

Women of Color Faculty at the University of Michigan:
Recruitment, Retention, and Campus Climate

Executive Summary

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Aimee Cox, PhD, Research Investigator
Center for the Education of Women
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

They brought in all of these wonderful young scholars, black, Asian, you know...but mostly African Americans and then it was like there was virtually no interest in hearing what they had to say about the direction of the department and absolutely no interest in engaging their work. It was like, 'Okay, you make us look good, we appear diverse, now be quiet.' And then, there was all of this incredulity when these assistant professors started to leave and go to other universities. I had to leave too; there was too much hypocrisy and no commitment to the scholarship and work we were doing.

-Former University of Michigan Woman of Color Faculty Member

I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for my chair A supportive chair who really understands the importance of diversity as more than just having black and brown bodies around – who understands the importance of supporting diverse scholarship and alternative methodologies for approaching scholarship – can really impact how the faculty as a whole responds to work that is not part of what is seen as mainstream work in the social sciences. The chair has to have integrity, be committed to the ideals of diversity and really want to see junior women of color do well.

-Current University of Michigan Woman of Color Faculty Member

The statements above highlight the experience and insights of women of color faculty at the University of Michigan. As the first quote illustrates, all too often lack of sincere commitments to diversity beyond the superficial markers of color and gender difference coalesce with enduring institutionalized inequities to create an environment where marginalization and invalidation transcend mere social discomfort to ultimately prevent both scholarly growth and personal well-being.

In contrast, as the second quote illustrates, sensitive and courageous leadership can make a real difference in the experiences of women of color faculty. In the five-year period between 2001 and 2006, women of color faculty members at the University of Michigan have had an average attrition rate of five women per year. In addition to this troubling rate, women of color are increasingly voicing their discontent and demanding that the University be accountable to its mission of excellence, diversity and inclusion. Through ongoing work with faculty members in the Women of Color in the Academy Project (WOCAP) and public forums where women of color faculty have spoken out about their experiences on campus, it has become apparent that creating institutional change will require listening closely to these women's stories.

There is a large and growing body of literature in higher education that speaks to the status of women and minority faculty (Aguirre, 2000; Aguirre et. al, 1993; Antonio, 2002; Baez, 2000; Thompson and Louque, 2005). These various studies, based on research at large public institutions as well at smaller private colleges, indicate that overall, when compared with their majority peers, minority and women faculty are less satisfied within their institutions and feel as if they neither “fit” nor are welcomed within their departments.¹

This study seeks to understand, through the experiences and insight of women of color faculty members themselves, what the University as a whole can do to improve their rates of recruitment and retention. The data gathered for this project help to demonstrate that women of color faculty play a significant role in contributing to the University of Michigan’s reputation for cutting-edge scholarship and excellence in teaching. Therefore, positively impacting the quality of life for women of color faculty will inevitably improve the educational and social environment for all University faculty, students and administrators across distinctions of race and gender. Many of the concerns and challenges identified by the women of color faculty in this study mirror those of junior faculty in general. This does not mean, however, that these challenges have the same impact on women of color as they do the majority population of junior faculty.

This study frames these women’s narratives with the relevant literature on minority, female and junior faculty, as well as within the current political and social climate following the passage of the anti-affirmative action legislation, Proposal 2. The women of color interviewees assert that “diversity-averse” students and faculty view Prop 2’s passage as a legal symbol that sanctions the disrespect and de-legitimization of women and minorities. Women of color will inevitably feel the brunt of this diversity backlash, and the University of Michigan must be poised to deal with this shift in the social and political climate within its classrooms.

Twenty-eight women of color faculty members were interviewed for this study. These 28 women include 21 current faculty members and 7 former faculty members spanning the range of schools and disciplines from the business and medical schools to the social sciences and humanities. Current faculty members were recruited from faculty in their third and fourth years in order to investigate the critical time period after the third-year review and prior to the tenure review. The term ‘women of color’

¹ For a helpful overview of the history of and trends within research interests in minorities and women in higher education see, Alberto Aguirre, Jr., “Women and Minority Faculty in the Academic Workplace: Recruitment, Retention and Academic Culture,” *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports* v. 27 (no. 6, 2000): pp. 1-62.

encompasses faculty members who self-identified as African American, Black, Asian, Asian American and Latina.

FINDINGS

Not surprisingly, the study found that the factors that have the greatest impact on women of color faculty's satisfaction at the University of Michigan are housed within their particular departments and units, with the chair holding a significant amount of power in terms of establishing and regulating the departmental climate. The primary factors women of color identify as detrimental to their professional success, as well as their ability to fully contribute to their departments, fall under the two broad categories of **work** and **social well being**.

