

LABOR & WORK-LIFE ISSUES

## When Recruiting Minority Faculty Members Isn't Enough

By Audrey Williams June | DECEMBER 04, 2015



Craig Mahaffey, Clemson U.

Juan Gilbert, chair of the department of computer and information science and engineering at the U. of Florida: "I wasn't really looking to leave Clemson," he says, but when Florida came knocking, he responded — taking a cluster of African-American faculty members and graduate students with him.

revolving door of minority professors is a reality familiar to some but largely overlooked by top administrators. Many leaders don't acknowledge some of the issues that minority faculty members face on predominantly white campuses — feelings of isolation, the burden of invisible labor, a hostile workplace environment — and how that climate affects turnover.

Several colleges, prodded by black students who want to see more black professors on their campuses, have announced ambitious efforts in recent weeks to hire more faculty members from underrepresented minority groups.

But even as some institutions promise to shell out millions of dollars to shift the composition of their faculties, recruitment and hiring seem to get more attention than retention does. Keeping the people who come aboard is a pressing challenge for institutions. A

If colleges' efforts to recruit and hire more black, Hispanic, and other minority professors aren't coupled with moves to improve the racial climate, it will be more difficult to diversify the faculty.

"There has to be some ownership that there is a negative racial climate," says Uma M. Jayakumar, an associate professor of organization and leadership at the University of San Francisco, who studies race and equity in higher education.

"Then you have to say, How do we make sure there's a plan in place to set these faculty hires up to be able to navigate that climate and be successful?"

One way to do that is to hire a critical mass of minority faculty members. A cluster hire in a single department or a cross-disciplinary research area can provide them with a built-in community that makes diversity more likely to stick. It also helps to use the institutional reward structure to acknowledge the extra work that minority professors often do in mentoring students and serving on committees, Ms. Jayakumar says, and to have senior faculty of color who can help them through the tenure process.

Three professors — a relatively new hire, an associate professor who stuck it out at his institution, and a full professor who recently moved — share how they've thought about where to go and whether to stay.

## **Surveying the Scene**



Courtesy Manya Whitaker

Manya Whitaker, assistant professor of education at Colorado College

After a yearlong stint as a scholar in residence at Colorado College, Manya C. Whitaker was offered a tenure-track job there in 2012.

But she negotiated to defer the job offer for a year and continue in her postdoc role, teaching three courses at the liberal-arts college. That gave her more time to get her dissertation published and to conduct the due diligence she needed to determine what life would be like for an African-American woman off as well as on the campus.

"I wanted to see if this was a place that I really wanted to commit to," says Ms. Whitaker, who arrived at the college after earning a Ph.D. in developmental psychology from

Vanderbilt University.

The biggest hurdle, she says, was the college's location in the mostly white and politically conservative city of Colorado Springs.

"It's a really sprawling city that is in no sense of the word diverse," Ms. Whitaker says. "I had to think about, Where can I live in this city where I can increase my likelihood of seeing diverse people? Where can I live and feel safe?"

She also wanted to figure out how her work on urban education would fit into the college's education department, which had extended her the offer. That was important because an academic department is supposed to feel like a home, and yet it's one of the first places where underrepresented-minority scholars tend to report feelings of isolation, particularly when their area of focus is called into question.

Ms. Whitaker's concerns were eased when the department made clear, she says, that it was "100 percent behind me developing and teaching whatever courses I wanted to." Another plus: Her position was a new one, so she wasn't replacing a retiring professor whose classes she would inherit.

Evidence of the college's commitment to diversifying the student body also impressed Ms. Whitaker. She wanted to work at a teaching college where she could forge relationships with students of color and others who were first-generation, low-income, or from rural communities. "If those students weren't here," she says, "I didn't need to be here."

When it came to the faculty, "it was less clear what was going to happen," she says. When she arrived, the college had less than a handful of black faculty members.

Still, halfway through her deferred year, in 2012-13, Ms. Whitaker decided to stay. She was encouraged by the freedom to shape her new position and by the resources the college offered to support her research and conference attendance. Now in her third year as an assistant professor of education, she's committed to helping make the college more inclusive for students and faculty alike.

Colorado College now has six black professors.

"We need a critical mass to retain our faculty of color, and we need to retain faculty of color to get a critical mass," Ms. Whitaker says. "We have to figure out a way to do that."

## Staying Put

When José F. Moreno was in graduate school, he says, people frequently predicted his success on the academic job market as a Chicano with a Harvard Ed.D.

