The Diversity Dilemma in the American Academy

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Over the past three decades, with the advent of affirmative action and an increasing sensitivity to issues of diversity, American colleges and universities have shown recognizable progress in their enrollment of students from African American and Hispanic communities. Unfortunately, the same statement cannot be made in regards to the representation of members of these two underrepresented groups among the faculty or as senior-level administrators. National data indicate that about 5.2 percent of the full-time faculty in American colleges and universities are African American, and these figures include representation from the cohort of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Hispanics hold a scant 3 percent of full-time faculty positions, so the progress made by both these groups in predominantly white institutions has been at best, extremely modest. (Harvey, 2011) In fact, it is white women who have been the main beneficiaries of affirmative action, as their representation has increased substantially in the faculty ranks. Nelson’s research ( 2007,2010) shows that the disturbing disparity in hiring faculty of color is not field-specific, but is spread across several content areas, and is particularly noticeable in the scientific and technical fields. Given these circumstances, it is regrettable that defenders of traditional university approaches to bringing new members into the professoriate not only contend that universities have largely eliminated racial discrimination in faculty hiring, but also argue that additional hiring of faculty members of color will lower the quality of teaching and research. (Bok, 1982) On the administrative side, the racial disparities are even more disturbing. African Americans and Hispanics are rarities at the Dean’s level in predominantly white institutions, and they are practically nonexistent in presidential or vice-presidential positions.

The increased representation of faculty of color on predominantly white college and university campuses, especially those who hold tenure, is important for several reasons. Their presence sends a message to white students regarding the intellectual capacity of the groups they represent, while also providing tangible role models and examples for students from the underrepresented communities. In addition, the unusual structure of higher education employment operates in such a way that once a faculty member has earned tenured status, he or she essentially has a job for life, and could literally remain at their chosen institution for decades. Because a person who holds a faculty position is afforded an opportunity to be involved in the development and implementation of various policies through participation in shared governance through the institutional committee process, over a prolonged period of time, it may be possible to affect such substantial matters as admission requirements, financial aid policies, and determination of curricular offerings. “At this time, the academic profession, facing a turnover of large numbers of faculty members, has the opportunity to shape the future to look more like America and more like the increasingly diverse student population. It has an opportunity as well to exercise leadership with respect to human equality.” (Gaff, 2000)

There are both structural and attitudinal reasons why the numbers of faculty and senior administrators of color have been slow to increase in the American academy. Several of those factors will be explored in this session, including the roles played by search committees, the vagaries of the tenure process, and the presence of implicit bias.

William B. Harvey brings both a research background and practical experiences to this topic. He has held senior faculty and administrative positions at both major research universities and teaching-focused colleges, and he also has served as Vice President and Director of the Center for Advancement of Racial and Ethnic Equity at the American Council on Education in Washington, DC. Harvey is also the founding president of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education.