



Survival Strategies for Faculty of Color on Predominantly White Campuses

by Dr. Charles Taylor

This article is intended to help faculty of color cope with the pressures and challenges they face at predominantly white institutions and to provide insights on how others have succeeded in similar situations.

Introduction

“Working on predominantly white campuses can be both a unique opportunity,” (Neufeldt, 1990) and “painful isolation,” (Spring, 2004).

“We are required to perform a high-wire act in which we walk and sometimes run while juggling personal and professional selves, balanced on the lines of insecure messages of commitment, support, and understanding,” (Smith and Taylor-Archer, 2006).

Most staff, faculty and administrators of color working on predominantly white campuses can identify with those statements. They were taken from the book, *Our Stories II-The Experiences of Black Professionals on Predominantly White Campuses*. This is a book I would encourage anyone interested in the topic of survival strategies to read. It chronicles the stories of black administrators and faculty who are battling daily to make their campuses more inclusive while having to worry about their own job security and opportunities for advancement.

The stories are heart-wrenching, courageous, but most of all inspiring. I think the lessons that these men and women have shared will help future generations not only cope on these campuses but thrive. *Our Stories* only tell part of the story. There are many others.

Professor Mildred Rice Jordan tells us that it’s possible to go from token, to pioneer, to crusader, (Jordan, 2003). As a token she endured painful years of isolation and frustration. But she survived and now she’s a crusader working to change the complexity of her university. Her message is that you, too, have the strength to survive, the courage to endure, and the power to make a difference. Keep that last phrase in mind because your presence on these campuses is vital to their transformation. You’re forcing them to acknowledge and eventually accept different world views, so don’t surrender. Continue to help create an environment that encourages and supports diversity. Make it better for those who will come after you. I hold to the notion that we should try to pull others up as we climb.

This article doesn’t attempt to list all of the successful coping strategies used by people of color to survive in the academy-that would take an anthology. Instead it focuses on several common tips that continue to surface in the literature. I hope you will find them useful as you negotiate your tenure at a predominantly white institution.



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Find a Mentor

In the absence of mentoring programs, faculty of color are pretty much left on their own to figure out the informal departmental and university norms, (Turner et al., 1999). Other researchers agree that the lack of mentoring is one of the primary reasons for the high attrition rates of faculty of color on predominantly white campuses (Jayakumar et al., 2009).

Few graduate programs offer any formal training of what faculty are expected to do once hired. For instance, while they may have spent considerable time acquiring research skills, new hires may have limited experience delving into departmental politics, or advising students. That's where a good mentor comes in.

Mentors can provide assistance, direction and support. They can be a resource to help you overcome institutional barriers. Seek advice and knowledge from such individuals. If you're fortunate to have tenured faculty of color on your campus, get to know them and learn from their journeys. Perhaps there is no better mentor than someone who has already cleared a path.

Get to Know Departmental and University Policies

One of the biggest challenges that new hires have to deal with is to learn the ropes of departmental and university policies. They must get to know the formal and informal mechanisms of the department quickly if they are to be effective in their positions.

Adams (2002) discusses in detail how new faculty need to learn and adjust to the unique academic life at their institution. Faculty members, have to be part of departmental politics, and take part in decisions that have serious and lasting impact on their careers (Adams, 2002). Therefore, in order for a new faculty member to succeed, they need to have a very clear and precise knowledge of not only the written rules and procedures of the department, but also the unspoken, informal norms that govern the functioning of the department.

Get to know who makes the rules and who gets to bend the rules and why. Learn to read your department and campus climate. Observe and seek the opinions of others before making major decisions. Find out what resources are available and how to access them. Seek professional development funds to improve your skills and knowledge.



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Find a Way to Deal with Racial Bias

Unfortunately Minority faculties still have to deal with racial bias daily on predominantly white campuses. They report less satisfaction with almost every aspect of their jobs as opposed to their white colleagues, (Turner et al., 1999). That shouldn't come as a surprise since our campuses are but a microcosm of the larger society. Some of the racial allegations that are reported at some of our colleges are so egregious it's easy to understand the high attrition rate of faculty and staff of color.

What may be worse is the denial that racism is still a significant problem or that many people work in a racially hostile environment. If you need proof that it's still a problem in this day and age, do a google search using the key words, racial bias and black faculty, or racial bias and Latino faculty and then make up your own mind. Better yet, just ask a faculty or staff person of color on your campus.

