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The Underrepresentation of Minority Faculty in Higher Education: Panel Discussion

Abstract

[Excerpt] The 3 July 2002 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* described the matter we are discussing today in these words: "Taken together, African-Americans and persons of Hispanic origin represent only 8 percent of full-time faculty nation-wide, and while 5 percent are African-American, half of them work at historically black institutions. The proportion of black faculty members at white institutions is 2.3 percent, virtually the same as it was 20 years ago."

We are privileged to have the opportunity to explore this issue from two different perspectives. The first contends that unless major changes occur, the number of minority students interested in and prepared for faculty positions will remain dreadfully insufficient and that, furthermore, affirmative action has been a culprit in this process and leads many of these students into higher educational environments in which they do not perform well enough to even seriously consider or be considered for careers in academe. The other position says that, although the supply of minority faculty candidates is admittedly small, the relatively low level of commitment from higher educational institutions to recruit, hire, and promote minority candidates and the salary disparity between academe and industry lead to a problem of demand that must be appreciated and addressed. Furthermore, it argues, affirmative action has been beneficial in increasing minority faculty presence.

Keywords

higher education, faculty, affirmative action, minority hiring

Disciplines

Higher Education | Labor Economics | Labor Relations | Race and Ethnicity

Comments

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The Underrepresentation of Minority Faculty in Higher Education: Panel Discussion

John Brooks Slaughter:¹ I am not an economist. I am an engineer, but do not hold that against me. I am pleased to moderate what I think will be an important session on a matter of great significance to higher education.

The 3 July 2002 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* described the matter we are discussing today in these words: "Taken together, African-Americans and persons of Hispanic origin represent only 8 percent of full-time faculty nation-wide, and while 5 percent are African-American, half of them work at historically black institutions. The proportion of black faculty members at white institutions is 2.3 percent, virtually the same as it was 20 years ago."

We are privileged to have the opportunity to explore this issue from two different perspectives. The first contends that unless major changes occur, the number of minority students interested in and prepared for faculty positions will remain dreadfully insufficient and that, furthermore, affirmative action has been a culprit in this process and leads many of these students into higher educational environments in which they do not perform well enough to even seriously consider or be considered for careers in academe. The other position says that, although the supply of minority faculty candidates is admittedly small, the relatively low level of commitment from higher educational institutions to recruit, hire, and promote minority candidates and the salary disparity between academe and industry lead to a problem of demand that must be appreciated and addressed. Furthermore, it argues, affirmative action has been beneficial in increasing minority faculty presence.

The first perspective, by Stephen Cole and Elizabeth Arias, is based on the book by Cole and the late Elinor Barber, *Increasing Faculty Diversity: The Occupational Choices of High Achieving Minority Students* (Cole and Barber,

2003). Cole is well known in the discipline of sociology. He is the author of a best-selling research methods text and in 1991 edited a collection of essays, *What's Wrong with Sociology?* The Cole and Barber book was based on considerable research that they and their associates accomplished in addressing this matter.

The other position is that of Samuel L. Myers, Jr. and Caroline Sotello Viernes Turner, authors of the book, *Faculty of Color in Academe: Bittersweet Success* (Turner and Myers, 2000). Their book is based on studies of African-American, Latino, American Indian, and Asian Pacific American faculty from eight Midwestern states and presents the case for an examination of demand issues for minority faculty.

The first discussant is Ronald Ehrenberg; he will be followed by Eric Hanushek.

Ronald G. Ehrenberg:² It is hard to believe that these two papers and the books from which they are drawn are viewing the same world. Cole and Arias conclude that the problem of minority underrepresentation is largely a pipeline problem and propose ways to increase the flow of talented underrepresented minorities (URM's) into Ph.D. study and academic careers. Turner and Myers stress that demand-side factors, including a chilly climate for URM faculty, are the major problem limiting the expansion of URM faculty hiring.

