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Learning Communities: Opportunities for the Retention of Faculty of Color

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to address how teaching in learning communities can be an effective tool for the retention of faculty of color. The article outlines the on-going, concerning issue of higher education's lack of faculty diversity. Through their shared lens as tenure-track faculty of color at an urban community college, the authors identify common barriers for retention of faculty of color, and types of learning community models. They also recommend the most effective learning community model for faculty of color collaboration, and explain how this model addresses the trends of tokenism, isolation, marginalization and lack of mentorship frequently experienced by faculty of color in higher education.

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Introduction

The underrepresentation of full-time faculty of color (FOC) in higher education is well documented in the literature. Although efforts to diversify underrepresented minority (URM)[1] students are also challenging, a closer examination reveals that they *still* fare better than FOC. In fact, over the last 25 years, the population of URM students has grown to 31% in community colleges whereas FOC currently only comprise approximately 20% of full-time faculty in higher education (Chronicle, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). An equally pressing concern is that the overall growth of full-time faculty of color in American higher education has been slow, increasing by less than 6% since the 1970s (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002).

These facts about FOC retention rates are germane to the discourse regarding the academic success of all students. Institutions that employ more racially diverse faculty benefit because students of color have more opportunities to see themselves reflected in academia and White students have more opportunities to see people of other races in positions of academic authority and expertise. Many colleges and universities therefore advertise a commitment to diversity, particularly to better prepare their students to engage with an increasingly multicultural and multiracial 21st century America. However, these efforts are "perhaps the least successful of campus diversity initiatives as faculty of color remain underrepresented and their achievements in the academy almost invisible" (Turner, González & Wood, 2008, p. 139).

When FOC are hired, they are often expected to occupy several roles that their white counterparts are not expected to fill. They are the diversity representatives on hiring committees, the mentors to students of color in their classes and those who have never taken their classes, the guest lecturers on race and ethnicity, and—perhaps most exhaustingly—the "racial conscience" of their institutions. FOC do all this work, often while trying not to risk their tenure. Although institutions may recognize the aforementioned work as important, they rarely incentivize or reward it. Indeed, even when institutions espouse a commitment to diversity and are intentional in their recruiting efforts, they often still fail to provide opportunities or environments where FOC do not feel marginalized or tokenized. Consequently, despite their contributions and academic ability to earn tenure, FOC often depart from higher education because of their limited access to information about the informal barriers to tenure success.

Institutions that are committed to inclusivity implement norms, policies, and practices that increase, or at least retain, the number of racially underrepresented students and faculty, but not always simultaneously. Certain policies or practices are sometimes used only to retain student populations, but not faculty, and vice versa. Extant scholarship has established the positive impact of learning communities on students, including retention, persistence, and performance, to name a few (see Zhao & Kuh, 2004, for

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[1] The category URM includes the same racial representations denoted for FOC.

example). However, research about the potential impact of learning communities on faculty—in particular, FOC—is rare or non-existent to our knowledge. Nevertheless, we argue that the same features of learning communities that are beneficial for students can also reduce barriers for and improve retention of FOC.

Learning Community Models

According to Tinto (1998), there are three models for learning communities: linked, paired, or clustered. Linked models place a cohort of students in two or more courses that the faculty of each course teach independently or together and coordinate syllabi and assignments so that the classes complement each other. In the paired communities, faculty *teach together* and work closely to integrate the *majority* of the curriculum. Clustered learning communities place a cohort of students in linked courses over multiple quarters. This paper focuses on the second discussed model—paired courses.

The authors were offered an opportunity to teach in a combined English and Sociology learning community in our second year on the tenure track. The first learning community we taught applied the linked model, but after reflecting upon our experiences and our students' collective academic performances, we opted to use the paired model for subsequent learning communities. In the following section we will further explain how the choice of learning community model had implications on experiences that transcended mere preference.

Learning Community Factors That Positively Impact Faculty of Color

Learning communities are intentionally designed to foster student success, but in our experience, they had several additional unintended positive effects. As Black women seeking tenure in a predominantly White institution (PWI), our experience with learning communities helped to ameliorate some of the widely documented barriers FOC face at PWIs. In particular, teaching in a paired learning community allowed us to effectively address issues related to tokenism, isolation, mentorship, and marginalization of scholarship efforts that are widely discussed in the literature about the experiences of FOC.

