

Inequality in Higher Education: Diversity or Transformation?

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Introduction

Despite the rhetoric of diversity in higher education, trends toward greater representation of historically underrepresented minority (URM) faculty have not significantly improved post-Civil Rights. The percentages of historically underrepresented African American, Latino, and Native American faculty in all higher education institutions are well below parity with their percentage in the total U.S. population, but especially in research-extensive universities.¹ From 1988 to 2010, the presence of African American faculty increased from 3.2% to 5.0% and from 2.4% to 3.6% for Hispanic faculty, respectively. However the percentage of Black, Hispanic, and Native American/American Indian faculty earning tenure and promotion to full professor has remained unchanged.² Such significant underrepresentation provides a compelling rationale to launch a comprehensive investigation to contribute to the knowledge base on institutional culture and social climate and its effect on an unchanging trend of low URM representation in academic institutions. During 2010–2012, a mixed methods study was conducted to examine the associations among academic occupational stress, organizational factors, coping strategies, and physical and mental well-being. Conducting a mixed methods study allowed for a more coherent narrative

Source: Based on a brief overview of the preliminary results of a study entitled “Understanding the relationship between work stress and U.S. research institutions failure to retain underrepresented minority (URM) faculty.” University of Maryland, College Park, Consortium on Race, Gender and Ethnicity. Received on June 4 (2015). Available from <http://www.cрге.umd.edu>

by employing qualitative data to contextualize web-based survey results. The preliminary findings provide rich narratives and quantifiable “lived experiences” of the challenges URM faculty confront in recruitment, retention, and successful tenure and promotion outcomes. These findings may contribute to solution-driven policies and practices for mitigating the potential impact of these challenges and increase URM retention in higher education.

What Does the Extant Corpus of knowledge Tell Us?

A significant and growing body of scholarship provides strong foundational knowledge and yields a compelling rationale for why institutions should be transformed to ensure equitable practices and a more welcoming climate for URM faculty. Here is what we know currently about academic and occupational stress:

- Occupational stress is a growing concern that manifests itself in stress-related disorders (both physical and mental), poor work performance, and reduced productivity and retention of qualified employees in the workforce.³
- Underrepresented and first-generation college students and faculty report higher rates of stress, anxiety, and depression due to racism and micro-aggressions, as well as higher rates of physical symptoms such as high blood pressure compared to Whites.⁴ Predictors of stress are promotion concerns, time constraints, and overall work demands and overload.⁵
- Mentoring is a critical social support resource in career advancement and progress for URM faculty, yet is not a resource easily available to many URM faculty.^{6, 7}
- There is a consistent, positive correlation between occupational stress and perceptions of prejudice and discrimination.⁸
- Despite the existing wealth of information that connects racism and discrimination with ill health effects,^{9, 10} multiple gaps in our knowledge concerning the relationship between occupational stressors and physical/mental well-being for URM faculty remain.

Methods

A mixed method approach was used to examine the relationships between occupations stress, institutional climate, and the coping strategies, physical and mental well-being in U.S. born URM. Our population consisted of tenure track assistant or associate URM faculty in high or very high research intensive universities. The study includes an online web-based survey

(n = 616) and in-depth interviews and focus groups (n = 58), which were collected to examine the associations among occupational stress, institutional climate, coping strategies, and physical and mental well-being among U.S. born tenure track assistant and tenured associate URM faculty in high or very high research-extensive universities. Data were collected on demographic information, occupational stress indicators, self-reported health status, psychological stress, and coping strategies. In addition the web-based survey assessed the perceptions of institutional climate, access to support resources, such as mentoring; vocational strain, role overload among others and the impact on physical/mental well-being and career progression. In-depth interviews and focus groups captured the lived experiences of URM faculty, using a life course perspective, which is particularly important in the investigation of the impact of systems of inequality on the physical/mental health of URM faculty in the United States.

Selected Sample Characteristics

Web-based survey respondents (n = 616) were 50% Black (n = 310), 18% Mexican American (n = 113), 10% Puerto Rican (n = 62), 4% Native Americans/American Indians (n = 23), and 18% Other Hispanic (n = 108) with women comprising 48% of the total sample (n = 297). The mean age of the participants was 44.6 years. In terms of marriage, 69% of sample was married or living with a partner (n = 419), about 15% divorced/separated/widowed (n = 91), and the remaining 18% reported never being married (n = 101). Forty-one percent of the sample reported no children (n = 248). Respondents represented the following disciplines: 22% arts and humanities (n = 129), 19% social sciences (n = 112), 19% professional schools (n = 108), 17% health professions (n = 100), 9% education (n = 52), 8% STEM (n = 44), and 6% ethnic studies (n = 35). The mean mentoring scale score was 10.12 and mean perceived bias/discrimination scale score was 12.06. The data show low levels of access to mentoring resources and high levels of perceived discrimination.

