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Reconceptualizing Chilly Climate: Minority Faculty in North American Academe

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In spite of the fact that faculty of color open up new areas of investigation, provide new and unique perspectives on traditional curriculum, and effectively serve as role models and mentors, they continue to be isolated, unsupported and marginalized in the institutions in which they work.

The metaphor "chilly climate" is a relatively new term which entered higher education in the last fourteen years. It was coined by Roberta M. Hall and Bernice Sandler in their widely acclaimed chilly "Climate Report" in 1986. They used the term to describe the subtle ambiance in which many small inequities can create a negative atmosphere for learning, teaching and for fulfilling professional roles on campus.

My paper is a qualitative feminist analysis of the daily lived experiences of minority faculty who teach, conduct research and do administrative work in the United States' universities. The central arguments in this paper are that over recent years, there has been a concerted effort to diversify the students and faculty, as well as the curriculum in the U.S. academe; and a growing recognition by mainstream faculty and administrators of the crucial role faculty of color do play in enriching both the cultural and academic life in the United States' universities. Faculty of color, for example, open up new areas of investigation, provide new and unique perspectives on traditional curriculum, serve as role models, mentors not only to students of color, but to mainstream faculty and students.

In spite of these important contributions to the U.S. academe, it is ironical that the majority of the faculty of color continue to be isolated, unsupported and marginalized. They continue to experience status ambiguity, contradictions and dilemmas, and loneliness in the sacred grove. They continue to be treated as outsiders (strangers) and indeed experience chilling climate not only from their majority academic colleagues, but also from students who undermine and challenge their authority. Gender, ethnicity, racial background, geographical location of the university, students and faculty composition and age, as well as sexual orientation, are important variables in determining the extent to which chilly climate is experienced.

As knowing, resilient, social actors, minority faculty endowed with a double vision consciously adopt certain strategies for survival and success within a somewhat hostile academic climate.

PRESENTER

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