The latest data on new Ph.D. production indicates that the pipeline problem is a serious one (Thomas B. Hoffer et al., 2003). Overall, 0.4 percent of new Ph.D.'s produced by American universities were American Indians. 4.3 percent were African-Americans, and 3.4 percent were Hispanics in 2002. These percentages do not control for the large fractions of the URM Ph.D.'s who receive Ph.D.'s in education. While in 2002, 16 percent of all Ph.D.'s were granted in education, the comparable percentages for the three URM groups were American Indian (31 percent), African-American (39

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percent), and Hispanic (24 percent). In each of the scientific and engineering fields (save for health sciences) the proportion of new Ph.D.'s coming from the three URM groups combined is under 5 percent. In economics, 2.9 percent of the Ph.D.'s granted went to African-Americans or Hispanics; there were no American Indian Ph.D.'s.

In 2002, three times as many Ph.D.'s were granted to temporary residents of the United States as were granted to URM citizens and permanent residents. Over half of all Ph.D.'s in economics went to temporary residents. Some have asserted that the admission of large numbers of foreign students into American Ph.D. programs is displacing URM citizens from being admitted into these programs. However, the only study that seriously addressed this found that our nation's leading universities actually discriminate in the admissions process against temporary residents and in favor of URM's (Gregory Attiyeh and Richard Attiyeh, 1997). Other factors held constant, temporary residents have to score higher than white Americans to be admitted to top graduate programs, but URM's receive a leg up in the admissions process. To the extent that a plentiful supply of foreign Ph.D. students puts downward pressure on academic salaries, the presence of foreign Ph.D.'s does discourage American citizens from going on to Ph.D. study. However, it is unclear why this discouragement should be greater for URM's than for other students.

The share of graduating seniors from top private colleges and universities who ultimately receive Ph.D.'s fell by over 50 percent between the late 1960's and the mid-1990's. This should not be surprising. Earnings of full-time faculty members have declined relative to earnings in other professions. Moreover, nationwide the proportion of faculty in non-tenure-track positions has steadily risen, and as many states withdraw support from their public higher-education institutions, this trend is likely to continue in the future. Cole does quite accurately note that the demand for URM Ph.D.'s to fill faculty positions at selective universities is likely to be better than the demand for otherwise identical white Ph.D.'s. It would be appropriate for faculty to emphasize this to their undergraduate URM students.

My ambition when I entered college was to become a high-school mathematics teacher. But there was one young faculty member who turned me on to economics. I wanted to be just like him, and that was my motivation for going on for a Ph.D. Many colleagues have similarly told me of a key person who motivated them to want to become a professor. Role models are important. As more and more of the teaching of American undergraduate students is done by lecturers and part-time faculty, we would do well to ponder what this will likely imply for the future supply of American academics.

I have chaired the Ph.D. committees of numerous female Ph.D.'s and one African-American Ph.D. These experiences confirm what my own and others' research shows: role models need not be of the same gender/race/ethnicity. However, as soon as a leading female labor economist came to Cornell, my flow of female Ph.D. students dried up. Many female Ph.D. students *prefer* to have female mentors. Similarly, I was as close as one could possibly be with my African-American student (who is now a tenured faculty member at a top-10 department). However, until a leading African-American economist told him how good he was, my student never fully realized this. So having a diversified faculty is important to our students.

I decided five years ago that I wanted to involve the undergraduate students at my college in my research. I reasoned that only by getting students involved in research early in their college careers and having them see the satisfaction that one gets from being a professor, would they be motivated to consider going on for Ph.D. study. Most top graduate programs in economics now require four semesters of calculus and linear algebra, as well as real analysis, and only by getting to undergraduate students early can one explain how they need to structure their studies. So I now recruit undergraduate research assistants prior to their arrival at Cornell, reading through the folders of the students who have accepted offers of admission to my college (about 160) and searching for students with strong mathematical and statistics backgrounds. One of my former students, who came to Cornell planning to be a lawyer, is now a first-year economics Ph.D. student at MIT, after coauthoring three papers with me during his undergraduate years. A first-year undergraduate

working with me was amazed to learn that she would receive a stipend to be a Ph.D. student, and she is now orienting her program to prepare for graduate school. Moreover, as my graduate students began to understand the importance I place on mentoring undergraduates, they have begun to recommend that their undergraduate students come to talk to me. From such a referral I was able to add a very talented young African-American sophomore to my research group.

