Searching for Higher Ground: Developing an Innovative Faculty Support Organization

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Abstract

The presenters will describe the initiation and development of an innovative faculty support program focusing on the unique needs of untenured faculty of color and untenured faculty who are involved in research on issues of race, ethnicity, or class. Initiated by the Dean’s Office, program activities are kept separate from administrative control and the RTP process. The program involves volunteer junior faculty who have organized into a formal faculty organization (complete with members, officers, and written bylaws) to promote research, effective teaching, collegial and social support networks, peer and mentor support, and leadership development. Accomplishments thus far, strengths, challenges, and caveats will be discussed with conference participants.

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Background, History, and Role of the Dean’s Office

The presenters will describe the initiation and development of an innovative faculty organization created by and for faculty who are engaged in research and scholarship on issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, linguistic diversity, and social justice. This organization is unique for several reasons. First, while this effort was initiated by the Dean’s office, program activities are kept entirely separate from administrative control and the tenure and promotion process. Second, while the organization was originally founded by volunteer junior faculty of color (complete with members, officers, and written bylaws), this organization’s membership is inclusive, permitting faculty of any rank and ethnicity to join. Third, the organization will offer support in a variety of key areas such as promoting research and writing, as well as coping with various teaching situations, building collegial and social support networks, providing peer support during the tenure process, leadership development, and securing mentoring support from senior faculty.

California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) is part of a 22-campus state system and is a comprehensive, urban undergraduate and Master’s degree institution with more than 30,000 students and approximately 700 full-time faculty. Our College of Human Development and Community Service has 104 tenured and tenure-track faculty and with 26% being faculty of color vs. 12% nationally (“The Nation: Faculty and Staff,” The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac Issue, 2001). While this percentage may be laudable compared to the national norm, when confidentially and individually interviewed, many of our faculty of color expressed a quiet sense of isolation or disconnection. One reason for this may be due to the fact that of these 27 faculty of color, 78% currently are untenured. While it is a fact that junior faculty undergoing the rigors of the tenure and promotion process often report feeling significant stress and disconnection from their colleagues, more telling is that a number of these faculty of color also reported negative experiences that were situationally-specific to faculty of color.

As a result of this information, the dean authorized the associate dean to work primarily with untenured faculty of color to discuss creating a support system for faculty in the college.
Bringing Faculty of Color Together

The associate dean began a series of informal conversations with a small group of untenured faculty of color regarding the institutional climate for minority faculty. Plans were made to launch this discussion by hosting an off-campus luncheon meeting inviting all untenured faculty of color to discuss the following: (1) build a community of colleagues willing to frankly discuss issues and challenges for faculty of color in the college; (2) brainstorm actions, activities, and programs to support research, teaching, the tenure process, and promote social activities; and (3) reduce the feelings of stress and isolation and forming stronger relationships among colleagues. To make the setting more inviting, rather than hosting the meeting on campus, it was held in the home of one of the untenured minority faculty and the cost of the lunch was subsidized by the Dean’s office.

At this meeting, faculty of color discussed and shared their professional and personal challenges. The meeting was very productive on a number of important levels, not the least of which included the timely convocation of faculty of color, the voicing of salient patterns of treatment, and a commitment to further action. However, perhaps no single realization during the gathering was as compelling as the understanding of the commonality of experiences, reactions, and consequences of being faculty of color committed to academic issues of equity, social justice, and representation. Like the findings from Quicho & Rios (2000), the founding members of what was to become Researchers and Critical Educators intuitively understood the significance of the conspicuous “presence” of equity-minded faculty of color. The presence of this group of faculty threatened to introduce absent or invisible considerations to the enterprise of preparing teachers within a public teacher education program. Collectively, the members would be emboldened to expose and act against instances of injustice and inequity (Sleeter, 1992). As the work of Kanpol (1992) establishes, one’s personal, social and cultural subjectivities profoundly influence how one envisions their role and responsibilities as educators. Certainly, this point was materialized in the formation of this group. There would be an open recognition of individuals’ personal histories and professional insights as invaluable resources for the group’s collective “funds of knowledge” and its ensuing blueprint for action.

