

## **Enhancing Faculty Diversity at Community Colleges: A Practical Solution for Advancing the Completion Agenda**

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### **Abstract**

Community colleges are in the national spotlight. With an increased demand for accountability and responsiveness to community needs, especially in challenging economic times, there is amplified focus on creating and utilizing frameworks to address the expanding needs of their constituencies and in particular to increase college completion rates. In response to addressing the completion challenge, we propose practical strategies to complement existing efforts, primarily through highlighting the advantages of faculty professional development and enhancing the racial/ethnic diversity of faculty in community colleges. With current literature indicating that 40 to 80 percent of community college faculty expecting to retire by 2015, these institutions are poised to address recruitment and retention of faculty that is more reflective of the students they serve as well as of the overall demographic makeup of the communities in which they serve.

*Keywords:* Community College Faculty Development; Diversity; Community College Completion Agenda

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## **Background**

Since their inception, and especially in recent times, community colleges have grown tremendously in number and relevance to the US society (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Robinson, Metoyer, Byrd, Louis & Bonner, 2012) and even more so to those traditionally underrepresented in higher education. For example, these institutions enroll higher percentages of first generation college students, higher percentages of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as higher numbers of older students when compared to four-year institutions (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Additionally, as a segment of higher education, community colleges have proven to be the most responsive to their communities, particularly to their communities' workforce and labor needs (Kasper, 2003). Today, while community colleges play a prominent role in the educational experiences of college graduates, these institutions play an ever-increasingly important role in local community and nation building. Consequently, the significance of the role of community colleges continues to emerge as an important point of discussion in social, political, economic, and educational arenas (National Center for Statistics, 2011a; Snyder & Dillow, 2011; Robinson, et al., 2012). Further, with the current political and economic interests harnessed to the expectations of community colleges in providing economic development, regional economic growth and relevant workforce and labor training (Vega, Yglesias, & Murray, 2010) there is a national implicit demand on these institutions.

Indeed, the salience of the community college in higher education is undisputable and although there was an overall 1% decrease in enrollment rates from fall 2010 to fall 2011, enrollments remain up 21.8% since fall 2007 (Mullin & Phillippe, 2011). Incidentally, some 2 million veterans are expected to take up their educational benefits in the near term (ACE, 2008). Since many veterans prefer community colleges and for-profit institutions because they are more convenient and cater to their needs (Field, 2008), student registration numbers at community colleges are not expected to wane soon. This sets the context for increased accountability for community colleges because as Robinson et al. (2012) indicate, as enrollment figures escalate along with public demand for education, so does political pressure from its stakeholders.

As the demands on community colleges broaden, with external forces being particularly strong during turbulent economic times (Wharton, 1997), these institutions must quickly adapt to current demands while keeping sharp focus on college completion, in spite of great fiscal pressures and stressed budgets. Community colleges have taken note. With the national spotlight on community colleges demanding increased responsibility and accountability for local communities and the nation as a whole, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) joined with five other national organizations to solidify their joint commitment to student completion. According to McPhail (2011), the main findings from the AACC's research efforts centered on key suggestions for advancing the completion agenda. These include:

- Enhance instructional programs.
- Enhance external engagement practices.
- Enhance faculty engagement and professional development for faculty and staff.
- Improve student engagement.
- Enhance student services.
- Strengthen technology and research infrastructure.
- Connect the completion work to the strategic plan.
- Strengthen internal and external communication.
- Build a culture of completion.
- Market the community college. (pp. 3-4)

There is an inherent value in all these suggestions for advancing the completion agenda at community colleges. With that, there is a painfully obvious absence of any effort to increase the diversity of faculty on community college campuses, despite the many benefits of diversifying faculty membership as highlighted in research literature (Gurin, Nagada, & Lopez, 2004; Milem, 2003). On the other hand, Antonio (1998) noted that the value of faculty of color to higher education institutions has not received adequate attention in academic literature.

Consequently, this article takes a bold approach by emphasizing the advantages to be gained, particularly towards advancing the college completion agenda, by focusing on one of the suggestions put forward above--faculty professional development, as well as exploring how enhancing racial/ethnic diversity among community college faculty can support these efforts. In a recent case study based on hiring diverse faculty members in community colleges, Fujimoto (2012) emphasized three reasons to study the lack of racial diversity among faculty at community colleges including: continued evidence of racial discrimination in employment; importance of the “critical mass” in increasing the quality of education and student achievement; and keeping up with effectively serving all students in an “increasingly multicultural and global society” (p. 257) also put forward by Kayes and Singley (2010).