How does one deal with the profound disappointment and real damage that racism causes. If I had the answer to that question someone would nominate me for the Nobel Peace Prize. People cope with racism in a variety of ways ranging from ignoring it, to filing lawsuits. In whatever way you handle it, don't let it consume you. Address it when you need to; report it when you must and continue to work with others to create an anti-racist environment. Take care of your health because dealing with racism is very stressful. Racism is systemic and is not going away. People like you who have the courage and character and skill to teach and work in these situations are making the most difference. You are the true role models. You and your anti-racist allies.

Avoid Being Pigeon-Holed

Minority faculty often find themselves undervalued, whether it is in terms of the research methodology they use or the substantive research that they conduct (Turner et al., 1999). Another study found that African American faculty were considered to be intellectually inferior and their research interests deemed less significant than those of the mainstream faculty, Bonner (2006). Such attitudes result in faculty of color often getting relegated to teaching introductory courses; or courses that only relate to their ethnicity or assigned to committees that are considered less important by their peers.

Furthermore, this lack of importance is often passed on to students, who then consider certain professors as doing less tangible and less important scholarship. This leads to faculty of color getting pigeon holed in that they end up teaching primarily ethnic courses. There is nothing wrong with ethnic scholarship; students just need to understand that Minority



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faculty intellectual interests and abilities are broader than the racial dimension assigned to them.

One way to avoid being pigeon-holed is to broaden your perspective. Even if your primary focus is diversity, demonstrate that your research interests are broad. Participate on committees and volunteer for events that are outside your normal interests. Create new courses; teach across disciplines. Remember every time you stretch, you grow. When you're viewed as an asset, usually you'll be treated as one. Demonstrate your value to the institution. Become that expert. Be the best at what you do!

Engage in Networking and Outreach

Get to know campus stakeholders within and without your department. There are many people on campus who can influence your career and make your stay on campus intellectually and socially rewarding. Reach out and introduce yourself. Network! The importance of informal networks in enhancing one's career cannot be overstated, (Sandler, 1992).

Networking can be extended to one's peers and faculty from other departments. It should also include clerical staff, which can provide valuable resources and information about the informal procedures through which things get done in the department. Good relationships with clerical staff can help new faculty wade through administrative and bureaucratic procedures with relative ease as opposed to trying to do it all by themselves. Faculty of color should take advantage of all resources that are available on campus, and try to build connections campus wide.

Get Use to Being Under the Microscope

When you're the only black or Hmong in a department, it can get pretty lonely. Your performance will be constantly scrutinized and there will be times that you'll feel like you're living in a glass house. Expect even the president to review your end-of-class evaluations and talk to your peers about how you're fitting in. It seems like everyone on campus knows you, although you may not have a clue who they are. Be friendly but wise. Some folks are naturally curious but it's up to you to establish limits.

If you share things of a personal nature, don't be surprised if it becomes public news. I've gotten used to being the first; first black dean; first black professor, first black this and that, but I'll never get used to being the only black. Teaching is by its nature a lonely profession. Because of the peer review system for contract renewal, tenure, and promotion, many teachers lack a supportive environment to discuss issues in the classroom and learn from



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each other to hone their teaching skills. Minority faculty in a predominantly white school find it problematic to discuss their teaching issues because of the need to protect themselves and to project an image that everything is fine. That's why effective alliances and a strong support network are vital.

Conclusion

There are numerous factors and explanations that account for the attrition of faculty of color in any academic department. These could be institutional, social or entirely personal. At the end of the day it is a combination of all these that effect the success or failure of any faculty member.

Surviving on predominantly white campuses gets a lot easier when faculty of color have an institutional partner committed to their success. The San Diego School of Medicine's Junior Faculty Development Program is a good example. Junior faculty enrolled in this program received career counseling, help with academic file preparation, were introduced to the institutional culture, received grant writing and pedagogy training as well as mentoring by senior faculty. As a result they observed an increase in the retention of minority faculty from 58% to 80%, (Daley et al. 2006). Wouldn't it be nice if all campuses provided this type of support?

Those schools that create a welcoming campus climate and communicate to the entire campus that diversity is an institutional priority tend to have better retention rates.

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