The category of **work** includes concerns related to research, teaching and service expectations such as:

- 1. The Devaluation of Scholarship and Intellect*
- 2. Burdens of Departmental Service and Committee Work*
- 3. Impossible Workloads Created by Joint Appointments*
- 4. Lack of Transparency in Processes for Tenure and Promotion*
- 5. Unbalanced Distribution of Student Mentoring*
- 6. Hostile Classrooms/Environments*

Included under the umbrella of **social well being** are two primary concerns:

- 1. Personal and Work Life Balance*
- 2. Social Marginalization*

Added to these challenges is the understanding shared by many of the women of color faculty interviewed that they have little or no recourse to address issues and behaviors that are racist, sexist or just plain offensive because they fear that they will be unfairly penalized for standing up for themselves. The quote below from Tamara, a faculty member in one of the professional schools, captures this fear. Tamara discusses why she chose not to confront a senior faculty member who offended her with a racist comment:

So, you can't go off. You'd be crazy to go off. You just smile and say no and you move on because you don't want to be the angry black woman. It could mean not getting tenure...even if you've been offended.

Women of color faculty, especially African American women, realize that any time they take a decisive stand or make a bold statement they are in danger of being forever labeled “troublemakers,” “angry black women,” “hostile,” or “difficult.” So, the choice becomes swallowing your pride or committing career suicide. Consequently, women of color must endure the physical, emotional and spiritual health effects of this impossible decision.

The complete report of this study seeks to share the stories of Tamara and other women to increase the University community's understanding of “the stories that remain untold.”

The following recommendations are based on the suggestions of the twenty-eight women of color faculty members who participated in this study, along with insight gleaned from ongoing discussions with the Women of Color in the Academy Project's steering committee. Women of color faculty emphasize the importance of not placing the responsibility for supporting and implementing these initiatives with the usual suspects: underrepresented minorities, women and the faculty, staff and administrators already engaged in diversity work. All members of the University community, but especially those in positions of visibility, influence and power, must be held accountable for creating change within the University of Michigan. In advocating for women of color faculty, these recommendations inevitably support the excellence and prosperity of the University as a whole.

- Mentoring
- Recruitment
- Cluster Hires
- Chair Training
- Management of Joint Appointments
- Tenure Transparency
- Formal Acknowledgement and Rewards for Faculty Mentoring
- Hostile Classrooms: Chair Training and Official Statement of Intolerance for Disrespectful and Threatening Behavior
- Support for Family and Work Life Balance
- Social Networking and Support for Single Women of Color Faculty
- Counter-offers: Acknowledgment of the Value of Women of Color Faculty

Students and faculty members at the University of Michigan in increasing numbers are beginning to see *diversity* as a superficial, meaningless term that functions as a tool of institutional bureaucracy. Supporters of institutional change, as well as those seeking to maintain the status quo, seem to have a very superficial understanding of the benefits of a diverse educational setting. There need to be consistent and effective forums to address how the concept of “diversity” is being thought of, discussed and implemented across the University of Michigan’s campus, and what both the smaller concrete and larger ideological goals are for achieving diversity.

If diversity education is to be effective, individuals holding positions of leadership within the University organizational structure must model the vision for an inclusive environment that celebrates diversity as more than benign difference. This will require all university constituents, but especially those with decision-making authority, to acknowledge their own positions of privilege and power and be willing to fearlessly address the structural racism, sexism and overall xenophobia that undermines the University of Michigan’s mission for academic excellence. The academy, and the U of M more specifically, must “continue to be a site for political struggle and radical transformation.”²

The following recommendations from the women of color faculty mirror the core recommendations presented by Waltman and Hollenshead in *A Collection of Suggested Procedures for Improving the Climate for Women Faculty Members* prepared for the ADVANCE Departmental Transformation Grant at the University of Michigan. The ADVANCE recommendations fall under the categories: *Transparency*, making all kinds of information available and easy to find; *Uniformity*, leveling the playing field and dealing equitably with all faculty; and *Assistance*, attending to the needs of faculty by offering mentoring and other types of help.³

RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Mentoring

Require all departments to develop and be held accountable for formal mentoring structures for all junior faculty members.

² Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. (2003). *Feminism Without Borders*. Durham: Duke University Press.

³ This best practices document is based on interviews and focus groups with both male and female faculty at the University of Michigan who were asked to describe the initiatives that could contribute to a supportive environment that facilitates academic career success.

From the perspective of women of color at the University of Michigan, the informal, behind the scenes information passed through what many call “the old boys’ network” is one of the most valuable resources in gaining promotion, tenure and generally establishing a strong academic career. The discrepancies between the mentoring received by white male faculty and minority faculty have been well documented. Women of color at the U of M express that even within departments where there are established formal mentoring programs, they have to work hard at actively seeking the mentoring they need.