Consequently, the article is divided into three main sections. The first provides an overview of professional development in community colleges while the second discusses the unique dynamics associated with faculty of color in terms of diversity on college campuses. The third section discusses the issue of faculty of color on two-year college campuses. Finally, we provide a summary with implications for practice as it outlines practical suggestions on how to recruit, retain and develop faculty of color in community colleges.

### **Faculty Development in Community Colleges**

President Barack Obama has declared a focus on recovering the United States’ place in the world as having the highest proportion of college graduates by 2020 and has not hesitated to emphasize the role community colleges should play in this mission. In fact, the president has challenged community colleges to educate an additional 5 million students with degrees, certificates, or other credentials by 2020 (AACC, 2011). With declining revenue and increasing enrollments, these institutions have to be strategic in their efforts to show continuous improvement and to maintain positive attention of legislators and funders. As such, community college faculty must be able to deliver program outcomes to meet the required skills and

components of academic disciplines demanded by current and even future employers. Quality improvement is no longer a corporate phenomenon; it has found its way into higher education and one strategy to capitalize on the resources and investments they have in faculty is to harness their unique talents and skills and to promote their professional growth.

American Community Colleges provide a diverse array of services to a diverse population of students which consequently causes the faculty to represent an equally varied combination of credentials, experience levels, demographic characteristics, and ultimately, professional development requirements. Two-year campuses typically provide some combination of these curricular functions: *academic transfer* – providing courses necessary for students to matriculate to four-year universities, *vocational-technical* – preparing students for their careers, *continuing education* – teaching adults who seek lifelong learning opportunities, and *community service* – meeting the needs of the local public (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). With such a mixture of services provided, the faculty teaching the courses comprises a sorted range of academic credentials, professional experience levels, and career interests. However, community college professors must develop their skill sets to be able to meet the needs of the diverse range of learners in their classes and fulfill the egalitarian community college mission (Murray, 2002). Additionally, faculty coming from traditional graduate programs may often find themselves unprepared for the challenges of the open door institution (Rafkin, 2000) and consequently community colleges have found it necessary to host professional development activities for faculty particularly aimed at improving instruction (Burnstad, 1994; Van Ast, 1999).

Faculty development on the two-year campus has historically included a mixed bag of strategies and levels of support. Activities have included seminars led by consultants, paid tuition for graduate-level courses, release time for research on professional interests, and grant funding for faculty travel to conferences, seminars, or conventions (Vineyard, 1994). Murray's (2002) review of literature related to professional development in community colleges produced a surprisingly low return on empirical studies dedicated to the subject. From the extant studies identified, he noted that three primary themes emerged: professional development activities were rarely tied to institutional mission, evaluation of development effectiveness was lacking, and that there is traditionally a very low participation rate in development activities.

A qualitative analysis of community college faculty conducted by Fugate and Amey (2000) found that educational preparation for the instructional career in the early stages of employment was viewed as extremely valuable by two-year college instructors. Most notably, the faculty pointed to their orientation to the college environment as most helpful in preparing them to become more effective teachers. While professional experience was important for vocational-technical faculty, they often sought out opportunities upon entry into the professoriate to enhance their instructional ability. The authors noted that without programs designed to develop their faculty, community colleges risk losing professors to other industries. As such, "faculty development and support activities are vehicles for retention as well as professional growth" (Fugate & Amey, 2000, p. 17).

Additional positive examples of community college faculty development were provided in Murray's (2002) review of literature. He noted that effective development activities demonstrated the following characteristics: the development activities were fostered and supported by the college's administrative leadership, the activities were directly linked to the institution's mission and future goals, there was some form of reward available to faculty who engaged in the activity, successful programs were designed with some level of faculty

participation, and the activity was delivered by a colleague in the faculty member's discipline. The author warns in the article, however, that even these best approaches rarely transfer directly from one campus to another and the development activities must be narrowly tailored for the instructional needs at the individual campus.

Although an overview of the status of part-time (adjunct) faculty in community colleges (see Banachowski, 1996) and the effects of part-time faculty employment on community college completion (see Jacoby, 2006) is outside of the scope of this article (see Banachowski, 1996;), it is important to note that there is a growing reliance of adjunct faculty at community colleges and this further complicates the development and delivery of professional development at these institutions. As a result, it is complex and difficult to identify a single best practice example of how to engage community college faculty in effective development opportunities. This may also help provide an explanation for the shockingly low level of scholarly research dedicated to the subject.

