion in the department and institution, to thoroughly understand what is expected and the benchmarks used to assess progress, and to have this in writing, if possible, in the contract. It is crucial to understand the tenure process and structure. For example, at some institutions, the primary decision is made in the department and is rarely reversed at other levels. At other institutions, decisions from the previous level can be reversed at each stage of the process. If any changes are made in the tenure process, get a written description of the change(s), when they take effect, and to what extent and how they will affect you. Get oral promises from the chair or dean in writing; this serves as protection in cases of turnover and/or “selective memory.” It is also important to find out the informal, unwritten rules, practices, and customs relevant to the tenure and promotion process.

- **Mentors.** Actively seek out mentors, whether or not they are assigned. Individuals can have more than one mentor and/or different mentors at any given point in time. It is unrealistic to expect any one person to be able to give advice on all aspects and phases of one’s career. Mentors can be in one’s home institution (but not necessarily in the same department) and/or can be in one’s discipline or research area at another institution. Establish connections with senior faculty from underrepresented groups on campus and in your discipline and/or research area; do not wait until there is a “problem.” Do not hesitate to terminate a mentoring relationship if you feel that it is not working out.

- **Professional associations.** Actively participate in professional associations; present papers and posters to heighten your professional visibility. This is especially effective for people of color for whom a little visibility goes a long way, because they are underrepresented in the profession. Some professional associations have caucuses or subcommittees addressing the issues and concerns of underrepresented groups in the profession. Identify and participate in networks—much useful information is communicated there.

**Institutional Level**

- **Infuse diversity into the institution.** First and foremost, make increasing the representation of African Americans, Hispanics, and other underrepresented groups on the faculty an institutional goal and an integral part of the institution’s standard operation. Include it among the criteria for performance evaluations of department chairs and other administrators. Institutions should continually monitor progress toward this goal and provide resources to facilitate achieving it. Make certain that the institution’s tenure process in structure and practice is transparent and fair and that it is perceived that way by faculty from underrepresented groups.

- **Institutional climate studies.** College and university administrators should regularly assess the extent to which the climate of the institution facilitates productivity of faculty from underrepresented groups. Such assessments should include indicators of the extent to which faculty from underrepresented groups are encouraged or discouraged. Research indicates that women in general tend to interpret lack of encouragement as discouragement (Leggott, 2003) and that women faculty of color experience their greatest discouragement at the faculty level (Jackson, 2004).

- **Ensure that underrepresented faculty receive an equitable distribution of resources.** Administrators should make certain that faculty have what they need to be productive, including office and/or lab space, equipment, and access to good graduate student assistants. The institution should monitor teaching loads in terms of numbers and levels (undergraduate and graduate) of classes, students, and advisees. Also, monitoring should be done of the department and university service of faculty from underrepresented groups. Because faculty from underrepresented groups are inundated with requests to serve on committees, some faculty are reluctant to decline these invitations for fear of negatively affecting their tenure and/or promotion. At the least, chairs should limit requests to junior underrepresented faculty to serve on department committees; at the most department chairs should “run interference” or intervene (if necessary) to make it easier for them to decline committee service requests.

It is my sincere hope that my research and experience will make it easier for others to negotiate the academic career path.
Endnotes

1) Underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities are defined as African Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans/Pacific Islanders.

2) The "top 50" are operationally defined as those ranked by the National Science Foundation in terms of research funds expended.

3) "Seven sisters" refers to the all-women's colleges created to provide women with education comparable to that provided to men by Ivy League schools. Initially these sister institutions were Barnard College, Mount Holyoke College, Pembroke College, Radcliffe College, Smith College, Vassar College, and Wellesley College. In the late 1960s, some of these institutions merged with Ivy League institutions (e.g., Radcliffe with Harvard University, Pembroke with Brown University).

References


