Cross-Cultural Mentoring for Faculty of Color

Over the past several decades, we have witnessed unprecedented growth in the gender, racial, and ethnic diversity of higher education’s student population, but without a comparable diversification of the faculty. While minority students now account for approximately 28 percent of the overall student body (Snyder and Hoffman, 2000), the diversification of college faculty of color has lagged at a mere 12 percent (Moody, 2004; Antonio, 2002). Also troubling is the fact that faculty of color are less likely to be fully integrated into the academic culture at higher education institutions, which puts them at greater risk of being marginalized and makes them less likely to be awarded tenure or promotions at rates comparable to their white colleagues.

Clearly, our institutions have an urgent problem that must be addressed. Good departmental practices and resources should be used to help women and faculty of color thrive and contribute to the academic experience (Moody, 2004).

LMU’S SOLUTION

Eliminating the barriers hampering faculty of color must begin at the department level. Empirical research shows that peer mentoring improves job satisfaction, vocational support, and perceived career success (Ensher, Thomas, and Murphy, 2001). However, little or no research has focused on the unique challenges in predominantly white institutions of “cross-cultural mentoring”—when the mentor and protégé are of different cultural backgrounds.

At Loyola Marymount University (LMU) in Los Angeles, we are currently implementing initiatives to address these challenges, and preliminary results suggest these initiatives are working. Furthermore, we believe similar initiatives can be used elsewhere.

Approximately five years ago, LMU began an ambitious capital campaign to hire 100 new faculty. The university soon began to institute some aggressive mentoring programs to ensure the survival of its junior faculty of color, because many of these faculty appointments were within departments that lack senior faculty of color to help the new faculty adjust.

Junior faculty often need assistance in making major decisions that can critically impact their professional lives. The results of a case-by-case examination revealed that most of LMU’s faculty of color
were first-generation professors who were competent in their respective disciplines but often unfamiliar with the academic culture. With the cooperation of our president and Office of Intercultural Affairs, we began a pilot program to give white faculty special training for cross-cultural mentoring efforts within their departments. We have learned a lot from the program, and are currently refining the cross-cultural mentoring process with faculty of color and other underrepresented groups across the professoriate at LMU.

Some preliminary findings from our pilot project and focus groups of junior faculty of color suggest that the needs of faculty of color are no different from those of white faculty. However, to be successful, cross-cultural mentoring relationships must have a mentor who is (1) aware of the cultural attitudes, beliefs, and values that impact the professional lives of faculty of color; (2) sensitive to systemic barriers and challenges for protégés that may hamper their ability to thrive and perform; (3) politically balanced and aligned so that he or she can be a valuable ally and resource; and (4) sensitive to the demands often placed upon faculty of color. Further, the mentor must be vigilant in encouraging protégés to set realistic boundaries. Faculty of color also may need mentoring in balancing the expectations of their performance in service and excellence in teaching and research, which ultimately will determine their professional survival in the academy.

**WHAT CAN DEPARTMENT CHAIRS DO?**

The department chair has a crucial role not only in recruiting, but also in overseeing and coordinating the mentoring of faculty. Recruiting faculty of color and other underrepresented groups is not enough without a strategic retention and faculty development plan to ensure their professional nurture and well-being. Developing a carefully crafted mentoring program is key. Such programs can help colleges and universities achieve a truly diverse faculty both at the department and institutional levels.
REFERENCES


FOR FURTHER READING


