Women of Color in American Higher Education

by Stephanie Y. Evans

At the turn of the 21st century, there were 176,485 tenured full professors at the nation’s public and private research universities—72 percent White men, 17 percent White women, 8 percent men of color (Black, Hispanic, and Native American combined), and 2 percent women of color—combined. Why, after years of discussion about access and diversity, are there still so few women and faculty of color in American colleges and universities?

African American women are only one demographic that has been excluded or marginalized in academe but they offer an intriguing entry point into the discussion of faculty diversity. In this article, I provide a brief historical overview of African American and women faculty in the U.S. and examine tenure requirements with respect to women and faculty of color. Because I live and work in Florida, I use that state as an example of the continued lack of gender and racial diversity. I also look at student access to higher education because the students of today become the faculty of tomorrow. Finally, I offer anecdotal solutions based on my personal experiences as a Black woman faculty member. By better understanding the institutional phenomena that led to the current paucity of minority and women professors, we may increase success rates of current and future efforts. Cultural diversity in higher education is essential to the intellectual health of every campus.

Though slavery was present everywhere in colonial and antebellum America, it was more enduring in the South. Not surprisingly, African Americans in the antebellum period earned college degrees more often in the Midwest and New

England. But the situation changed after Emancipation in the 1860s. The proliferation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) allowed the South to generate the most Black college graduates. Nonetheless, with enduring barriers to higher education in predominantly White institutions in the South, African Americans sought graduate school education in the North in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Until the 1960s, northern universities provided the only venue for Black Ph.D.s. For African American women, faculty employment was virtually non-existent.\(^3\)

A survey, “The First Black Faculty Members at the Nation’s Flagship State Universities,” revealed that for the first Black women college graduates in 1850s, no faculty positions were available. For the few Black women who attended college before 1900, teaching was the main profession, but employment was limited to primary or secondary schools.\(^4\) For those Black women who had college or graduate degrees and did not want to teach at elementary or secondary schools, the position of dean of women at the college level enabled them to use their advanced skills. By the 1920s, the position uniformly required a B.A. so that deans would model the learning that they encouraged in their students. For Black women university professors, pay and promotion were unreasonably low.\(^5\) They were relegated to lower ranks, doing much “invisible work,” such as counseling, coordinating meetings, stretching meager resources, and organizing grassroots civil rights campaigns that improved their campuses and communities.

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For the dominant culture, doctoral degrees were less training for pedagogy than a ticket to a professorship in which good teaching became optional and public service expendable.\(^6\) Laboratory experimentation became the preferred pedagogical model and professionalization rapidly transformed faculty roles. The professoriate became “the American faculty club, merely one more occupational variation of the gentleman’s club—the manufacturer’s club, the banker’s club, the broker’s club.” This club was for comfort, shared agenda, and validation of self-designated experts; outsiders need not apply. Where diversity did exist, minorities and women were mostly quarantined in the humanities or education studies, while the sciences were declared White male territory.\(^7\)

Not surprisingly, tenure requirements reflected this slant toward science and research at the expense of teaching and service. Minority researchers argue that culturally centered service must count in the tenure process and that the process
must recognize that faculty of color disproportionately engage in campus and community service. At predominantly White institutions, this work is taken for granted, discouraged, or not valued in the tenure and promotion process. In this vein, Woods challenges the Eurocentric, singled-minded assessment of the traditional university. She does not argue against the value of research but objects to weighting an arbitrary journal count while dismissing the worth of special contributions that faculty of color choose (or are called) to make. Obviously, those colleagues who choose not to serve the campus or local community, but instead concentrate or their own scholarship or research, will have a higher journal count for the tenure tally. But why would an institution penalize faculty who desire to contribute to the diversification of the campus and foster connections to local communities?

When a faculty member is tenured, the college or university is recognizing a partnership with one who has duly demonstrated his or her potential, growth, and commitment to the institution. Tenure decisions, however, are subjective. At each level of review—department, college, and administrative—the terms of the tenure process are open for interpretation. Thus, at each level, the criteria for evaluation must be made transparent and the evaluators must rationalize their decisions. Clearly, the disproportionate hiring of women and faculty of color into lower ranks is exploitation. In academe—as in other labor arenas—women, poor people, and people of color have generated institutional wealth enjoyed by those (White and male) who don’t recognize their unearned privilege and status. Women and faculty of color must be made full institutional partners by being duly awarded tenure and promotion.

Researchers have found that, “while the increasing numbers of women in academe appears promising, it’s hard to ignore the considerable numbers of women seeping out from every point along the academic pipeline.” At each step, women are frequently given mediocre reviews and isolated by lack of women mentors; their mistakes are often amplified or remembered long after their male colleagues’ missteps are forgotten. Additionally, women pay the ultimate social tax: their childbearing, child rearing, and care-taking roles put them at a clear and often significant disadvantage on the job.  

