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Black Issues in Higher Education; Aug 15, 2002; 19, 13; Ethnic NewsWatch
pg. 0_4

LAST WORD
BY TAMMY THURMAN

Are We There Yet? Retaining Faculty of Color

T he retention of faculty of color at predominantly White institutions continues to be a significant issue in higher education. By sharing personal insights, however, those in higher education might be able to identify common perspectives held by similarly situated colleagues.

I joined the social work faculty at a public university in the Midwest in August 1999. Today, I am still figuring out what the university expects of me and what I should expect from the university in order to have an optimal faculty experience. My institution is located in central Illinois and enrolls approximately 20,000 students. The largest segment of the student body, 43 percent, comes from the Chicago area and surrounding counties, and an additional 28 percent comes from central Illinois. In 2001, 87.7 percent of the student body was “White/Non-Hispanic” and 10.2 percent were minority students. The university employs 1,302 faculty and approximately 11 percent are minority. As a Black, female, tenure-track faculty member, these demographics are significant because they help me understand and identify what I think are realistic expectations for the university and myself.

In addition to my social work training, I also received legal training, which provides a context in which to analyze my personal perspective. In law, most offenses or causes of action consist of elements. For example, battery consists of (1) an act intended (2) to cause harm to (3) someone's person. In order for the battery to exist, all three elements need to be satisfied. To determine whether the elements are satisfied, one must define each element and describe the circumstances that support the definition. This approach is useful when thinking about one's experience as a faculty member of color. Just as certain conditions need to exist in order for battery to occur, certain conditions need to exist in order for faculty of color to have successful experiences at predominantly White institutions.

First, there must be respect for what we “bring to the table” or what we can contribute. We should expect the department, school or college to recognize and be receptive to prior educational and professional experiences that, while not necessarily “mainstream,” can provide a valuable alternative perspective. As faculty of color, we should value our own contributions by seeking (or creating if necessary) outlets for our teaching, service and scholarship.

Second, there must be support to nurture strengths and growth areas. We should have access to resources that encourage creativity or provide constructive direction. Faculty members of color should seek each other out through formal or informal mentoring and/or support groups, and increase visibility by readily participating in university-wide activities.

Lastly, there must be validation of accomplishments. We should expect tenure committees to be inclusive in their recognition of journals and/or publication sources. In addition, we should expect department or college recognition via award nominations or inclusion in university publications of innovative scholarship, service or teaching projects.

By no means are these three elements meant to be exhaustive. We, as faculty of color, have come a long way, but also have a long way to go. Writing this essay afforded me the opportunity to be thoughtful about the type of academic world I want and what it might take to get there. Hopefully, the discussion will stimulate ideas about what individuals and institutions can do to ease the journey.

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