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Answer Sheet

It's 2015. Where are all the black college faculty?

By Valerie Strauss November 12, 2015

Colleges and universities talk up a blue streak about their commitment to diversity, in their student bodies and faculty. But when it comes to actually hiring black faculty at most schools, the commitment doesn't match the rhetoric. The recent racial trouble at the University of Missouri, leading to the resignation of the president, underscores this reality. Here's a piece on this issue, by Leslie T. Fenwick, dean of the Howard University School of Education and a former visiting scholar in education at Harvard University, and H. Patrick Swygert, president emeritus of both Howard University and the State University of New York (SUNY) at Albany.

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“We demand that by the academic year 2017-2018, the University of Missouri increase the percentage of black faculty and staff campus-wide to 10 percent.”

So reads the fifth item on the list of demands written by the Legion of Black Collegians at the University of Missouri. It's an uncomfortable and unacceptable shame – nearly two decades into a new millennium – while scientists seek travel to Mars and crash test self-driving cars – the work to integrate college and university faculty and administration remains undone.

If the University of Missouri abides by the Legion of Black Collegians demands and is able to increase the percentage of black faculty to 10 percent, the university will become a national exemplar.

A 2007 *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (JBHE) report – the most recent such study conducted on this issue – shows that few of the nation's traditionally white institutions (TWIs) had achieved such a level of diversity in the faculty ranks.

In fact, among top-tier state and private universities, the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa reported the highest percentage of black faculty at 6.8 percent. By way of comparison, here are the statistics on black

faculty at other universities: Emory (6.8 percent), Columbia University (6.2 percent), University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (5.9 percent), University of Michigan (5.4 percent), Northwestern (4.6 percent), University of Virginia (3.8 percent), The Ohio State University (3.7 percent), Harvard (3.1 percent), University of California, Los Angeles (3 percent), Yale University (2.9 percent), and University of California, Berkeley (2.7 percent).

While the report was from nearly a decade ago, it somberly concluded that with the pace of change, “*it will take about a century and a half for the percentage of African-American faculty to reach parity with the percentage of blacks in the nation’s population.*” And indeed, at some of those schools, those percentages haven’t moved much. For example, at the University of Virginia, blacks today account for 3.1 percent of all faculty, according to a university spokesman. That’s down a bit from nearly a decade ago. At Harvard, according to the [university website](#), in 2009 the faculty included 47 blacks. In 2013, that number had risen to only 56, out of more than 1,570.

Of course, the majority of the nation’s tenured black faculty are at historically black colleges/universities (HBCUs). Most earned their doctoral or other terminal degrees at traditionally white institutions, but despite these credentials are not vigorously recruited or advanced into the ranks of tenured faculty in large numbers at TWIs. Remarkably, 96 percent of black tenured faculty are at HBCUs (even though HBCUs comprise only 3 percent of the nation’s 3000 colleges and universities). If HBCUs disappeared, so would most of the nation’s black academics.

The myth that black PhDs just don’t exist supports anemic institutional efforts at TWIs to recruit and tenure black faculty. A 2012 National Center for Education Statistics report indicates an almost 43 percent increase in the award of PhDs to blacks from about 7000 in 1999-2000 to slightly over 10,000 in 2009-2010. Yet, the average increase in black faculty appointments at TWIs during the same period was about 1.3 percent. Sadly, the percentage of black faculty at the nation’s TWIs averages out to a dismal 4 percent, today.

The nation’s college students benefit from learning from diverse faculty. Such interaction teaches students that *all* people can serve as models of intellectual authority and can provide students a visceral antidote to the myth of black intellectual inferiority.

Additionally, more diversity in the faculty ranks may offer a new range of innovative thinking and research. This notion is best summarized by astronomy professor John A. Johnson in a 2015 interview he did with Harvard University’s *Crimson Magazine*, “I sincerely believe that there are problems I can solve

differently because of my unique background.” Johnson, an African-American in the physical sciences, became the first African-American to receive tenure from Harvard in the physical sciences in 2013.

The best plan for increasing the number of black faculty is not convening a new diversity committee or appointing another vice president for diversity, it’s hiring more black presidents, deans and department chairs at TWIs.

Shockingly (with the exception of HBCUs), most of the nation’s colleges and universities do not have any black deans or department chairs and fewer than 30 of the 3,000 are led by black presidents. This consistent lack of diversity around the leadership table reinforces an unspoken and dangerous assumption that only white males are fit to lead. It’s time for this operating assumption to die.

At a time when women constitute almost 60 percent of U.S. college students, and minorities will soon exceed 50 percent of the U.S. population, the Academy must accelerate progress and make way for a vital American future.

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