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Faculty Diversity When Jobs Are Scarce: Debunking the Myths

By Daryl G. Smith

The poor job market for Ph.D.'s in many disciplines is colliding with efforts by colleges and universities to diversify their faculties. Yet some myths are making the process even less successful than it might be - - for example, the notion that institutions must engage in "bidding war" to attract scholars of color. New data on the experiences of Ph.D.'s from the most prestigious universities and fellowship programs undercut this and other common assumptions.

Instead, the data suggest that institutions must take more responsibility for preparing their students to be viable candidates in the job market. And colleges trying to hire faculty members need to re-evaluate how they conduct searches and who is included on search committees. The research also indicates that, even in a time of national backlash against affirmative action, colleges and universities can take educationally sound steps to expand their hiring of scholars from minority groups.

A report from one prestigious research university about its faculty-diversity efforts is typical of the claims that we often hear: "Although a concerted effort has been made, small candidate pools and intense competition between top universities has made growth in faculty numbers extremely difficult."

Many minority Ph.D.'s insist, though, that they still must struggle to find positions.

To investigate these conflicting perceptions, the Ford Foundation and the Spencer Foundation recently financed a national study, which I directed, to investigate the labor market for new faculty members, especially those from minority groups. The study focused on scholars who had completed their Ph.D.'s since 1989 with the support of fellowships from three prestigious program run by the Ford, Spencer, and Mellon Foundations. Of nearly 400 recipients invited to participate, almost 300 completed extended telephone interviews about their experiences.

It turned out that our participants were among the most elite of the new scholars, almost all of them having received both undergraduate and graduate degrees from the country's most selective universities. One third got their Ph.D.'s from Ivy League institutions; over all, 93 percent earned them from highly prestigious research universities. Of all prospective faculty members, they should have had the best experiences in the job market.

To analyze the complex experiences of individuals, my colleagues and I developed eight prototypes, based largely on the number of job offers a person had received and the type of position ultimately accepted. Thirty-five per cent of our respondents were white, 32 per cent Latino, 26 per cent African American, 4 per cent Asian American or Pacific Islander, and 3 per cent American Indian. Forty-three per cent were in the humanities, 26 per cent in social sciences, 20 per cent in physical sciences, 4 per cent in education, and 4 per cent in ethnic or gender studies, with the rest scattered among other fields. About

half were women.

As a whole, the group we studied is doing well. Most respondents are in regular faculty positions (70 per cent) or in postdoctoral positions (17 per cent). Six per cent are in administrative or other non-faculty positions at colleges and universities, 5 per cent are working for companies, and 2 per cent are unemployed. Still, 11 per cent of the total are in positions that we categorized as underemployed -- including one-year faculty appointments, administrative jobs unrelated to the individuals' degrees, and part-time positions.

What's more, the experiences of the people whom we studied contradict several prevalent myths:

** Because so few potential faculty members of color are in the graduate-school pipeline, they are highly sought after.*

This contention is a gross overstatement. Of particular interest is the category that we described as "sought after," which consisted of people who had received personal solicitations from institutions and multiple job offers. Only 11 per cent of the scholars of color (and only 9 per cent of the entire group) fell into this category. Even for the 11 per cent of the minority-group Ph.D.'s which were sought after, that usually meant being called by no more than two institutions -- often not the ones that were the candidates' top choices. Candidates who were sought after could occasionally negotiate such things as teaching loads and research support, but they could rarely negotiate for significantly higher salaries.

Among the rest of the minority-group Ph.D.'s, 14 per cent took the only faculty positions they were offered; 10 per cent were underemployed, taking campus staff or administrative positions that did not utilize their doctoral work; and 20 per cent took postdoctoral positions. The rest had a variety of other experiences, including finally taking jobs in industry or getting job offers only after applying to dozens of institutions.

Commented one participant in the study, a Latina: "I find it a little surprising that I do not regularly get phone calls with regard to recruitment -- we are so few. It's amazing that most universities will say, 'We can't find anybody,' and yet persons like me are not recruited."

Even fewer members of minority groups pursue, Ph. D.'s in the sciences than in other fields, so the few available are in exceptionally high demand.

All of the scientists in the group we studied were from racial- and ethnic-minority backgrounds. Yet more than half of them (54 per cent) we're not offered faculty positions and are pursuing postdoctoral studies. Many now hold their third or fourth such post. In fact, only 20 percent of the scientists in our study now hold faculty jobs. Of the 15 scientists who took jobs in industry, 10 had applied unsuccessfully for faculty posts.

Many of the scientists engaged in postdoctoral study remain concerned about finding academic jobs. One African-American biologist is so worried that he is preparing for alternative careers, in law and elementary-secondary teaching. And one Chicano molecular biologist commented: "There are no jobs. ... Even the small universities and colleges will have 200 to 300 applicants, and the best universities may get over 1,000 applicants per job."

Even considering this difficult job market, though, many of our minority-group respondents felt that campuses did not know how to evaluate or appreciate their potential contributions. Others describe a general lack of commitment to faculty diversity in the sciences.

