

4 BRIEF Diversifying Faculty at Rural Colleges

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On a diverse campus, everyone benefits from having varying perspectives. For students of color, regularly seeing other students and faculty of color contributes to their sense of belonging. Having a diverse faculty also helps students — particularly first-generation students, who may not have many college-going role models — see that “someone who looks like me” can be academically successful. Despite this need, many rural colleges face challenges in attracting and retaining faculty of color. Forward-thinking colleges, however, are addressing this issue with honest conversations and purposeful solutions designed to narrow the discrepancy in the racial/ethnic make-up of faculty in comparison to their student populations.

Conduct an Honest Evaluation

Rural institutions that want to recruit and retain a diverse faculty must have an intentional, thoughtful plan of action. Colleges should begin with using data to understand their current student and faculty populations. Then, using this data, colleges can engage stakeholders in determining how to create and maintain a sense of belonging for all faculty, including faculty of color, faculty with a variety of religious backgrounds, faculty who are disabled, gender nonconforming faculty, and anyone else who may not immediately find others who share their life experience.

Nationally, people of color constitute 51 percent of community college students and only 22 percent of full-time community college faculty. America’s approximately 200 rural community colleges have a corresponding gap between students of color (34 percent) and full-time faculty of color (13 percent) on their campuses. Given these numbers, there is clearly work to be done at all community colleges — including rural colleges — to hire faculty that reflect their student populations. (Statistics are from 2019 U.S. Department of Education data.)

About the Rural College Leaders Series

Across the United States, a divide is widening. Many rural areas are losing population and job opportunities as economic expansion becomes concentrated in urban areas. Community colleges, already experiencing declining enrollment across the country, face even greater challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet challenges also bring opportunities for change. Innovative rural community colleges are finding new ways to rethink their structure; update their programming; and better engage students, employers, and communities.

This series of briefs, told from the perspective of rural college leaders, shows how colleges aim to regain control of their regions’ talent pipelines, serve as engines of economic improvement, and thus provide opportunities for both individual upward mobility and regional stability.

The series includes:

- **The Big Picture**
- **Brief 1: Creating a College-Going Mindset**
- **Brief 2: Acting Boldly to Build Financial Solvency**
- **Brief 3: Cultivating Partnerships to Support Students’ Basic Needs**
- **Brief 4: Diversifying Faculty at Rural Colleges**
- **Brief 5: Redesigning Advising and Support Services**
- **Brief 6: Collaborating to Create Regional Economic Opportunity**

START WITH UNDERSTANDING YOUR UNIQUE CAMPUS

Designate a faculty diversity team that includes, at a minimum, the college president, a designated lead (a chief diversity officer or another appointee), human resources, institutional research, and faculty. Ask for and review data that show the demographics of:

- * Your student body;
- * Your faculty; and
- * Your community.

Reflect on the data, and acknowledge all discrepancies in the ethnicity of students, faculty, and your community. The goal is to have your faculty reflect the diversity of your students.

Additional data points that may be helpful include:

- * The percentage of full-time and part-time faculty, disaggregated by race and ethnicity, gender, and other variables that are relevant to your college's population.
- * Faculty turnover rates, disaggregated by race and ethnicity, gender, and other variables that are relevant to your college's population.
- * Promotion and tenure rates, disaggregated by race and ethnicity, gender, and other variables that are relevant to your college's population.
- * Faculty participation in leadership roles, disaggregated by race and ethnicity, gender, and other variables that are relevant to your college's population.
- * Distribution of recognition and rewards for hard work (e.g., special project opportunities, innovation funding, and conference attendance), disaggregated by race and ethnicity, gender, and other variables that are relevant to your college's population.
- * Other data that can help your college identify areas in which it can improve diversity and/or elevate the voices of faculty who currently are in the minority on your campus.

“To create a culture in which faculty diversity is honored, celebrated, and an ongoing priority, colleges must have open, honest conversations among stakeholder groups.”

THE EQUITY IMPERATIVE

Wherever U.S. rural colleges are located, they share the conviction that they exist in large part to build communities, interrupt persistent poverty cycles, and promote the economic upward mobility of their students. Today, community colleges across the country are renewing their focus on equity and how it intersects with this mission of providing opportunity. Efforts related to improving diversity, equity, and inclusion have a variety of motivators, including a commitment to social justice, pressure from students, and the pragmatism of ensuring a sound future workforce. Whatever their origins, these efforts are as important in rural America as they are in urban areas.

Inequities have been built into our educational systems for decades. For example, while four-year graduation rates at rural high schools outpace the national average, rural students of color graduate at rates lower than the national average. Moreover, historical inequities persist across American health, employment, and justice systems.

Rural colleges may be serving populations that include first-generation students, low-income students, students of color, adults re-entering higher education, gender nonconforming students, and others. While each community is different, every college has current and potential students who face barriers that other students do not. To stay true to its mission, each college must acknowledge and purposefully work to break down these barriers and close opportunity gaps.

Engage in Honest Conversations

To create a culture in which faculty diversity is honored, celebrated, and an ongoing priority — all of which are essential to recruiting and retaining faculty of color — colleges must have open, honest conversations among stakeholder groups. These conversations should identify barriers and address all stakeholders' concerns. Use what you hear in these conversations to better understand and address current faculty members' concerns as well as to inform your college's practices.