But the narrative of universities clamoring to hire him didn't match his reality, Mr. Moreno says. "There was not a whole lot of, Hey, come be a tenure-track faculty member at our institution. We need more people of color."

He did a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of California at Irvine and then took a non-tenure-track faculty position at Claremont Graduate University, where he was also a research analyst for a diversity project at California's independent colleges as he continued searching for a job.



Cal State-Long Beach

José Moreno, chair of Chicano and Latino studies at Cal State-Long Beach

When he saw an opening for an assistant professor in the department of Chicano and Latino studies at California State University at Long Beach, he was intrigued. He'd never considered working somewhere that wasn't research-focused, and some of his mentors tried to dissuade him from applying. The teaching loads wouldn't leave enough time for his research, he remembers them saying, and he'd "never find his way back up."

But the job would offer a mix of teaching and research, others pointed out, at a place with a diverse student body. Mr. Moreno decided to apply.

He was hired in 2004 and knew right away that the position was a perfect fit. "I've absolutely loved it," says Mr. Moreno, who is now an associate professor and chair of the department. For one thing, he says, he doesn't have to justify why he does research on issues of diversity in higher education, including the recruitment and retention of minority professors. He also enjoys working with the students at Long Beach, where more than a third of the 31,500 undergraduates are Latino.

Mr. Moreno says he is one of about 70 Latino professors at the university, an increase from 55 a decade earlier. But the ratio is low enough that students often tell him he's the first Latino professor they've had.

"It appears faculty of color get hired, and one leaves. It's all replacement," Mr. Moreno says. "Did they leave because they got a better offer? Were we a stop on the way to UC-Berkeley? It's hard to know if there's something systemic that is going on in the culture."

Although several hundred faculty members have been hired at Long Beach since 2000, Mr. Moreno says — the kind of large-scale hiring an institution might use to diversify its ranks — the share of underrepresented-minority professors there has barely budged.

"This is a code red," he says. "There's no excuse for things looking the same as they did when this hiring started. If we don't do something immediately, we're going to have to wait another generation."

He continues to study the recruitment and retention of underrepresented-minority faculty members, he says. "I just have to keep trying to educate people about what's going on." And he encourages minority graduate students to stay the course: "There are people within many institutions that are fighting really hard to create a path to get you there."

## **Poaching and Prestige**

Clemson University recruited Juan E. Gilbert six years ago to be chair of the division of human-centered computing in what was then a new school. Almost immediately, Mr. Gilbert, who is black, took the lead on the recruiting that achieved a critical mass of African-American faculty members and graduate students at Clemson.

Fast-forward to 2014, when he held the university's first Presidential Endowed Chair and had formed a tight-knit community with five other black faculty members in the division and many black Ph.D. students. (He won an award this year from the American Association for the Advancement of Science for his work to increase the number of African-Americans pursuing doctoral degrees in computer science.) And his research lab was thriving, too.

"I wasn't really looking to leave Clemson," he says. "Things were great."

But the University of Florida came knocking. State lawmakers had allocated \$15-million a year over five years for it and Florida State University to hire top-notch faculty members and increase research. The dean of the College of Engineering at the public flagship told Mr. Gilbert he could be one of those hires. She just needed to know what it would take to make him move.

Among Mr. Gilbert's requests: an endowed chair and bringing the cluster of African-American faculty members and graduate students in his division at Clemson with him. The four professors who wanted to make the move interviewed for positions and ended up with offers. The graduate students, Mr. Gilbert says, "canceled their spring-break plans and drove to Florida and met with the dean."

Just like that, the number of African-American faculty members in computer-science at Clemson dropped from a half-dozen to one. Ultimately, two postdocs and 20 Ph.D. students also made the move to Florida, says Mr. Gilbert, who holds an endowed chair and was recently named chair of the department of computer and information science and engineering.

"There were just a lot of things that lined up that made it a good move for me," Mr. Gilbert says, including the opportunity to work at a more prestigious institution.

The exodus indicates the importance for minority faculty members — and students — of keeping a community intact. That plus career advancement proved a powerful incentive to leave one institution for another.

Yet Mr. Gilbert maintains ties to Clemson. There are still black Ph.D. students in computer science there, he says, and at least one black faculty member. "We didn't leave Clemson bare," he says. "Now Clemson's hiring, and I've offered to help the dean and the president recruit. They're not going to just leave things as they are and go backward."

With so many institutions giving renewed attention to recruiting minority faculty members, colleges will need to understand how crucial it is to create the right environment, Mr. Gilbert says. "A lot of people have good intentions, but it's so

easy to get this wrong in a way where the consequences can be very negative. There are people out there who can help."

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