The challenges of having to be twice as good to get half the recognition that are present for White women are magnified for scholars of color who don’t have

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the credibility that Whiteness provides. While it is futile to say who has it “worse” by ranking oppressions of gender or race, it is crucial to recognize that each demographic carries with it a unique standpoint and a unique set of challenges. Black women, while suffering a distinct set of educational and intellectual stereotypes, are still subject to what I call **extraordinary scrutiny**. This scrutiny takes place without critical analysis of the centuries of debilitating oppression that we have had to overcome. “Gender [and racial] stereotyping occurs in recognizable patterns” and must be identified and eliminated. But simply stopping the leakage is not enough. The flow of women and minority faculty must be increased; every point in the pipeline must be strengthened. Where programs are in place to enhance minority faculty numbers, these programs must be supported and built upon.10

Some programs such as those in the federal TRIO structure (e.g., Talent Search, Upward Bound, McNair Scholars) provide vital entry points into higher education for underrepresented populations and are essential networks that are helping to counterbalance the legacy of exclusion. In addition, programs like Preparing Future Faculty (originated at Howard University) and the Southern Regional Educational Board’s (SREB) Doctoral Scholars Program are examples of possible interventions. This type of sustained support is what SREB’s Ansley Abraham calls “more than a check and a handshake.” As a second way to improve the pipeline, for hiring purposes, campus administrators can consult professional organizations that focus on race. For example, in African American studies, scholarly groups such as the Association for the Study of African American Life and History and the National Council for Black Studies provide much-needed human and material resources for scholarly leadership. Race or gender caucuses in traditional disciplinary professional organizations offer a third possible resource available to help over-
come the “we can’t find any good candidates” scenario. The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation’s recent study *Diversity and the Ph.D.: A Review of Efforts to Broaden Race and Ethnicity in U.S. Doctoral Education* shows that the record for diversity is poor and getting worse. From elementary schools to higher education, inequities must be eliminated or the unnecessary drain of human potential will continue.\(^\text{11}\)

The dismal record for including African Americans in higher education in the South generally and Florida in particular will come as no surprise to most. Studies conducted by W. E. B. Du Bois and Augustus Dill in 1900 and 1910 revealed very limited college and university access for Black students in the South. By 1910, only 658 Black women and 2,450 Black men had graduated from institutions designated as colleges. Between 1945 and 1958, 85 Black students applied for admission to the University of Florida (UF), the state’s most prominent university. All African American students who applied during this time were denied admission. The first successful Black applicants would not be accepted until the late 1950s, 30 years after UF had graduated its first White female student and more than a century after its founding in 1853.\(^\text{12}\)

The historical record of the first Black students at Florida’s public primarily White institutions shows that most schools admitted a few Black students in their inaugural classes because the schools were opened in the mid-1960s, after UF and Florida State University (FSU) had already begun to desegregate. Though there was attrition in the first contingent of Black students at each institution, Black graduates nonetheless trickled out of Florida’s colleges as surely as they trickled in. In the early years of access, there was little gender disparity in the enrollment or graduation numbers; for Black women and men, enrollment was in the single digits until the 1970s.\(^\text{13}\)

As with student admissions, appointments for faculty of color generally became available in the 1970s, and there was not much gender disparity there either because the numbers for both men and women were also in the single digits. In the three decades following the original hiring of minority faculty, there was little improvement. As of 2004, there were 157 Black women and 258 Black men tenured in the Florida State University System. The total number of tenured faculty in the Florida system is 5,810: 1,451 women and 4,359 men. The disparities are obvious, reflecting the national underrepresentation of minorities and women
in tenured, senior faculty positions. Further, Florida A&M University (FAMU)—one of the state’s four HBCUs—employs more than 200 of the 415 tenured Black faculty in the state, again demonstrating the lack of substantial integration of Black scholars at Florida’s predominantly White colleges and universities.\footnote{14}

Clearly there is a lack of ranked and tenured Black faculty. But the number of Black women full professors in the state is appallingly low: FAMU has 37 Black women tenured as full professors and 128 Black men tenured at that level. Considering that nationwide there were only 1,916 Black women tenured as full professors in 2003–04, the numbers are not surprising. There are 3,427 Black men tenured as full professors in the nation. Although Black women earn more college degrees than Black men, this has not translated into equitable faculty appointments or comparable rank and tenure awards.\footnote{15}

In summary, Black students, both men and women, have historically been barred from the predominantly White institutions in the Florida State University System. Though representation has significantly increased since the 1960s, the numbers are not nearly representative of the state’s Black population, which in the 2000 Census showed a Florida population of 14.6 percent African American.\footnote{16} As many leaders of educational institutions have recognized since the mid-1980s, diversity enhances excellence, and considering the historical perspective, many schools in the South—Florida among them—are behind the curve.\footnote{17}

