



## lastword

# Diversity Within the Academy: Where Is the Balance?

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On most college campuses today, the demographics of the student population are changing, especially with respect to race and ethnicity, resulting in an increasing number of students of color. Within the next few years, nationally, a significant percentage of students in elementary, secondary and postsecondary education will be persons of color.

Diversity among faculty is quite another story; it lags even further behind the student body. Statistics show that “faculty members of color are, at most, 14 percent of the total faculty, and many describe experiences of racial and ethnic bias in the workplace,” according to Caroline Turner in an article in the *Journal of Black Studies*. This information is startling given the positive effect that faculty of color are known to have on the retention and productivity of students of color. Faculty of color tend to be more productive and active with students of color, but without a strong presence of such faculty on campuses, students of color begin to feel alienated and are less likely to persist.

“Students of color often find it difficult to take advantage of the opportunities available to them because they tend to feel alienated or unwanted due to a predominantly White environment,” according to George Kuh and colleagues in a report titled *What Matters to Student Success: A Review of the Literature*. They do not see themselves in the White faces of their professors. In fact, in instances where students begin to focus more exclusively on the environment they are in, they become uneasy and begin to lose sight of their goals, resulting in a negative impact on their success. Therefore, increasing the presence of faculty of color allows students to find mentors that resemble them.

When students see faculty of color, they begin to develop more positive role models that they may not have at home or within their communities. Role models among the faculty provide an impetus and support for students who want to achieve academically.

Statistics show that many families of color have annual incomes below \$30,000 and do not have college-level reading skills. This can result in many students of color lacking the support needed within the home, or cause them to believe that they are doomed to this outcome and may be ineligible to pursue certain careers.

“Young people pursue only what they can imagine as possible. ... All young people know that some people grow up to become physicians, but race and gender-matched physicians provide young people with the information that ‘people like me’ sometimes grow up to become physicians,” says Sa-

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brina Zirkel in a *Teachers College* article.

In a research study, *The Contribution of Faculty of Color to Undergraduate Education*, it was found that “faculty of color were more likely to interact with students, to employ active learning and collaborative learning techniques, to create environments that increase diverse interactions, and to emphasize higher-order thinking activities in the classroom.” Faculty of color give students opportunities to reflect positive attributes of their daily life that they may not have seen otherwise. “Faculty of color also model professional and personal responses to certain situations in which students of color may find themselves in, and similar to situations students of color may also face, that a dissimilar role model cannot provide,” says Zirkel. They may display positive attributes of culturally and ethnically diverse ways of learning, knowing, and living in the world that are accessible to students of all backgrounds. Faculty members of color also provide role models for their faculty and staff colleagues in working with students of color.

E. Thomas Sullivan, the Julius E. Davis chair in law at the University of Minnesota, notes that “a diverse faculty and their many and unique contributions are an essential part of what makes us better to discover, to teach and to learn.” With the rising numbers of students of color at today’s institutions, it is critical that the faculty of color is increased. By doing this, the academy is providing a better environment for all students and allowing them the opportunity to gain knowledge from a variety of backgrounds.

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are failing to provide their students with proportional numbers of faculty of color. The idea, of course, would be to hire a more diverse cadre of full-time faculty.

If institutions are serious about the success of their students of color, “supportive leadership, a willingness to evoke change on campus, careful planning ... and the necessity not to make diversity a numerical goal ... but a process toward better learning and equity in educational outcomes for all students” are needed, according to the Kuh report. If we begin to focus mainly on numbers, our overall goal of improving the livelihood of students can easily be overlooked. We must understand that society is ever-changing and we must conform to it, not against it. ▣

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