** After they are hired by one institution, scholars of color routinely are recruited by more-prestigious campuses, creating a revolving door that limits progress for any single institution.*

In fact, the struggle to find positions in the first place and the desire to establish a good career once hired militate against a change of institutions by young Ph.D.'s, particularly if their spouses have found suitable jobs in the region. In several cases, we found that when our respondents had moved within a few years, it was not because they had been offered more money or wanted to move to a more prestigious institution. Rather, it was because of lack of support for the development of their careers or because their spouses could not find appropriate work.

** Campuses are so intent on diversifying the faculty that heterosexual white males have little chance of being hired.*

In reality, 75 per cent of the white male Ph.D.'s in our study had found faculty appointments with which they were quite satisfied (70 per cent of the group as a whole did so). In most of the cases where such candidates had had difficulty finding a regular faculty job, the fields in which they specialized had virtually no openings. The study showed that white men with expertise in the latest scholarship in their disciplines concerning race, class, and gender had a significant advantage in the job market; indeed, many of them fell into our "sought-after" category. A number of these men commented on the resistance they saw to diversifying the faculty. As one said: "There is a lot of talk about diversifying, but when push comes to shove, there is still a lot of hiring of white males."

Thus our study found that the difficult job market was having a dramatic influence on the ability of even elite new Ph.D.'s to find jobs. Although pursuing new types of scholarship helped candidates in certain fields, our data indicate that the most significant factor in an individual's success in finding a faculty job was having a champion who recommended the candidate and who provided support and advice throughout the hiring process.

To our surprise, the champion was as often from the institution doing the hiring as from the one that produced the Ph.D. In many cases, the person who championed an appointment had met the candidate earlier at conferences or other professional meetings.

Graduate institutions with good records in placing their new Ph.D.'s were not simply lucky; they pursued several strategies to achieve that end. Besides informing students about the realities of the job market, they suggested that candidates acquire some job-search skills, including practicing techniques for successful interviews. Such institutions also encouraged students to "network" with faculty members from other institutions by publishing papers and by attending academic conferences and presenting papers. Clearly, such contacts can have powerful payoffs.

By the same token, graduate institutions can hurt their new Ph.D.'s by not encouraging them to be aware of the emerging areas of scholarship within their disciplines. Failure to do so ignores the kind of revised curricula that many campuses have adopted, and thus fails to prepare new Ph.D.'s to teach what many campuses want taught in particular disciplines.

Some institutions also have resisted preparing students for careers outside the academy. Indeed, many of our respondents felt that unless they aimed to pursue traditional academic careers at elite institutions, they would not be taken seriously by the faculty of their graduate programs. This was particularly true in the sciences, where careers outside of the "bench sciences" were not seen as viable options by faculty members.

For institutions trying to hire new Ph.D.'s, our study suggests that they must look carefully at the rather traditional methods they use to conduct searches -- placing ads in journals and newspapers and, sometimes, writing form letters inviting minority-group candidates to apply. Our respondents felt that the most effective recruiting devices were phone calls or personal letters from members of search committees; these showed that someone was familiar with the candidates' areas of expertise and that they would be taken seriously.

Unless members of search committees have access to diverse networks, however, they will continue to have difficulty finding candidates who would be a good fit for particular openings. In turn, this underscores the importance of fellowship programs

that sponsor annual meetings to bring together senior and junior scholars. Such sessions can create connections that can lead to jobs, especially for candidates who would not otherwise be known to members of search committees.

We found that the institutions that were more successful than others in hiring scholars of color had top administrators who were committed to diversity and who were attentive to the search process and the ways in which candidates were treated. Such institutions, our respondents indicated, were able to see the potential scholarly contributions of the candidates (not just their sex and race) and dealt directly with the issue of two-career couples.

It is clear that in the sciences, the tight job market has led more and more institutions to favor candidates who have had years of postdoctoral training in highly specialized areas. Often this increased specialization is not needed for the institution's teaching or research program and serves mainly to bolster its elite image.

This trend has several negative effects: It delays the development of serious careers. It ratchets up what new faculty members require of their institutions in order to continue their research. And it makes it difficult for Ph.D.'s who cannot afford to take postdoctoral positions to find jobs. This can hurt all new faculty members, but it has a particularly severe impact on the hiring of minority-group faculty members.

Some people have argued that tenure hurts institutions' efforts to diversify their faculties by limiting their ability to create new positions. But we found that the scholars of color whom we interviewed viewed tenure as extremely important to them. Many said that the climate on campus for minority-group scholars was still very difficult, and that tenure was needed to give them some protection if they were to speak out on issues that they might see differently from more-established faculty members.

The strategies that I have suggested for institutions preparing Ph.D. candidates and for institutions hiring them will not, of course, solve the underlying problems of the tight job market. But they can help diversify our faculties. It is imperative that universities abandon the prevailing myths about hiring and improve their recruitment methods. Otherwise, we face the possibility that in all too many cases, the rhetoric of diversity will remain just that.

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