Table 1: Tenured Faculty by Race and Gender in the Florida State University System, 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian/Pacific Islander</th>
<th>Native American</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>157 (11%)</td>
<td>1,142 (79%)</td>
<td>73 (5%)</td>
<td>70 (5%)</td>
<td>9 (.06%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>258 (6%)</td>
<td>3,571 (82%)</td>
<td>163 (4%)</td>
<td>358 (8%)</td>
<td>9 (.02%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If we wish to create a truly excellent system of higher education in this nation, it must be inclusive. To accomplish this, colleges and universities must recruit diverse student and faculty populations to advance scholarship that employs a range of experiences, theories, frameworks, and epistemologies. The scholarly inquiry of race and gender studies is one measure of an institution’s academic weight. Many Ivy League and top-ranking public universities desegregated relatively early and have longstanding African American Studies departments, as well as other well-developed ethnic studies areas. Having more scholars of color on campus will assist in a change of culture, but the effort must be made by all campus partners to increase the recognition that a diverse faculty enhances the institution’s standing and intellectual quality for everyone.\footnote{18}

Empirical research and anecdotal narratives suggest that faculty of color operate within a more communal culture than mainstream academia’s models of individual achievement.\footnote{19} As a broad institutional shift from the teaching-learning
model of the university to the business-model university takes place, the increase in competitive rather than collaborative patterns can negatively impact the ability of marginalized scholars to be successful in the academy.

Derald Wing Sue has observed that today’s racism is not the same as the overt racism of the past. The way that people of color are put behind now is mainly by a general failure to help. Assistance does not require handling people with kid gloves; it simply means taking work and scholarship by faculty of color seriously enough to challenge and support scholarship in a way that presupposes the possibility of success.20

On my campus, all university employees are required to attend a sexual harassment workshop. No such requirement or workshop exists for anti-racism. Often, administrators issue mandates to faculty hiring committees to hire faculty of color, but no resources are in place (or none are used) to hold departments accountable for taking diversity initiatives seriously or providing professional working environments in which faculty of color can thrive (or at least survive).

Writing by faculty of color offers inside perspectives on difficulties these faculty members face daily. For example, Journey to the Ph.D.: The Majority in the Minority presents research by faculty and graduate students that highlights daily battles, while research provides histories of desegregation and ongoing demographic struggles in vastly different locations (Texas, University of Missouri and University of Michigan, respectively).21

JoAnn Moody’s book Faculty Diversity: Problems and Solutions is one of many excellent resources available to help campus communities grapple with challenges. Her scenarios highlight how minority faculty can be shortchanged at every step of the professional process. One problem is that many who need to read this book do not and those who show up at diversity roundtables are already on board. While diversity as a value cannot be mandated, diversity as a policy can, even in this post-affirmative action era.22

Though faculty of color should not be confined to race studies, these programs allow for meaningful hiring of faculty of color while producing critical race scholarship that is much needed to address the ongoing debates of race in national and international arenas. Unfortunately, ethnic studies programs born of student protest in the 1960s have often been allowed to languish from benign neglect. As the late Nellie Y. McKay has noted, with more faculty of color—especially with the inclusion of tenured women faculty of color—academic work will expand and this civilization’s knowledge base will be broader, deeper, healthier, and much more humane.23

ENDNOTES

2. Ibid.
SPECIAL FOCUS: Will the Past Define the Future?


4 Ibid., 160-180.

5 Ibid., 67, 113, 175.

6 Ibid., 174-76.

7 Ibid., 160-179.


9 Joan Williams, Tamina Alon, and Stephanie Bornstein, “Beyond the ‘Chilly Climate’: Eliminating Bias Against Women and Fathers in Academe.” *Thought & Action* (Fall 2006), 92.

10 Ibid.


12 Stephanie Y. Evans, “I Was One of the First to See Daylight’: Black Women in Predominantly White Colleges and Universities in Florida since 1959,” *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 85, No. 1, (Summer 2006), 47.

13 Ibid., 47-49.

14 Ibid., 58.

15 Office of Strategic Research and Analysis. [www.usg.edu/sra/faculty/pg02.phtml](http://www.usg.edu/sra/faculty/pg02.phtml) accessed January 16, 2006. State colleges and two-year colleges in Georgia were not included in this count.


18 Currently, there are six Ph.D. programs in African American Studies: Michigan State, Harvard, Berkeley, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Temple and Northeastern. Yale's interdisciplinary Black Studies doctoral program is also quite successful. The field is growing, but no doctoral programs for Black Studies yet exist in the South. Stephanie Y. Evans, “The State and Future of the Ph.D. in Black Studies.” *Griot*, 25, No. 1 (Spring 2006), 1-16.


