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Leveraging Diversity: The Department Chair's Transformative Role

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Ten Concrete Strategies for Enhancing Diversity in the Academic Department

1. *Build a critical mass of faculty from dominant and nondominant groups to lead and support diversity progress.* A white male chair of economics in a public southwestern university explains the importance of obtaining a critical mass of faculty to take concrete action in support of diversity

The chair has to take the leadership role, has to be proactive, has to get a critical mass of people on his or her side to try to take the proactive measures that are necessary. Obviously a chair or a dean... who simply gives lip service to diversity but doesn't do anything concrete to make it happen is not going to make any progress.

Minority chairs in predominantly white departments may be viewed as pushing a particularistic agenda, making their leadership of diversity initiatives more problematic. For example, a female Asian American chair indicates that other faculty could view her promotion of diversity as driven by personal, selfish interests. And a female African American chair reported a challenge she has faced in promoting diversity due to "misunderstandings as well as perceptions about 'why' I'd promote diversity." These observations underscore the heightened vulnerability of minority chairs in predominantly white institutions when they promote a diversity agenda.

2. *Recognize that white faculty may also face challenges to their legitimacy or authenticity in leading diversity efforts.*

A white male chair of modern languages and literatures in an eastern urban private religiously-affiliated university explains how his legitimacy as a diversity advocate can be questioned:

I am a white male and therefore privileged, in some sense, just by being who I am, I think I get an airing for my views with certain constituencies. So I acknowledge that I have used my position of privilege to try to work towards this goal and that my privileged position has been an advantage for doing so. At times, though, I think also the fact that because I am a white male, there are those who might question my legitimacy as an advocate for diversity simply because I simply don't 'have an understanding of' or I 'don't necessarily' come from a diverse background.

3. *Review curricular offerings and ask what courses would attract women and minority candidates.* A white male chair of economics in a southwestern research university noted the general tendency of faculty to want to hire the best and brightest that will put the department on the map. By contrast, he emphasized the need to shift the conversation and

ask questions about the kind of courses that would attract diverse candidates.

4. *When overcoming objections to hiring diverse candidates, focus on the value that diversity brings to group decision-making.* A white male psychology chair in a Midwestern urban university has advanced consideration of diversity in recruitment by focusing on the value that diversity brings to group decision-making. As he explains:

In terms of hiring, a common approach that people adopt is to pursue the best scholar. And I was pushing us to consider the importance of diversity and one of the things that I did was I actually gave our faculty research to showing that groups that are diverse actually make more effective decisions than groups that are not diverse, to actually promote diversity as a positive attribute that's value added. It's not just diversity for diversity's sake. Making your faculty more diverse will improve the quality of faculty, it will improve the quality of decision-making of the group.

5. *Promote faculty engagement in the curriculum revision process to include diversity.* A white female chair of educational leadership in a western public research university actively encourages faculty to think about the curriculum revision process and how it relates to student needs. Leading that discussion in an open manner has encouraged faculty to speak up and participate in the process. As she observes:

I just try to encourage people to think about what [curriculum revision] means. We recently had a small student uprising from students wanting more diversity in the curriculum.... We had that conversation about the curriculum... the faculty think we are doing a good job, but the students don't. What does it mean to have diversity in the curriculum? Just having that conversation has done a lot... I think people view me as a person who is willing to have the conversation. And that's been pretty significant in terms of people feeling free to speak up.

6. *Break the silence about racism and reduce discomfort and fear around the topic by engaging in cross-racial dialogue* (Tatum, 1997). *Engage in practices that encourage self-reflection around one's own biases.*

Chairs who are willing to challenge the status quo create a continuous culture of conversation around diversity. A white female chair of educational leadership in a public western research university observes:

To truly advance diversity in American colleges and universities we have to have really critical conversations about racism, sexism, and homophobia, and people don't want to have those conversations because they tend to refuse to believe that they are racist or sexist or homophobic. ... The big thing as a chair is to keep the conversation going and bring it up over and over and over again.

An African American male chair of history in a Midwestern religiously-affiliated university emphasizes the need for self-examination and for generating conversations about difference:

An important thing for chairs, any chair, is to sit down and really look in the mirror and ask yourself, ‘What do you really know and what do you really believe about people who don’t look like you?’ And take it upon themselves to do some reading and have some have conversations about race. They need to have some conversations about gender equality. They need to have some conversations with people about alternative life styles, because a chair can be a very influential position in an institution. And if you’re chair and you’re close-minded, ignorant, worst of all willfully ignorant on these kinds of issues, I think you can do a lot of damage.

7. *Construct committee assignments that promote purposeful interaction among faculty members from non-dominant and dominant groups.* Research indicates that working collaboratively toward a common and meaningful superordinate goal reduces bias and prejudice among diverse members of a working group.
8. *Showcase research and scholarly accomplishments through formal and informal events that promote the inclusion of all departmental members.*

An African American male department chair of sociology in a private southern research university shares his strategy of creating social events that require faculty attendance and offer informal opportunities for faculty to mingle and learn more about each other on both a social and professional level. He notes the subtle ways in which exclusion can take place through party invitations and other social interactions:

Those veterans...go to lunch together; they meet after work for cocktails, gossip. New people claim that that they’re never invited over to these peoples’ home after work or on weekends; the kids have birthday parties... and their kids aren’t invited; somebody might put a picture on their door of the party and you see all these people and you’re not there; vegetable time, people have gardens, they leave bags of tomatoes or zucchini...on certain peoples’ doors and not on other peoples’ doors. You can’t make people get along.

To counteract these subtle forms of exclusion, the chair created departmental social meetings off campus with attendance required of all faculty:

So what I’ve done...is we have all department social meetings, off campus. It could be that you close shop early on a Monday afternoon or a Friday... and it’s mandatory just like a department meeting, so people can’t say ‘Oh well, I can’t make it, I have to take my dog to the salon’ or whatever. It’s similar to a department meeting; it’s not for business, it’s for a social hour. We’ve

had it where we cordoned off a room, and new faculty would take 15 minutes to talk about their research. So that people can't say, 'I've been in the department three years, and I don't know what they do.'

9. *Leverage the shared governance process as a powerful vehicle for inclusion and diversity transformation.*

While shared governance crystallizes the powerful voice of faculty, this avenue of diversity transformation has been significantly underutilized. Since nondominant faculty are often not in a position to alter the organizational distribution of power and privilege due to their location outside the mainstream, they must often lead from the margins (Aguirre and Martinez, 2002). The governance process, by contrast, offers the opportunity for formation of a coalition of tenured faculty at the core of an institution that includes members of nondominant groups. The participation of faculty from nondominant groups in the governance process can influence the development of institutional policies and ensure the inclusion of diverse viewpoints institutional policies (Aguirre and Martinez, 2002).

10. *Appoint faculty equity advisors for each academic department.*

The Vice Chancellor for Equity and Inclusion at the University of California at Berkeley has established an infrastructure of equity advisors located in each academic unit. Advisors are active Senate members at either the associate or full professor level and designated by the department chair or dean. Primary duties include assistance with faculty hiring and advancement and graduate recruitment and retention. Equity advisors also participate in strategic planning for the academic unit, to ensure that diversity is an active and meaningful part of the plan.