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An Ivy League professor on why colleges don't hire more faculty of color: 'We don't want them'



By **Marybeth Gasman** September 26 at 4:30 PM

In "The five things no one will tell you about why colleges don't hire more faculty of color," a piece first published in the Hechinger Report, Marybeth Gasman took on a common question: Why aren't college faculties more racially diverse?

It's a question gaining increased urgency from student protesters demanding change on campuses nationally.

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— *Susan Svrhuga*

While giving a talk about Minority Serving Institutions at a recent higher education forum, I was asked a question pertaining to the lack of faculty of color at many majority institutions, especially more elite institutions.

My response was frank: “The reason we don’t have more faculty of color among college faculty is that we don’t want them. We simply don’t want them.” Those in the audience were surprised by my candor and gave me a round of applause for the honesty.

Given the short amount of time I had on the stage, I couldn’t explain the evidence behind my statement. I will do so here. I have been a faculty member since 2000, working at several research universities. In addition, I give talks, conduct research and workshops and do consulting related to diversifying the faculty across the nation. I have learned a lot about faculty recruitment over 16 years and as a result of visiting many colleges and universities.

First, the word ‘quality’ is used to dismiss people of color who are otherwise competitive for faculty positions. Even those people on search committees that appear to be dedicated to access and equity will point to ‘quality’ or lack of ‘quality’ as a reason for not hiring a person of color.

Typically, ‘quality’ means that the person didn’t go to an elite institution for their Ph.D. or wasn’t mentored by a prominent person in the field. What people forget is that attending the elite institutions and being mentored by prominent people is linked to social capital and systemic racism ensures that people of color have less of it.

Second, the most common excuse I hear is ‘there aren’t enough people of color in the faculty pipeline.’

It is accurate that there are fewer people of color in some disciplines such as engineering or physics. However, there are great numbers of Ph.D.'s of color in the humanities and education and we still don't have great diversity on these faculties.

When I hear someone say people of color aren't in the pipeline, I respond with 'Why don't you create the pipeline?' 'Why don't you grow your own?'

Since faculty members are resistant to hiring their own graduates, why not team up with several other institutions that are 'deemed to be of high quality' and bring in more Ph.D.s of color from those institutions?

If you are in a field with few people of color in the pipeline, why are you working so hard to 'weed' them out of undergraduate and Ph.D. programs? Why not encourage, mentor, and support more people of color in your field?

Third, I have learned that faculty will bend rules, knock down walls, and build bridges to hire those they really want (often white colleagues) but when it comes to hiring faculty of color, they have to 'play by the rules' and get angry when any exceptions are made.

Let me tell you a secret – exceptions are made for white people constantly in the academy; exceptions are the rule in academe.

Fourth, faculty search committees are part of the problem.

They are not trained in recruitment, are rarely diverse in makeup, and are often more interested in hiring people just like them rather than expanding the diversity of their department.

They reach out to those they know for recommendations and rely on ads in national publications.

And, even when they do receive a diverse group of applicants, often those applicants 'aren't the right fit' for the institution. What is the 'right fit'? Someone just like you?

Fifth, if majority colleges and universities are truly serious about increasing faculty diversity, why don't they visit Minority Serving Institutions — institutions with great student and faculty diversity — and ask them how they recruit a diverse faculty.

This isn't hard. The answers are right in front of us. We need the will.

For those reading this essay, you might be wondering why faculty diversity is important. Your wondering is yet another reason why we don't have a more diverse faculty. Having a diverse faculty — in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion — adds greatly to the experiences of students in the classroom. It challenges them — given that they are likely not to have had diversity in their K-12 classroom teachers — to think differently about who produces knowledge. It also challenges them to move away from a 'white-centered' approach to one that is inclusive of many different voices and perspectives.

Having a diverse faculty strengthens the faculty and the institution as there is more richness in the curriculum and in conversations taking place on committees and in faculty meetings. A diverse faculty also holds the university accountable in ways that uplift people of color and center issues that are important to the large and growing communities of color across the nation.

Although I have always thought it vital that our faculty be representative of the nation's diversity, we are getting to a point in higher education where increasing faculty diversity is an absolute necessity and crucial to the future of our nation.

In 2014, for the first time, the nation's K-12 student population was majority minority. These students are on their way into colleges and universities and we are not prepared for them. Our current faculty lacks expertise in working with students of color and our resistance to diversifying the faculty means that we are not going to be ready anytime soon.

I'll close by asking you to think deeply about your role in recruiting and hiring faculty. How often do you use the word 'quality' when talking about increased diversity? Why do you use it? How often do you point to the lack of people of color in the faculty

pipeline while doing nothing about the problem?

How many books, articles, or training sessions have you attended on how to recruit faculty of color?

How many times have you reached out to departments with great diversity in your field and asked them how they attract and retain a diverse faculty?

How often do you resist when someone asks you to bend the rules for faculty of color hires but think it's absolutely necessary when considering a white candidate (you know, so you don't lose such a wonderful candidate)?

Rather than getting angry at me for pointing out a problem that most of us are aware of, why don't you change your ways and do something to diversify your department or institution's faculty?

I bet you don't, but I sure hope you do.

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