In a simple internet search on professional development programs at community colleges, there is evidence of organized and well developed faculty development programs all led by faculty for faculty (see for example: Lane Community College in Oregon; Lone Star Community College's Higher Education Teaching Institute in Texas; Valencia Community College in Florida). However, the meager amount of research literature on faculty development at community colleges makes it difficult to ascertain the degree to which these kinds of programs are entrenched throughout as well as the lack of data available on the effectiveness of these programs. We acknowledge that faculty development in two-year colleges has been studied for almost forty years (Centra, 1976; Hammons, 1979; Lindquist, 1978; Cryer, 1981), but while recognized as an important function, it is not without problems or challenges including the fact that it has not received an adequate amount of attention in higher education literature.

According to Smith (2007), there are several challenges facing professional development for both adjunct and full-time faculty at community colleges. Much of these challenges are related to resources and time conflicts because of heavy schedules (up to five courses, advising etc.) for full-time faculty and the absence or lack of integration of adjunct faculty as well as conflicts with teaching schedule or other outside career work. Despite these challenges, given the increasing fiscal and political pressure on these institutions, there is an obvious need for faculty development to assist in creating innovative learning opportunities for students and in addressing the completion agenda.

### **Unique Dynamics of Faculty of Color**

There is an increased thrust to recruit faculty of color across varying institutional types for a variety of reasons. These include: the acknowledgment of the benefits of faculty diversity on college campuses (Gasman, Kim, & Nguyen, 2011); the increasing diversity of the student population (Cora-Bramble, 2006); and because a diverse faculty is important in the success of a diverse student body (Hagedorn, Chi, Chepeda, & McClain, 2007). Despite this attention to recruiting faculty of color and regardless of several years of affirmative action policies, faculty members of color are still in the minority in American higher education institutions (Jayakumar, Howard, Allen, & Han, 2009; Astin, Antonio, Cress, & Astin, 1997; Harvey, 2001; Tillman, 2001; Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2008).

Scholars have advanced various reasons for the dismal record of the underrepresentation of faculty of color in higher education institutions. According to the literature, there are too few students of color who are earning doctorates (Myers & Turner, 2004) inadequate numbers of students of color in the pipeline to the professoriate and lack of success once they reach faculty status (Trower & Chait, 2002).

Some of the unique dynamics of faculty of color relate to their experiences of discrimination in academia. There is a heavy burden for faculty of color, especially in predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Some of the challenges relate to the mental and emotional discomfort because of tokenism-- "a situation that handicaps members of racial/ethnic minority groups who find themselves working alone or nearly alone among members of another social category" (Nieman, 2003, p. 100). Additionally, the responsibility to symbolically represent their race (Pollack & Niemann, 1998) burdens faculty of color causing them to be hyper vigilant in their expression and often results in feelings of isolation (Alexander & Moore, 2008). Despite these and other challenges faced by faculty of color, there is hope.

Butner, Burley, and Marbley (2000) posit three fundamental strategies required to navigate the context of being Black faculty at PWIs. We suggest that these strategies are appropriate for faculty of color regardless of ethnic/racial background. These strategies-- collaboration, collegiality, and community-- are useful in ensuring faculty of color can achieve personal and professional success even in institutions where they find themselves among the minority. These strategies are important because there are many benefits to society, institutions and individuals when there is diversity among faculty (Gurin, Nagada, & Lopez, 2004; Milem, 2003). Scholars such as Smith, Turner, Osei-Kofi, and Richards (2004), and Stanley (2006) have shown that a more diversified faculty population promotes an enriched intellectual environment, enhances student counseling and mentoring opportunities, and increases the accessibility to positive role models. Additionally, a more diverse faculty body will attract and retain a more diverse student body.

### **Faculty of Color on Community College Campuses**

According to *The Condition of Education 2012* (NCES, 2012), there are 18 million students enrolled in an institution of higher education; over 40% of these students are enrolled at public or private not-for-profit 2 year institutions. Concurrently, the American Association of Community Colleges (2012) reports that 16% of all community college students are Hispanic, 14% are Black, and 6% are Asian-Pacific Islander. These numbers, give an initial a glimpse of the diversity that exists on the community college campus. Such a varied student population calls for a professoriate that will not only teach courses and the content therein, but also connect with the needs, experiences, and cultures of their students. Bowers (2002) states that there is a plethora of research indicating a significant need for faculty of color at community colleges especially as the number of minority students enrolling at these institutions are growing.

