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For a Diverse Faculty, Start With Retention

Recruiting underrepresented faculty without fixing retention problems creates a revolving door, not long-term change, writes Kerry Ann Rockquemore.

January 6, 2016

By [Kerry Ann Rockquemore](#)

Dear Kerry Ann,

Our campus (like many) is coming to terms with the fact that we have a lack of diversity among our faculty and need to acknowledge the problem. I can see that there is consensus among my colleagues that something needs to change. My concern is that the focus is exclusively on hiring initiatives. My department has worked hard to hire underrepresented faculty, but we haven't

been able to keep them. For that reason, our recruitment efforts haven't resulted in a more diverse faculty over time; we've just had a rotating cast of tenure-track professors.

Shouldn't we also be talking about retention? And amid all the long-range initiatives being planned, is there anything I can do in the short term to help diversify our faculty?

Sincerely,

Department Chair and Ally

Dear Chair,

The current political climate has many people asking how to diversify their faculties. I am delighted that your colleagues are newly energized to tackle recruitment challenges. That's great news and positive momentum.

However, focusing solely on recruitment won't resolve the underlying issues that have resulted in a revolving door for the faculty you've been able to recruit. Given that, I'm going to make a radical suggestion: if you want to diversify your faculty, start with retention. Specifically, it's time to ask a few hard questions about why your department has been unable to retain the faculty members you have recruited.

I know that those who identify as allies for underrepresented faculty take that descriptor seriously, and you sound like you are in a genuine moment of reflection. So let me affirm that you *can* do some things in the short term. Only you know what that will look like for you, in your department and in the distinct environment of your campus. But let me suggest a few questions to guide your personal thinking and conversations with your colleagues:

1. Do you *really* know why faculty members have left your department?

Whenever people tell me they have difficulty retaining underrepresented faculty members, the first question I ask is if anyone has ever asked the person who left a basic question: Why did you leave? I have noticed that when I ask this question, it results in long pauses, stammering and then a story that was created by other faculty members about why the person left. Interestingly, the department's exit story is typically one that absolves it of any responsibility for the departure.

If you have had direct conversations with those who have left about the reasons for their exit, it's important to notice if those responses have any patterns (such as a hostile environment, unclear tenure and promotion criteria, and/or a lack of support). If you see patterns, what can be done to address those issues? And if there's a noticeable gap between the department's exit story and the individual's exit story, what does that tell you?

2. Have you asked current faculty members if they have what they need to succeed?

Here again, when I ask senior faculty members this question, I often get speculative answers based on conversations they've had in their own mind instead of conversations they've had with the actual people whom they've tried to recruit and retain.

Let me be clear, I'm not suggesting that you initiate a lengthy climate study. I'm suggesting that you sit down with your current faculty members and have an open, honest and direct conversation to ask if they have what they need to be successful. After you ask, stop talking and really listen to how they respond. This typically results in ideas for concrete actions that you can take to support them and create a welcoming and inclusive environment.

3. Is a structure in place to support newly recruited faculty members?

These are pretty basic questions, but: 1) Do you have a meaningful mentoring program? 2) Do faculty developers on your campus understand the distinct challenges that underrepresented faculty face, and are they prepared to teach skills and strategies to address them? 3) Does your department have transparent and clearly communicated expectations for tenure (particularly the relative weight of service, teaching, research and collegiality)? And 4) Does your department recognize the invisible labor that is expected of underrepresented faculty members across campus?

If the answer to all these questions is a confident yes, that's great. But if the answer to these questions is no, then you've got at least four concrete projects that you can take action on in the short term to improve the environment for your newly recruited faculty members.

4. Is there an ugly reality that nobody wants to face?

Faculty members who have spent a decade or two in a department often overlook consistently bad behavior, persistently difficult personalities and egregiously inappropriate dynamics at faculty meetings. At a certain point, people just consider this mess to be the department's version of normal. But for new faculty members, such dynamics often communicate negative messages and serve as factors that push them away from any desire to be a long-term member of your department.

And let me be even more specific. Is there a department bully (or bullies)? Do packs of faculty collectively dismiss and demean pretenure faculty members publicly? Are there open secrets that are tolerated (Professor X is always drunk, Professor Y sexually harasses grad students or Professor Z yells and threatens people)? And if there are such things that everyone knows, why are they allowed? And more important, what are you willing to do about it?

5. Are you actually *behaving* like an ally in your department?

Many faculty members understand themselves as allies in theory, but that does not extend to their daily behavior. In other words, does your behavior in your department match your self-understanding as an ally?

If you're uncertain, consider the last time you were in the presence of underrepresented faculty members and someone engaged in a microaggression toward that person. What did you do? Did you push back? Did you freeze? Did you stay silent and expect your junior colleague to deal with it? Do you feel skilled and prepared to respond to such situations?

And equally important, what do you do when things come up behind closed doors, in social settings and in contexts where your underrepresented colleagues are not present but are being discussed? How do you respond? Are you proactive or reactive? Do you act as a sponsor or take a backseat? Are you willing to expend some of your political capital on behalf of your junior colleagues? And if you have a tendency toward silence, what skill set do you need to acquire to confidently support your existing underrepresented faculty members?

6. Do you personally know how to mentor underrepresented faculty members?

What do your mentoring relationships look like? Do you have a schedule and structure in place, or do you wait to be asked questions? Do your underrepresented faculty mentees have real and meaningful benchmarks to measure whether they are meeting research and writing goals? Do you provide consistent opportunities for talking with your mentees, identifying problems, celebrating successes and giving directive feedback? Or do you just hope for the best and imagine that they'll sink or swim?

I hope these questions are helpful in expanding your internal and external conversations about faculty diversity. Ultimately, figuring out what issues have been leading to a revolving door in your department and doing what you can to resolve them in the short term will increase the possibility that your long-term recruitment activities will have lasting success.

Peace and productivity,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore, Ph.D.

President, [National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity \(http://www.FacultyDiversity.org\)](http://www.FacultyDiversity.org)



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