

Creating Racially and Ethnically Diverse Faculties¹

We must change hiring practices to produce racially and ethnically diverse faculties, argues Estela Mara Bensimon.

By [Estela Mara Bensimon](#) March 26, 2018

The national movement to increase the proportion of Americans who have postsecondary credentials is quite visible and laudable. As Lumina Foundation, the foremost champion of this idea, argues, learning beyond high school increases American talent and is essential for reducing inequality in our society. But I worry that the steps that states and institutions are now taking -- such as setting ambitious goals for attainment, reforming the focus on remediation in higher education and creating clear pathways for postsecondary students to earn a certificate or degree -- aren't enough. Too often, they're datacentric approaches that focus on structures, not people, to achieve more equitable outcomes. It's hard to see how a predominantly white faculty that isn't prepared to teach students from a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds can achieve equity with these practices alone.

What's noticeably missing from postsecondary attainment goals, now set by 40 states, is an effort to change the racial culture of colleges and universities generally -- and classrooms more specifically. These gaps make it unlikely that our state's postsecondary system can reach the goal of 60 percent of our residents age 25 to 44 earning high-quality credentials by 2025.

The only way we will successfully close the racial equity gaps produced by our higher education system when it comes to black, Latino, Native American and marginalized Asian-American students is to address racial imbalance on our faculties. Many such minority students are poor and the first in their families to attend college, and they are too often blamed for their own difficulties navigating our complex systems. We need to reform faculty hiring systems to elevate candidates of color who also show the qualities of "[equity-mindedness](#)."

¹ *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/03/26/new-policies-are-needed-recruit-racially-and-ethnically-diverse-faculties-opinion?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=a95ada1361-DNU20180111&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-a95ada1361-197631917&mc_cid=a95ada1361&mc_eid=6c0afdb612>

The [racial imbalances](#) between students and faculty members are extremely troubling. In [California community colleges](#), Latinos represent approximately 45 percent of students, but only 15 percent of full-time faculty members are Latino. Meanwhile, only 26 percent of students, but 60 percent of full-time faculty members, are white.

Recognizing that the California Community College system has made a commitment to close equity gaps by 2027 in “[Vision for Success: Strengthening the California Community Colleges to Meet California’s Needs](#),” we recently hosted an Institute for Equity in Faculty Hiring at Community Colleges. The two-day institute, which will be repeated this month, convened more than 200 community college representatives from 20 campuses around the state to develop a set of practices and processes to embed equity-mindedness into their campuses’ faculty hiring processes and policies.

The Center for Urban Education surveyed summit participants on their faculty hiring processes and found that 84 percent of respondents said their institution faces challenges when hiring faculty of color and their hiring processes are not designed to yield a diverse faculty.

In response to those problems, the center created a set of tools and practices to achieve racial equity in faculty hiring. Our goal is to help institutions identify candidates who reflect the racial and ethnic backgrounds of students and who are committed to closing racial equity gaps and have the knowledge and expertise to do so.

Too often, people throw up their hands at the idea of hiring faculty members who are black, Latino, Native American and Asian, saying things like “none apply” or “they get better jobs.” Another frequent complaint is that there are no such candidates in the pipeline. Some public institutions are convinced they can’t compete for talent against better-resourced private ones. They rarely view the problem as having to do with how they go about hiring or how their racial beliefs

about quality, competence and fit are the root cause of the whiteness of the faculty.

But we put inquiry tools into the hands of practitioners so they can study how they do things and see for themselves that whiteness in hiring is being produced by their practices, as well as their implicit bias. Among the barriers to such hiring is a culture of collegiality that makes honest discussions of the racial gaps on the faculty difficult to have.

We found this at California Lutheran University, a private, Hispanic-serving four-year institution, where the center supported efforts to change faculty hiring practices. Faculty members complained that a “culture of niceness” was a major obstacle to confronting practices and language that create a negative environment for minority faculty members. Black and Latino faculty who experienced discrimination and microaggressions were reluctant to confront their colleagues or administrators because they were aware that conflict avoidance was highly valued. The “culture of niceness” made it very difficult for them to speak up and call out practices that undermined the college’s espoused diversity values. Those who dared risked being viewed as troublemakers. One of the consequences was that black and Latino faculty engaged in self-imposed silence about racialization in how things were done at the university, making it all the harder to bring about change.

Cal Lutheran’s situation is pervasive in higher education. What’s unusual was its leaders’ response. An interdisciplinary group of 18 faculty members, as well as the provost and a dean, engaged in a yearlong transformational process. They were trained by staff and doctoral students led by Lindsey Malcom-Piqueux, the Center for Urban Education’s associate director of research and policy, to fill new roles on search committees as “equity agents” with voting power. This core group of change agents was also taught about the ways in which racial bias is manifested in hiring procedures and language.

For example, a deep assessment of the hiring guidelines conducted by the center uncovered many obstacles. Job announcements were written in conventional language that did not mention that Cal Lutheran is a Hispanic-serving institution. There was no mention of valuing faculty members who engaged in culturally relevant approaches or those who could teach and mentor first-generation college students and students of color. Now, it's routine for job announcements to require applicants to demonstrate commitment and success working in a diverse and multicultural community; to ask them to submit statements about mentoring underrepresented students with a special focus on black, Latino and Native American students; and to require them to submit a teaching philosophy that explains how they plan to engage and interact with such students.

The results were remarkable. During the 2016-17 academic year, Cal Lutheran filled 11 new faculty appointments and one deanship. Two-thirds of the hires were people of color, including two Latinos, two blacks and three Asian-Americans, in addition to a Latina who was hired as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Institutions should establish programs to train and certify faculty equity agents and distribute two for each search committee. Equity agents can review position announcements and draft questions that focus on candidates' cultural competence and knowledge of strategies to provide direct support to underrepresented students. They can monitor the conduct of interviews and identify practices and expectations that disadvantage nonwhite candidates. Institutions can also require that all search committee members go through a training to learn how to do equity-focused hiring; provide all search committee members with evidence-based information about the educational benefits that students derive from having same-race/ethnicity professors; and document the search process by keeping data by race and ethnicity of applicants, short-list candidates and offers.

As Cal Lutheran's results demonstrate, this problem can be solved. Indeed, if we're to reach our goals for postsecondary attainment, it must be.

Bio

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