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Creating a Climate of Inclusion: Success Starts at Home

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PREPARING this position paper turned out to be a more daunting task than it seemed when Bob Smith first proposed it. I found it impossible in a brief position statement to present a concrete and coherent set of “strategies, tactics, and behaviors” for creating an inclusive campus climate for faculty *and* students.

Although my personal experiences as a faculty member and (briefly) as a department chair have made me fairly confident about the elements of a positive climate for faculty, I am less sure about specific “strategies, tactics, and behaviors” that create a positive climate for students in our many, varied campus environments. In my experience, student bodies (including their “minority” student components) differ greatly from one campus environment to another. For example, the personal politics, and social and academic expectations of the affluent students I now teach at Tulane are vastly different from those of the working class students at my former institution, an urban commuter college. In addition, so much of what makes a campus environment a positive one for students is outside of our control as faculty (and under the control of Deans of Students, Graduate Deans, and other administrators). Finally, what creates a feeling of inclusion for undergraduates is vastly different from what creates it for graduate students.

I offer these disclaimers about students to justify my concentrating this paper on creating a positive climate for recruiting and retaining faculty of color on predominantly white campuses. I suggest only three strategies for retaining students of color, but thirteen for recruiting and retaining faculty. I have based my suggestions for recruitment and retention of faculty of color in part on my expertise in interracial communication, but mostly on my experiences as an African American woman professor at four predominantly white universities and my interviewing experiences at several others. (I’ve probably applied for more jobs than any other Black person in the field!) In constructing these lists I have also reflected on my tenure as department chair at one of the aforementioned predominantly white universities; in three years, I oversaw the recruitment of seven new faculty members, including two

African American professors. That experience taught me that locating, attracting, and retaining faculty of color is challenging, but not impossible. There are many idiosyncratic, personal and interpersonal factors that affect recruitment and retention of faculty of color that I cannot reflect in the strategies I suggest; so I do not offer them with any guarantees.

I offer the suggestions in this paper to people who are *serious about creating a positive climate for students and faculty of color and their white counterparts*. They are not intended for those who are resistant to the idea of hiring faculty of color or who do not believe that having a multiracial/multicultural faculty and student body enhances the educational experience of all students and expands the world views of all faculty. In other words my suggestions are not intended to *persuade* anyone to engage in recruiting and retaining faculty and students of color, but to facilitate these activities for those already committed to them.

There are three features that I believe help to create a desirable climate for faculty and students of color that I have tried to reflect in my suggestions: (1) honesty and forthrightness; (2) fairness and consistency; and (3) supportiveness.

RETAINING STUDENTS

1. Assume competence.

We should assume that the students of color who come to our campuses were admitted under the same standards, have the same academic backgrounds, and possess the same intellectual abilities as the white students. Attributing incompetence to students of color is a form of racist communication (Essed, 1991).

2. Make every course multicultural.

If students of color see (accurate) information about the communication of members of their cultural groups represented in our courses as the norm, they will feel included in our departments and our discipline; if they see work written by members of their cultural groups, they will begin to see themselves as potential communication scholars. If the multicultural approach becomes the norm for our courses, white students will no longer be placed in the over-privileged position of universalizing their communication norms and behaviors; they will develop a healthy respect for culturally diverse styles and practices in public, interpersonal, and mass mediated communication.

3. Be supportive as students of color struggle with the racism of faculty and peers.

Racist communication in ordinary, everyday interactions is a reprehensible but inevitable part of contemporary life for people of color in the U.S. It is essential to honor a student's meanings for racist encounters on campus; do not assume that he or she has "misinterpreted innocent remarks," or "blown things out of proportion." By the time they are the ages of our undergraduate and graduate students, people of color have had a great deal of experience distinguishing racism from other sorts of behaviors. Research with graduate students and educated professional people of color has shown that, rather than rushing to label any or all behaviors racist, they identify behavior as racist only after eliminating other probable explanations (Essed, 1991). As faculty, we should be

familiar with the support services on our campuses for students who are disadvantaged by racial discrimination or experiencing severe racial harassment. When students of color share their perceptions of minor incidents of everyday racism, they are usually seeking expressions of support from faculty and, in some cases, concrete suggestions for how to deal with specific sorts of behaviors by specific others (students or faculty members).

RECRUITING FACULTY

1. Recruit faculty of color for the right motives.

Don't hire faculty of color only because of an incentive program, such as getting an "extra" faculty line. Hire a person who fits the needs of your department. Faculty of color should be able to feel assured that they were hired for their expertise in an area of teaching and research that is valued by their colleagues, not for the color of their skin or their contribution to the department's affirmative action profile.

2. Before doing anything "special" to recruit a candidate of color; be sure to do what is usually done for any candidate.

For example, be sure to emphasize all the advantages of your department, institution, and locale. If your campus visits include office interviews with all departmental faculty, lectures by the candidate, or having a realtor show homes in desirable neighborhoods, do these things for candidates of color. Make sure all the usual things are done before you begin to do the other things on this list.