Over the years, the number of faculty of color at community colleges has increased (Bowers, 2002). In many categories community colleges have employed larger percentages of minority faculty than the national average and their 4-year counterparts. Both public and private 2-year colleges possess higher percentages of Black and Hispanic faculty than that of public and private 4-year colleges (NCES, 2011b). Hispanic faculty constitutes 5% and 7% of public and private 2-year institutions and Black faculty are 8% and 13% of the respective institutions.

Nationally, Black faculty are 7%, and Hispanic faculty are 4% of the professoriate. However, there are lower percentages of Asian-Pacific Islander faculty at community colleges than the national and 4-year institutions' averages (NCES, 2011b). The percentage of Asian-Pacific faculty for all institutions in the United States is 6%; for public 4-year institutions it is 8%, and 6% for private 4-year institutions. For public and private 2-year institutions the percentage of Asian-Pacific Islanders is 3% and 4% respectively. Notwithstanding any slight advantage in the diversity of the professoriate at these two-year institutions, there is much room for improvement on diversifying the landscape at these institutions.

More significantly than simply numbers; hiring and retaining faculty of color stand at the core of the future success of community colleges (Kayes & Singley, 2010). Major issues such as student retention and graduation rates can vastly improve if faculty of color are brought in and subsequently nurtured at community colleges. Kayes and Singley (2010) state,

Many of the significant educational issues facing community colleges revolve around diversity. ... At the center of all these issues is diversifying faculty, for, as so much research demonstrates, both minority student achievement and intercultural knowledge and understanding increase when all students learn from culturally diverse and minority faculty. (para. 4)

Lovell, Alexander, and Kirkpatrick (2002) echo parallel sentiments. They believe if hired on a full-time basis, faculty of color will add value and credibility to student recruitment efforts. They become integral members of the community and serve as role models and mentors for students. These professors, also act as recruitment beacons for other professors to consider life at community colleges. Thus, recruiting future colleagues of color becomes more efficient. Additionally, Springer and Westerhaus (2006) share similar sentiments pointing out that longstanding research shows that a diverse faculty and student body lead to great benefits in education for all students.

However, when hired, many faculty of color become maladjusted to the community college environment, perceive it as hostile and eventually depart (Kayes & Singley, 2010). Smith (2011) states that faculty of color usually experience "alienation, cultural taxation, marginalization, discrimination, microaggression and lack of mentoring" (p.143). Especially now as the need to replace community college faculty becomes even more evident, there is a challenge to replace some 40 to 80 percent of the faculty cohort which is expected to retire by 2015 (Vega, Yglesias, & Murray, 2012). Therefore, it is imperative that community colleges find ways to not simply hire faculty of color; but to find, implement and execute processes, modules and programs that will develop and ultimately retain faculty of color. As it seems by all the research and reports that faculty of color are the cornerstones of community college success.

### **Conclusion**

Given the focus of the current White House administration on not only access but also the completion of some college-level education, it will be critical for community colleges to advance their mission of educating a diverse and wide array of citizens. Of particular interest has been increasing the number of people of color who complete a college education. If this is to be the

case, it will be important to create institutional contexts that are attractive and supportive of these students. Studies have indicated that the presence of faculty of color significantly influence the recruitment and retention of students of color; therefore, finding viable ways to keep faculty of color invested in community colleges is critical.

Perhaps the most significant approach in keeping faculty committed is to invest in their professional development. Whether full or part-time, it is incumbent for the institution to invest in cultivating the talent of these faculty members of color by connecting professional development experiences to the day-to-day functioning of the roles as faculty in the two-year setting. Additionally, professional development for the mere purpose of “checking a box” to say that it was completed flies in the face of faculty who are overcommitted and overtaxed with the priorities within and outside of the school context. It is incumbent on those structuring professional development experiences to provide meaningful experiences that directly translate into key outcomes. Funding should be provided to support faculty professional development by way of keeping them current in their respective fields; too often we lose sight of the importance of faculty in the two-year context keeping abreast of the latest developments and research in the respective fields of endeavor. Notwithstanding, the role of all community college faculty is to address the completion agenda. It is the unique perspective and role of faculty of color in the context that have the potential to create a pipeline for students of color from the P-12 to postsecondary setting. It becomes our job to ensure that they are getting the professional development they need to make this goal a reality.

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