The qualitative sample (n = 58) included: 23 African Americans, 21 Mexican American, and 14 Puerto Ricans. The mean age was 41.5 years old, about three quarters were married, slightly over half (53%) had children, and almost half were first generation, with Mexican Americans the most likely to be first generation in their families to graduate from college. Participants reported the following disciplines: 18.9% arts and humanities (n = 11), 22.4% social sciences (n = 13), 29.3% STEM/health/medicine (17), 12.1% psychology (n = 7), and 8.6% education (n = 5). The mean mentoring scale score was 12.6 and mean perceived bias/discrimination scale score was 11.1.

Results

Preliminary results show four major occupational stressors that, depending on severity and frequency, can be hypothesized to be associated with physical and mental well-being. Specifically, these stressors include: an unwelcoming institutional climate, mentoring, perceived racism and discrimination and family-work balance. We also measured coping strategies as mediating variables to assess their buffering effect on health and mental well-being outcomes. Table 1 displays the four central constructs analyzed to date and thematic categories that capture the experiences of respondents and confirm the findings from the quantitative web-based survey. These data reveal low numbers of URM faculty in their departments, colleges, and universities, and the qualitative data describe perceptions of an unwelcoming climate with multiple experiences of marginalization (e.g., tokenism, “brown/black tax,” “only one” syndrome) and perceptions of an unsupportive institution with limited access to mentoring resources.⁶ Discriminatory practices are structurally embedded in the institutional climate and are manifested through inadequate mentoring and excessive workload expectations to engage in “diversity service and teaching activities” and mentoring diverse students. In turn URM faculty oftentimes have higher workload, higher diversity service expectations, and experience obligations to engage URM students as a way to “pay it forward.” These additional obligations may compromise their levels of productivity, family life, and their physical and mental well-being. Our findings also reveal the work-family balance as an oxymoron with respondents instead characterizing it as sacrifice of family over work. Additionally, due to historic institutional racism and less access to family wealth, URM

Table 1: Qualitative thematic findings

<i>Institutional climate</i>	<i>Mentoring</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low numbers of URM in universities-tokenism Hostile and unwelcoming climate Low value by institutions of higher education on community engagement research High racial/ethnic “tax” burden 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low perceived support of senior mentors Few mentors who know their research area Need to develop patchwork of mentors 49% report that inadequate mentoring has significantly/somewhat impeded their career growth.
<p><i>Perceived Racism and Discrimination</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experiences which are subtle, intangible, difficult to name. Intersectional experiences of discrimination-struggle to disaggregate the experience. Faculty is perceived and perceive themselves as outsider, interloper, and having an unwelcome status within the academy. 	<p><i>Coping Strategies</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confrontation Intentional Ignoring Staying Below the Radar Resignation
<p><i>Physical/Mental Well-Being</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Depression, anxiety, ulcers/GERD, migraines, asthma, and shingles, and high levels of stress and anxiety reported, associated with sleeping problems and stress-related disorders. A greater proportion of women (27.3%) met criteria for depression than men (4.2%). African American women were more likely to be depressed than Puerto Rican and Mexican American women. A greater proportion of men reported their health as excellent/very good compared to women. 	

faculty often have less family of origin economic resources to draw on and in fact report economic and emotional obligations to assist family of origin and extended family further compounding work-family challenges.¹¹⁻¹³

Conclusion

These data capture the experiences of a segment of the current domestic talent pool that is vital to strengthening our higher education institutions. These data lend support to the importance of URM faculty presence in higher education as scholars who can proffer differing social and political perspectives, bring a research focus on critical national issues such as social and economic inequality of U.S. communities, and can strengthen the education of future cohorts of historically underrepresented and first-generation students. Our data show that higher education institutions are perceived as unwelcoming and embedded with invisible and unrecognized discriminatory practices. These practices at both the micro and macro level are associated with occupational stressors that may contribute to premature morbid physical and emotional conditions and patterns of low representation and retention. However, the findings also reveal sources of strength and possibility, both individually and institutionally, and offer a path forward for institutions wishing to address the low presence of URM faculty in higher education. Some preliminary solution driven practices include:

- Valuing the range of forms of scholarship and service¹⁴ including, but not limited to, taking them into account in tenure and promotion criteria and profiling work of URM faculty to the same extent as that of non-URM faculty.¹⁵
- Mentors should provide political guidance in the form of knowledge about invisible institutional norms and role of race and power relations in higher education institutions without demanding assimilation and instead offering deep respect for mentee's potential and scholarship contributions^{16, 6}
- Chairs should have an annual review with early career faculty and provide an assessment of progress and help faculty member to identify important areas of focus and productivity goals as well as "bounded" service for the following year to assure career progress.
- Senior administration, such as the president, provosts, deans, and chairs, must act as advocates and show support for family-friendly policies, and department chairs must be trained on how to implement family-responsive policies and manage with flexibility.¹⁷

These data are not representative of all historically underrepresented faculty as there is racial, economic, and ethnic differences between and among these

groups. Native Americans/American Indians are also significantly underrepresented and a separate paper is being developed on this group. We expect that these data will inform the discourse on diversity such that its practice becomes more democratic and transformative. More transformative diversity practice will culminate in the presence of a highly valued domestic talent pool as well as the inclusion of many voices and experiences in higher education institutions. This inclusion will reflect the true strength of our nation.

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Notes

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