As you plan for these conversations, consider these factors:

- * Our institutions exist as microcosms within American culture as a whole. Our work to diversify our faculty ranks exists during a time when racially driven incidents are regularly in the news, attacks on affirmative action are ongoing, and a multitude of similar societal issues affect our campuses.
- * These conversations — about our campuses and about our nation's ongoing reckoning on race — are challenging for everyone, and the challenges are not unique to rural communities. Many colleges find it helpful to bring in experts to facilitate these conversations. Experts can create a space that is safe for all participants and encourages honest, productive interactions. They can also recommend next steps as your college moves through this journey.
- * Do not put the burden on current faculty of color to explain or solve any diversity issues at your college. Some colleges set the stage for honest conversations with common readings and discussions. Again, a skilled facilitator can help with this process.

The following discussion questions and actions are prompts to establish dialogue and guide the faculty diversity team toward finding solutions.

“Give equal weight to equity issues (as compared with credentials, for example) in hiring-decision rubrics.”

RETAINING DIVERSE FACULTY

Discussion Questions

- * Is our faculty population as diverse as our student population? If not, is this discrepancy acceptable? Are we committed to addressing it?
- * Do some faculty leave at higher rates than others? If so, which faculty do so and why? Why do faculty — particularly those who are in the minority on our campus — leave our college?
- * Is our campus culture welcoming to everyone? Do all faculty feel like they belong in all spaces, from the classroom to the faculty lounge?
- * Does our mission explicitly address equity and social justice? Are we engaging in equity and social justice work on our campus and in our community? If so, how? If not, why not?
- * Do we engage in work related to cultural competency, trauma-informed practices, or poverty-informed practices?

RETAINING DIVERSE FACULTY

Actions

- * Schedule regular meetings with your president (or chief diversity officer or human resources) and faculty who are in the minority on your campus. Ask what challenges they are experiencing and actively seek solutions to address them. Then circle back to discuss the actions you are taking and ask whether their experiences have improved.
- * Conduct exit interviews for all faculty who leave. If you have a chief diversity officer, ask that person to conduct exit interviews for faculty who are in the minority on your campus.
- * Use team teaching, communities of practice, and mentoring structures to help establish a sense of belonging for all faculty.
- * Look at data on providing recognition and rewards for hard work as mentioned previously. If faculty of color are not represented in this recognition, review the process for identifying recipients of these rewards.
- * Ask about the needs of various cultural groups on your campus and then seek to meet them. These needs might include making specific foods available in cafeteria, providing access to prayer spaces, considering the importance of specific titles, and so on. For example, in the Hmong population, the title *academic counselor* provides a great deal of social recognition and respect whereas *academic advisor* or *academic coach* does not.

HIRING

Discussion Questions

- * What issues make recruiting faculty of color challenging for our college?
- * Why should faculty of color want to join our college instead of other colleges? If we do not have clear answers to this question, what do we need to change?
- * What is the culture in our local area and in our region? Do we welcome people of color, people who practice a variety of religions, and people who are gender nonconforming?
- * Are our application and interview processes accessible to people with disabilities?
- * How do we present our institution on our website, in our marketing materials, and in our job postings? What will attract or turn away diverse faculty?
- * Do we talk about equity and social justice in our materials and job postings? Do we talk about work related to cultural competency, trauma-informed practices, or poverty-informed practices?
- * Do our search-process policies support hiring diverse candidates? Are we willing to delay or cancel a search if there are no candidates of color in the applicant pool? Who makes this decision?

HIRING

Actions

- * Use answers from the discussion questions to update recruitment efforts, including marketing materials and job postings.
- * Have an accountability plan for diversity in hiring. Determine who is ultimately accountable, the timeline, and how you will measure this work.
- * Review faculty qualification policies with an eye to equity. For example, does your college default to selecting a faculty candidate with a doctorate over a candidate with a master's degree? If that is the case, make the candidates' skillsets, rather than their credentials, the primary hiring criteria. This change will open the door to hiring candidates who have had a nontraditional career path.
- * Give equal weight to equity issues (as compared with credentials, for example) in hiring-decision rubrics. Having rubrics is a good practice, and equally weighting equity is the only way to improve diversity in hiring.
- * Identify where candidates of color will see your job postings and post jobs there.
- * Build relationships with graduate programs and agencies with diverse populations. Connect with your region's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges, Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), and/or Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs).
- * Create a Teaching Fellows program aimed at recent graduates of color. Ask your foundation if it will support such initiatives.
- * Ask campus champions to activate their networks to help you identify faculty candidates of color. Also use your alumni networks and the networks of current faculty.
- * Address how your college creates and trains search committees. Make sure the committee members are invested in creating a more diverse faculty and/or add a few community members to the committee.
- * Talk with faculty candidates about your diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and where your college is in its process of diversifying faculty.
- * Work with community organizations to understand your local racial climate. If necessary, get involved to improve it.

ONBOARDING

Discussion Questions

- * What are our processes for welcoming new faculty to our campus? Is it more challenging for new faculty of color to navigate their entry to our campus? If so, how can we make joining our community easier for new faculty?
- * Do we have a faculty mentoring model? If so, how is it working? If not, should we develop one?
- * Do we have affinity groups on our campus? If not, why not?

Actions

- * Clarify onboarding procedures and use answers from the discussion questions to improve them.

FOR RESOURCES RELATED TO THIS BRIEF, PLEASE SEE [THE BIG PICTURE](#).