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Multiple Perspectives on a Failed Attempt at Diversity

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Multiple Perspectives on a Failed Attempt at Diversity

Abstract

Four faculty members from diverse disciplines and backgrounds use a polyvocal method of analysis to discuss a set of patterns which insure the failure of a campus to retain most faculty and teaching academic staff of color for more than a few years.

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We are four faculty members from four different disciplines. We are all either department chairs or directors of interdisciplinary programs. We represent four different ethnic backgrounds - African American, Japanese American, South Asian (Indian sub-continent), European American. We share a common concern: we are disturbed by a recent series of events on our campus which resulted in what we see as attacks on a new member of the teaching staff, a woman of color. We see this event as tragic and as symbolic of our campus's lack of progress towards diversifying the faculty despite continual lip service.

Our own observations as well as our own experiences point to a set of themes or common patterns which insure the failure of our campus to retain most faculty and teaching academic staff of color for more than a few years. We are amazed at the repeated pattern of "blaming the victim" and at the overwhelming lack of recognition by faculty and administrators of the patterns which appear so obvious to us and to a minority of our colleagues.

Our method is polyvocal. The polyvocal structure is an attempt to create an interactive, critical reflection which includes our individual perspectives and the dialogue that results from listening to and responding to one another.

We will focus on this one example of failure on our campus. In presenting our reflections on this example, we will expand our stories to include our reflections on other incidents. We will reflect on the difficulties we have faced and the feelings we have experienced by our refusal to cave in to the predominant definitions of the situation. We will share our reflections on situations when some of us were put in the victim role and were the ones

who were blamed.

From these multiple perspectives, we present the story of the arrival of a faculty member of color on our predominantly white campus and the series of conflicts that followed. We discuss how we saw the situation unfold at various points, how we felt about it and how it was defined by others. We connect our observations with our memories of similar events in the past, including events in our own personal and professional lives.

Our goal is to uncover a set of patterns which are widespread throughout academia. The patterns we see include interactions within departments, responses of various groups of students to faculty of color and actions of administrators. We present the few positive steps as well as the many mistakes.

We have a range of reasons for collaborating on this project. What were our roles in creating the situation? How do we overcome our own fears? Why do we see ourselves as outsiders in this situation, although we have defined roles within the institution? When have we functioned as insiders? How did this tragedy reflect the normal situation on this campus, including historical campus alliances and power structures? We hope that by presenting these analyses, the campus will no longer be able to blind itself to these failures and will find ways to overcome destructive patterns.

Presenters

Fay Yokomizo Akindes is Assistant Professor of communication and co-director of the Center for Women's Studies at UW-Parkside. Her research problematizes culture and identity in Hawaii and the United States and has been published in *Diegesis*, *Discourse and Qualitative Inquiry*. Forthcoming is a chapter in "Women Faculty of Color in the White College Classroom" edited by Lucila Vargas (Peter Lang, Sept. 2000). Fay was born and raised on Molokai.

Michele V. Gee earned her Ph.D. in Management Science from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1994, after first earning a Master's Degree in Business Administration from the University of Chicago. Michele has been a faculty member in the School of Business and Technology at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside since 1994. She is currently the Co-Director of the Center for International Studies, Co-Director of the New Directions Community Economic Development Program and an Associate Professor of Business Management. Her expertise includes International Business, Strategy, Marketing and Management. Michele also provides strategic planning assistance for numerous organizations and received the University of Wisconsin System Woman of Color Award in 1997. Prior to returning to academe, Michele worked in marketing management for IBM and AT & T.

Farida Khan is an economist by background and has worked on economic development and international trade policy in developing countries. She has worked in academe and in international organizations. Her teaching has also been in these traditional areas and has recently extended to feminist economics, international finance, globalization and immigration. She has written about and participated in poverty alleviation and pro-

democracy projects.

Mary Kay Schleiter is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Chair of the Department of Sociology-Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. She has a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Chicago. Her research focuses on the Sociology of Occupations and Careers and Inequality. Her recent research projects focus on the consequences of Welfare Reform in the lives of women in transition from AFDC to full time work. She has also studied inequality within the medical professions and predictors of college success.