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The Minority Faculty Member in Predominantly White Institutions

Rebecca A. Lopez

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“The politically conscientious academician encounters multiple conflicts in priorities when loyalty to community competes with responsibility to academia.”

Any discussion of minority faculty members in America should begin with the recognition that a "one-minority-per-pot syndrome" still very much prevails for many academic and corporate settings. Both because of the dearth of minority professionals and because window-dressing is an acceptable practice for many, ethnic minority faculty often find themselves the sole representative of an entire ethnic minority community.

The issues and burdens for such faculty are multi-faceted—if that faculty member chooses to retain a sense of ethnic identity. The politically conscientious academician encounters multiple conflicts in priorities when loyalty to community competes with responsibility to academia. Many academicians in White institutions are able to focus their efforts and energies on advancing in their respective disciplines and status. Time and interactions are invested in collegial and scholarly pursuits with the goal of meeting well-established expectations of White institutions. Professors of color, however, are often obligated through a sense of communal commitment and differing value systems to consider community needs ahead of professional and personal advancement. The choices made are often a natural outcome of the cultural values which the ethnic minority faculty member brings to the institution. Even the very definition of community may be at odds with the institution. While some universities may view community participation in the context of the university campus and its faculty committees, the minority professor will view community as first and foremost that identifying ethnic community which nurtures his or her spirit.

Compounding this difference in value perspective is the fact that the White institution may practice a system of evaluation of the professor's productivity which is often culture-bound within the history and experiences of the predominating White professors. Many educational institutions make use of peer evaluations in adjudging merit for tenure and salary awards. Inherently problematic in such peer evaluations is the fact that the ethnic minority scholar is most often not surrounded by peers of comparable background, interests, and even values. The credibility of minority research domains may not be entirely understood by the prevailing powers. Often, the ethnic minority professor finds much of his/her time being spent trying to translate and explain a particular cultural concept or trait which merits attention.

A university assessment of the ethnic minority professor's productivity may be made in a vacuum of lack of information or interest in the productive role played by the professor in his or her respective community. Likewise, the additional roles and activities undertaken by ethnic minority faculty may also involve needy minority sub-groups within the

university community. Time spent informally mentoring minority students, providing active role modeling, and modeling and counseling junior colleagues who happen to be ethnic minorities is not often valued. Yet these are compelling commitments and obligations which are left to that one minority who has made it to sacrosanct levels of higher education. Those of us who were ethnic minority students attending college and graduate school with no minority mentors nor minority professors feel a special obligation to spend time with students who will benefit from our example of succeeding in higher education. Yet these are all additional, time-consuming tasks which fall almost exclusively to the Latino professor who is approached by Latino students, or to the African American professor who is approached by African American students struggling to adjust to university culture.

For many professors, the attainment of a faculty position in an institution of higher learning signals the capstone to decades of struggle and commitment. For the ethnic minority faculty member, continuing minority status means that the levels of expectation increase to include yet another arena of accountability, roles, and competing interests.

PRESENTER

Rebecca A. Lopez is the only current tenure-track faculty Latina or Latino in the Department of Social Work at California State University at Long Beach, where she teaches courses in human behavior, social policy, and community practice at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Lopez is a native Californian of Mexican descent who grew up in San Francisco. She holds a B.A. in anthropology from the University of California, Santa Cruz; and a Master of Social Work degree and a Ph.D. in social policy and administration, both from Brandeis University in Massachusetts. Lopez has extensive experience in ethnic community organizing and in federal and local policy analysis.