3. Be honest with yourself and the candidate of color about the racial climate of your department.

For example, if you have a large number of successful, satisfied majors who are people of color, tell the candidate about them (especially if, for example, the candidate is Latino and the majors are too). On the other hand, if some members of your faculty are "right wing" NAS types—or individuals who automatically view any person of color as an "affirmative action hire" who is "unqualified" for the post—before interviewing the candidate, analyze how such faculty might adversely affect the career of a faculty member of color, e.g., are they senior faculty who vote on retention, raises, tenure and promotion? Are they in charge of scheduling courses or of other duties through which they can disadvantage a faculty member of color? Then develop strategies to combat the adverse effects of such individuals; for example get the Chair or Dean to have forthright conversations with them about institutional expectations for fair, equitable treatment of faculty of color (subtext: "I'll be watching how you treat this person."); or get the Chair to quietly remove them from positions of power ("John, you've done the thankless chore of scheduling long enough; I'm going to get Mary to do that for awhile.").

During the interview, alert the candidate of color to the unreceptive (or hostile) attitudes of some faculty members and give your **honest** assessment of how those faculty might affect the candidate as a member of your faculty. Tell the candidate what support he or she will receive within the department or institution to combat such faculty members (be sure to be honest about the types and level of support; if you expect faculty of color to deal with such

persons on their own, say so). Information about negative aspects of your departmental climate will not necessarily “turn the candidate off” because people of color are used to achieving against the obstacles of racism. Candidates of color need this information in order to make an informed decision about your position. If they are hired, and discover such negative information later, they are likely to feel deceived (and to immediately begin looking for another post).

4. Be honest with yourself and the candidate about the racial climate of your campus.

Analyze your institution in a manner similar to your department. Note the academic programs and other activities that support racial/ethnic diversity. Be honest about the politics of the majority of students, faculty, and administrators. If you know considerable hostility to the presence of faculty of color exists on your campus, discuss how a faculty member of color will be supported if he or she encounters such hostility.

5. Be honest with yourself and the candidate about the racial climate of your city or town.

Learn what your locale has to offer a person of color (being sensitive to the desires of persons from different ethnic groups). Then share with the candidate frank and honest answers to such questions as: Will a faculty member of color find it difficult to rent an apartment or buy a home near your campus? If he or she has a relational partner who is another professional person of color, are there ample job opportunities for professional people of color in your town? How are interracial couples treated in housing and public accommodations in your town? If the candidate has children, in which schools do children of color fare best? What support can your department or institution offer in relation to these lifestyle issues?

6. Ask the faculty member if he or she would like to have “off the record” talks with other faculty of color.

Do not rely on faculty members of color to know about and discuss the issues in items 1-5 above; but if the candidate wants to meet and talk with them, and they are willing to do this, try to schedule discussions with several different faculty of color. (They often have different perspectives or impart different information.) Don’t use administrators for this purpose; in my experience they never talk “off the record,” but are always concerned with presenting the institution in the best light.

7. Encourage the candidate to be open with you about any apprehensions regarding your department, institution or locale.

Departments, institutions, and regions of the country have reputations for their treatment of people of color. If you demonstrate your honesty and openness during the interview, then the candidate is likely to feel free to voice apprehensions about issues you haven’t mentioned. You may be able to share information that will allay those apprehensions.

RETAINING FACULTY

1. Keep in mind that faculty members of color are individuals with different personal histories.

Like white faculty, some faculty of color are more compatible with your particular department, institution, and locale than others. Not every faculty member of color will want to remain in your department; you will not want every one to remain.

2. Keep in mind that you have hired a person whose cultural background is different from your own.

Do not expect a white person with a black . . . brown . . . yellow face. This does not mean that faculty of color are totally different “creatures” than white faculty. It simply means that you should not be surprised if faculty of color differ from you, and every white person you know, in their opinions about such things as students, colleagues, campus politics, local politics, world politics, etc. Expect and respect differences.

3. If you hire faculty of color who do research on race/ethnicity and communication, don't expect them to publish exclusively in “mainstream” communication journals.

Be knowledgeable about the politics of publishing in the field. As with any faculty member, determine the appropriate outlets for the sort of research done by a faculty member of color.

4. Don't “overuse” faculty members of color.

Do not make them the “minority voice” on every faculty committee; don't expect them to advise every student of color or every multicultural student organization. Because of their minority status (and visibility) on campus, they will inevitably experience stresses and demands that their white (male) counterparts will not; don't add to it unnecessarily.

5. Discourage untenured faculty from spending more time and energy fighting campus battles over diversity or developing multicultural programs of study than they spend on their own research.

Don't expect faculty of color to engage in such battles or to develop such programs in order to justify their presence on your campus (see item #1 under “Recruitment” above). You might also remind untenured faculty of how little research there is on the communication of people of color and of the value of their doing such research, not only to their own retention, raises, tenure, and promotion, but also to students beyond their own classes.

6. Be supportive as faculty members of color struggle with the racism of students and colleagues.

Racist communication in ordinary, everyday interactions is as inevitable for faculty as it is for students. While every faculty member of color will

have a different way of dealing with racism, expressions of support and offers of assistance from colleagues are usually welcomed. (See additional comments under "Retaining Students" item #3.)

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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