Many more senior economists should be doing what I am doing. However, as Turner and Myers point out, faculty at research universities get paid for their research, not for mentoring undergraduate students. While I do not believe my research productivity has suffered because of my mentoring activities, the satisfaction I receive from them more than compensates for any negative effect they may have on my salary.

I count among my friends three extraordinarily productive Hispanic scholars at other institutions (a lawyer, a computer and applied mathematician, and a biometrician), who have devoted a good share of their time to developing programs to mentor URM students into Ph.D. and law programs, on through to Ph.D.'s and law degrees, and then into faculty positions. All are extraordinary scholars and role models; however, their mentoring efforts are very time-consuming. Turner and Myers correctly point out that there are trade-offs involved in URM faculty involvement in such efforts. Cole and Arias also correctly note that decisions on the training of URM graduate students and the hiring of URM minority Ph.D.'s are departmental decisions. However, if universities believe that expanding the pool of URM Ph.D.'s is important, they can provide the resources to departments to help achieve this, including reducing the teaching loads of faculty heavily involved in mentoring efforts.

How we structure efforts to diversify the faculty at major research universities is also important. If affirmative-action/faculty-development offices at universities are headed by faculty members chosen primarily for their race/ethnicity, rather than for their academic accomplishments, a natural tension will arise between these offices and the departmental committees doing the hiring of new faculty. If instead, these offices are headed by administrators chosen for their strong academic credentials, when they

press for more open and complete searches they will likely meet less resistance.

Finally, if one believes that the major problem limiting our ability to diversify our faculty is a pipeline one, universities in areas with small URM populations should worry about producing more URM Ph.D.'s and establishing programs to enhance the productivity of existing URM Ph.D.'s more than they should about increasing their own URM faculty representation. I often tell my students about a best unnamed business school that contacted me early in my career to ascertain my interest in becoming dean. I asked the caller where the nearest synagogue was, and he responded "What's a synagogue?" That institution will never have a large percentage of Jewish faculty.

Eric A. Hanushek:³ It is fair to say that many in higher education have been intensely interested in increasing the representation of minorities on their faculties. A variety of highly celebrated hiring plans by major research universities has been reinforced by a much broader effort in the remaining colleges and junior colleges of the nation. And yet the results have been discouraging, with disproportionately few minorities securing faculty positions, and particularly tenured positions.

Much of the discussion focuses directly on what institutions of higher education can do to change the situation. In this, the different focal points sort out into efforts to expand the supply of minority Ph.D.'s and approaches that work more on the demand side. While these positions, separately emphasized by Stephen Cole and Elizabeth Arias (2004) and Samuel Myers and Caroline Turner (2004), are treated as opposites, I do not perceive them that way. To me, the evidence suggests that each of these is important but also indicates that each is likely to be insufficient.

Why Is the Issue Important?

Recent decades have seen the income distribution widen as wage premia associated with

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college degrees steadily rose. This expansion has taken place across the spectrum, with wages for advanced degrees pulling away from wages for just bachelor's degrees. Thus, differences in completion levels for minorities have direct impacts on racial income gaps.

The argument for further recruitment of minority faculty follows from a presumption that role models are particularly important in increasing the supply of minorities with advanced degrees, and indeed that this would feed back into subsequent expansions in minority faculty. Surprisingly, there seems to be relatively little work on the importance of role models or the strength of any reactions to them, even though I personally am willing to accept the general proposition (and Cole and Elinor Barber [2003] are not).

The role-model perspective suggests that there is an externality to the minority individual—and this would generally lead one to think that minorities were prone to enter university teaching at too low a rate. On the other hand, colleges and universities will pay attention to these externalities and should internalize them. Thus, an obvious interpretation of the aggressive hiring stance of many institutions is that they are acknowledging the role-model externalities.

The analysis that I have seen of role-model hypothesis (largely for primary and secondary schools) generally seems to indicate that there is truth in the hypothesis but that it holds *ceteris paribus*. The general idea is that, for teachers of equal quality, minority students tend to do better academically with minority teachers; but at the same time, quality differences can offset any role model gains.

