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## The Role of Academic Departments in Diversity Issues



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"Is the attainment of diversity in the university setting the responsibility of the faculty or of the upper administration?"

Talk about diversity is ever present. Is the attainment of diversity in the university setting the responsibility of the faculty or of the upper administration? One thing that I have noticed about universities over the years is that the rhetoric of diversity comes mostly from the administration. University administrators espouse the necessity of diversity--having the university be representative of this country.

However, with all of this rhetoric, the underrepresentation of minorities among the mathematics, science, and engineering (MSE) faculty has barely changed over the years. When we look further at the MSE graduate student population at those universities that produce this nation's university faculty, we find again an appalling lack of minority students. With all of this expressed concern for diversity one has to wonder why there has been so little progress made in achieving diversity.

### The Need for More Minority Faculty

Several years ago I was visiting a university in the Southwest. This university is located in a city with a substantial Chicano population, and as is typical of most universities, there was almost no Chicano presence among the faculty in the MSE departments. On this visit I pointed out to the head of the mathematics department that his department currently had no Chicano faculty and they had not hired a Chicano mathematician in more than 20 years. He replied, "Why do we need one?"

I believe that the department head's reply is emblematic of the attitudes that exist among faculty members at our universities. MSE departments can be isolated units,

burdened as they are with the many responsibilities that are involved in running a department. With almost no minority presence in a department, there is no one in the department that is pushing for diversity.

Of course, the university administration does make some noises about the need to diversify, but who listens to them? If departments were listening, change would have occurred long ago. If the ones who espoused diversity were the same ones who made the hiring decisions, then one might expect to see results, but this is not the case. It is not the upper administration that makes faculty hiring decisions, it is the departments, and herein lies the problem. Departments send out the job announcements, collect the applications, and discuss among themselves who to bring in for an interview. It is departmental members who contact their friends to let them know of employment opportunities. There is a strong disconnect between the ones who espouse diversity and the ones who make the decisions that impact diversity.

### **Diverse Faculties--A Rarity**

And what's in it for a department to have a strong minority presence? Are minorities better researchers, will they bring in more research grants? This, after all, is the coin of the realm when it comes to establishing a strong and recognized department. If the primary goal of a department is to produce publishable research then what does increased diversity do for a department? I think that departments have answered this question for themselves and their hiring practices over the years have implemented their answer. Only the perceived research potential of the candidate is important in making that hiring decision.

If our departments were in fact research institutes, supported by the state and federal governments to accomplish only this function, then perhaps such departmental attitudes could be defended. But departments are not autonomous units (although they sometimes behave as if they were). They function as part of the university and universities exist to educate the children of this country, all of the children of this country. The departments are representatives of the university to the public.

When students arrive in a university, they associate themselves with a department and are taught by faculty members within that department. It is difficult to find sincerity in the university's thinking that minorities can succeed and are welcome into the university community when no minority voices from the department can carry this message to the minority student population. Will the departments be part of the solution to achieving diversity or are they part of the problem?

### **Recognizing the Problem**

Addressing diversity issues is a difficult problem. The fact that these problems are difficult does not mean that they are intractable. It does mean that we should first of all recognize that there is a problem here and this problem deserves attention by departmental units. That attention should come with an appropriate allocation of resources. Of course, upper level administrators must play a critical role in this, as they control resources.

One of the first things that an administrator should ask of a department is baseline data: What has been the minority representation in a department over the years, and by this I mean the faculty and graduate and undergraduate students? If minority representation is low, then what steps are being taken to address the pipeline issues? If no serious steps are being taken, then perhaps university resources should be

allocated to other departmental units that are more in step with university goals in regards to diversity. But what are the university's goals in terms of diversity?

I would like to make the following suggestion to upper level administrators. Don't just tell the public about your concern for diversity. Tell your departments! Impress upon your departments that the mission of the university is to diversify its workforce at all levels and that departments are responsible for achieving the goals that the university has set forth. It is up to the upper administration to formulate an answer to the question, "Why do we need one?" and to use that answer to convince departments that educating our children is a priority.

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