The outcome of the meeting concluded with a resounding singleness of purpose, that is, to insure that future faculty of color within the college discover a professional climate that is conspicuously more inviting, inclusive, and actively invested in their retention and promotion.

Establishing a Faculty of Color Organization: “Researchers And Critical Educators” (RACE)

After much discussion, it was decided that the group was interested in establishing a formal organization with the broader mission of supporting faculty interested in research and teaching that is conscious of differences of race, ethnicity and diversity. Hence, the organization was named, Researchers And Critical Educators (RACE). Establishing a formal organization became important for a variety of reasons. First, forming an inclusive group, avoided the problem of having one or two individual faculty singled out in the college as the radical, vocal “troublemakers.” Second, establishing a formal organization, complete with bylaws and officers, would help legitimize and formalize the issues and provide greater structure, more active members, and a sharper focus than a loosely defined ad hoc committee at the behest of the Dean. Third, forming an organization would permit faculty to join voluntarily and avoid the sense of a privileged clique of faculty selected by the Dean. Fourth, a formal organization that is recognized and supported by the Dean’s office would be a better vehicle for exchange of ideas with the Dean, and yet maintain autonomy from the Dean’s office. Fifth, a formal organization would project a model of strength and support to non-tenured and tenured faculty that is different from other organizations on the campus. Sixth, RACE would become more inclusive of all faculty because it would be founded by untenured faculty of color, but then opened up to any faculty member who is interested in issues of difference by race, ethnicity and diversity in the areas of research and teaching.

A subgroup of faculty of color met several times to draw up bylaws for the organization. The bylaws include the following information: the organization’s overall mission and statement of purpose; membership requirements; meeting notices; executive officer qualifications and their roles and responsibilities; nomination, election, and voting processes; standing and ad hoc committees’ structure and functions; and a list of the founding officers. The bylaws were approved by the members and also submitted to the Dean of the college to formally document the establishment of the organization.

The RACE organization has devised a set of objectives. The primary objective of this unique effort is to develop activities and foster discussions that will support diverse faculty’s scholarship, teaching, professional service and leadership
development as part of their tenure and promotion process. As part of this objective, RACE has initiated two innovative programs that have been supported university-wide. They include the Noon-Time Colloquium Forum that establishes a space for participating members to present their research, and the Distinguished Scholar Series that highlights the contributions of invited guests whose scholarly pursuits center on critical inquiries of equity, class, culture, race, gender and linguistic diversity.

A second objective for RACE is to critically investigate how to better provide opportunities and improve conditions that will have a transformative value for the college’s faculty of color community. One aspect of this agenda is the creation of a culture within the college and university that is more hospitable to the teaching interests and research agendas of all faculty, regardless of ethnicity. As such, RACE participants are actively working to build strong, effective formal communication with appropriate university offices.

As a final objective, RACE aims to develop support networks with other faculty campus-wide and eventually, to other colleges and universities, with the eventual goal of establishing multi-campus chapters. Towards this end, RACE is working in collaboration with other colleges to establish a journal that will address the multi-faceted issues, which impact diverse faculty in American universities.

**Conclusion**

Establishing a formal organization comprised of faculty of color has many advantages. First, this approach provides greater visibility, legitimacy, and support for researchers engaged in scholarly work on issues of race, class, linguistic diversity, and social justice. Second, this approach fosters greater communication not just among its members, but with administrative units such as the Dean’s office with a particular focus on supporting junior faculty negotiate the tenure process successfully. Third, this approach is simple, direct, and cost effective and may be especially appealing for colleges that are seeking innovative ways to recruit and support faculty of color as part of strengthening their programs for accreditation purposes. Fourth, this approach is innovative in that much of the locus of control resides among the faculty forming the organization who work closely with a higher administrative unit (e.g., Dean’s office); with the resulting organization benefiting from this more grassroots approach that more easily reflects the culture of different campuses. While this is an innovative approach to developing greater support programs for minority faculty, this approach must be taken with care and openness to avoid potential misperceptions.

**References**