Supply and Demand Perspectives

The discussions of Cole and Arias (2004) and Myers and Turner (2004) have been placed in opposition to each other. Cole and Arias, building on Cole and Barber (2003), emphasize the supply side and the lack of minority students entering into and completing doctoral programs. Myers and Turner, building on Turner and Myers (2000), look at colleges and universities and estimate how faculty representation would change with an increase in supply of minority Ph.D.'s. Both analyses, I believe, provide a number of insights and do not directly contradict each other.

First, the problem of expanding the faculty representation of minorities has existed for some time, even in the face of substantial efforts by colleges to hire more minorities. Thus, it seems unlikely to be solved by any single policy, and the recommendations of both of these papers have a place.

Second, Myers and Turner's analysis, which shows a very small change in faculty for a change in supply, is a reduced-form analysis that traces out the historical outcomes from changes in the academic labor market. It is a sobering view of the situation, but it does not necessarily point to the kinds of policies that might yield a better response. It instead says that, if the future evolves like the past, one should not expect much. On the other hand, a variety of policies are designed to change how the future evolves, so Myers and Turner's expectations might be altered.

I specifically want to address some of the policy issues. Both papers focus on what colleges can do to change the situation. I think this is valuable to consider, but I am not very optimistic about the magnitude of impact.

My perspective on universities is that they reside in a competitive market for faculty, at least in many fields of study. Given that colleges also understand the externalities generated by minority faculties and have instituted a variety of policies to attract more, I do not see that any simple form of discrimination can operate in hiring or promotion of minority faculty—because other schools would swoop in to take advantage of mistakes.

On the other hand, Cole and Arias show limited movement of minorities into Ph.D. programs, and Myers and Turner show specifically that minority faculty representation falls at tenure time. Only part of these findings can be attributed to other market forces pulling minorities elsewhere.

As noted, each of these papers has identified an important issue and has developed some interesting and compelling policy ideas. But, from my different perspective, I think they are missing a larger and more important issue.

Actions Outside of Higher Education

It may be natural for people thinking about diversity in higher education and minority faculty

TABLE 1—GRADE-12 MATHEMATICS AND READING PERFORMANCE BY RACE ON NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS

Test	Percentage proficient or above		
	Whites	Blacks	Hispanics
Mathematics			
1990	14	2	4
2000	20	3	4
Reading ^a			
1992	46	18	23
2002	42	16	22

Sources: James S. Braswell et al. (2001) and Wendy S. Grigg et al. (2003).

^a In 2002 but not 1992, the reading test permitted accommodations for handicapping conditions, resulting in slightly lower scores.

representation to focus on what higher education can do, but I believe that there is substantial evidence that this might be too late. Specifically, obtaining a Ph.D. is a highly specialized activity that generally draws upon students high in the upper tail of the achievement distribution. But let us look quickly at the performance distribution of high-school seniors.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) provides a picture of the performance levels of students both over time and across racial groups. Table 1 provides a summary of students performing at the “proficient” level or above in mathematics and reading. These appear to be minimal requirements for students who will eventually be capable of Ph.D.-level work and would seem to define the relevant pool for eventual advanced degree study.

Table 1 shows that black and Hispanic students are much less frequently in the proficient and above category than whites. Moreover, it shows that the discrepancy actually grew in mathematics during the 1990’s.

Colleges can of course think of providing remedial courses to bring larger numbers of minorities up to levels that would support advanced degrees, but three things are relevant. First, it is very expensive to wait until college to provide the foundation for future study. Second, time spent in remedial work must detract from the range and depth of courses that these students will complete. Third, given weaker preparation, students eventually completing a Ph.D. are likely to be weaker researchers and faculty

members, perhaps explaining some of the fall-off at tenure that Turner and Myers (2000) find.

To me, expansion of minority faculty is not solely, or even chiefly, a problem of the performance of colleges. Instead, it reflects poorer pre-college preparation. Without dealing with that problem, I think we are in for a long and discouraging time trying to expand minority faculty representation.

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