It should not be surprising that, as FOC teaching in English and Sociology, we experienced considerable feelings of tokenism and isolation. FOC tend to be "concentrated" in departments with less prestige and fewer resources, such as the humanities and social sciences (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). Garza (1993) coined this actuality the "ghettoization" and "barrioization" of FOC. Our experiences differed, however, when considered through the lenses of our disparate disciplines. As the only non-White person in her department, the English faculty member had to negotiate the stereotype threat associated with addressing racial issues with colleagues in her departmental meetings and curriculum. Conversely, because of the pervasive and dismissive notion that hers was a "boutique" and "ethnic-focused" discipline, the Sociology faculty member often had to navigate discourses within her division that would challenge the broad relevancy of her subject, as well as her ability to create innovative learning communities with many different disciplines. Joining together to form a paired learning community thus helped us to

alleviate the stereotype threat resultant of our identities and move forward the transcendent social equity work we both desired to do as Black women in our fields. In paired courses, faculty do more than re-organize the curriculum: they also create a collaborative, contextualized learning experience. To do this, they select a theme and design interactions and assignments that require the students to work with one another. For our second and third learning communities, we chose a theme reflective of our racial identities. The creation of this curriculum allowed us to subvert institutional tokenism by giving us the opportunity to address our racial identities on our own terms and as part of a fundamental, explicit component of the curriculum.

Unlike so many other interactions on campus that highlight differences in power and status, learning communities create an opportunity where faculty must work together as equal partners. Because learning communities link courses, each individual brings an expertise that is pertinent. This creates a mutual dependence because the course cannot advance without both faculty doing their part. In our own experience, we were no longer striving alone for tenure. We became a support for one another, often able to affirm the other and champion the other's skills and talents to our colleagues. This is important to note, for research conducted by the Stanford University Panel on Faculty Equity and Quality of Life (2013) has documented that women, especially women of color, are less likely to self-promote their professional accomplishments. Therefore, having someone else promote on one's behalf can become critical during the tenure process. Teaching in a learning community together would be beneficial even if, and especially if, one of us had tenure and the other did not. It would provide an opportunity for the work of the non-tenured faculty to be observed without the hierarchical dynamics of other types of observations. In addition, it could also provide teaching observations that are more complete and possibly touted by a faculty member with tenure.

In addition to developing a network, the learning community can also provide de facto mentoring. In our case, the mentoring was at the peer level. Becoming socialized to our campus is a part of the tenure process and is also important for retention. As we both became familiar with the institution, we were able to share knowledge. Furthermore, we were both pushed out of our silos, a challenge that is not unique to FOC, but possibly more detrimental. Through our collaboration we were also able to introduce each other to colleagues in our respective departments and even include the other in departmental or committee activities. Ultimately, this helped both of us to feel connected to the wider campus. Pairing tenured and non-tenured faculty could obviously impact these outcomes even more, assuming the tenured faculty would be more familiar with some of the unspoken rules of each institution and could further assist to expand the network of tenure-seeking FOC.

Learning communities can also foster the scholarship and contribution of FOC. For example, if it were not for teaching together, it is very unlikely that we would have even written this paper together. We are also co-creating a multi-course clustered learning community to support historically underserved students, especially those who enter our institution at the pre-college level. For students who need it, the college offers a summer jump-start during which they can take pre-college English and math with a college success course, followed by the prescribed learning community for two subsequent quarters.

Students who enroll and complete this pathway will start in the fall taking college-level courses and will be given additional support in their educational planning. As we have illustrated, learning communities can assist with the persistence, performance, and ultimately the retention of FOC by increasing opportunities for collaboration, which benefit both the faculty and the students.

Conclusion

As FOC collaborate and experience increased academic and social engagement, they are more likely to persist. Learning communities can provide the opportunities to support the retention and performance of FOC, especially those who are seeking tenure. Additionally, learning communities can help to make inclusion of FOC—and collaboration with them—the norm, not the exception. Faculty of color should not persist alone. Additionally, colleges should provide a setting for faculty to become socialized to the expectations of the college and not make it the sole responsibility of FOC. If colleges are truly serious about promoting the retention of faculty from underrepresented backgrounds, they should create opportunities in which FOC are not required to prove they belong. Although no single intervention or strategy will lead to meaningful and long-term improvements for FOC, learning communities are at least one promising method.

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