We recommend that all departments establish formal mentoring structures. Formal mentoring should include mentoring teams comprised of senior faculty members who may provide a variety of perspectives to meet the varied academic, social and political needs of women of color faculty. Based on this research with women of color junior faculty at the U of M, formal mentoring should also include:

- Teaching support,
- Departmental service expectations,
- Decoding of the unspoken, unwritten departmental rules, and
- Preparation for tenure.

Additionally, mentoring women of color faculty should not be relegated only to female faculty or faculty of color. From the perspectives of many women of color, what matters more than the race and gender of the mentor is the mentor’s willingness to understand the unique burdens of female faculty of color, willingness to advocate on their behalf, a sensitivity to departmental micro-politics and the ability to communicate openly about issues of race and gender. Margaret, a faculty member in one of the professional schools, explains the critical difference a supportive mentoring environment makes in her experience as part of the junior faculty.

I think one of the other things that also makes this a good department, besides the research being very close to what I do and having a lot of resources, is that the department is very nurturing. They really nurture junior faculty to a very advanced extent. Senior faculty seem to feel as if it is their role to take on extra departmental service so that junior faculty are not overburdened during the pre-tenure years.

II. Recruitment

Prepare the immediate pipeline: Develop postdoctoral opportunities to support the advancement of excellent women of color scholars.

Departments, especially those in the social sciences and humanities that typically do not hire post-docs, should target outstanding Ph. D. recipients to bring into their departments in two-year post-doc positions. The targeted Ph.D.s would be candidates who demonstrate, through their research, teaching and outreach activities, that they are committed to enhancing diversity at the University of Michigan. The President's Postdoctoral Fellowship Program at the University of California provides a long-established, successful model for this type of initiative. The focus of the postdoctoral program would be the positive diversity outcomes candidates would bring to the university through research, community work and theoretical engagements that are typically marginalized within the academy. There would undoubtedly be a high number of women of color in this category.

During the two-year post-doc period, these individuals would be given time to publish articles, revise their dissertations and develop a book prospectus, become familiar with the particular structure and expectations of their home department, and receive structured, consistent mentoring from other faculty members. In addition, the cohort of post-docs across departments could meet on a regular basis to offer support to one another and attend professionalization seminars and other educational forums to prepare for the cultural shift from graduate student to faculty member. At the end of the two years, the post-docs would be well positioned to be on the tenure track.

III. Cluster Hires

Recruit several faculty members at one time whose work lies outside of the department's traditional core curriculum

Search committees must consciously work to recruit several candidates at one time whose work lies outside of the traditional core curriculum in a given department. In this way these candidates, typically underrepresented minorities, may be afforded the opportunity to develop the type of built-in professional and social support system that majority faculty are privileged to enjoy. This, in turn, may reduce feelings of tokenism and isolation among these individuals (often women of color) who can become marginalized within their new departments.

IV. Chair Training

The University's overall commitment to diversity and inclusion needs to be systematically integrated into training for each chair or division head so that it becomes an established value system within each department.

A key component of this training must include expanding the notion of diversity to exemplify much more than visible difference or variations in phenotype. In order for women of color faculty to experience full inclusion within their departments, diversity must include respect for and acknowledgement of differences in style and self-presentation. This means that the “traditional” ways of operating, which are usually code for either behaving within the stereotypical expectations of one’s gender and race and/or imitating white male behavioral styles, should not be the norms under which faculty are assessed, evaluated and promoted.

Respecting diversity must also include valuing the diversity in thought, methodology and scholarship produced by women of color faculty. Across all 28 interviews, each woman of color identified that knowing her research is valued and respected by her chair and colleagues is one of the most significant factors in determining her overall satisfaction with her department. The clarification of diversity’s meaning and implementation within the actual operating culture of each department requires each chair to embody these values and effectively communicate her or his expectations to the entire department. Attending to the complexity of diversity in this way will also alleviate the perception of many of their colleagues that women of color benefit departments by adding visible diversity on committees and service oriented departmental initiatives. Michelle, a faculty member in the social science, captures the importance of this recommendation in her statement below:

I wouldn't still be here if it wasn't for my chair. I don't know if people realize how much a good chair can turn a bad department around. Or, should I say an inhospitable department around. A supportive chair who really understands the importance of diversity as more than just having black and brown bodies around – who understands the importance of supporting diverse scholarship and alternative methodologies for approaching scholarship can really impact how the faculty as a whole responds to work that is not part of what is seen as mainstream work in the social sciences. The chair has to have integrity, be committed to the ideals of diversity and really want to see junior women of color do well.

V. **Managing Joint Appointments**

Upon hire, the chairs of each department where the faculty member holds an appointment must meet with the new hire to establish reasonable departmental service obligations that will not impede the junior faculty member’s research and publishing goals. In addition, there must be clear tenure guidelines that establish coherence across departments.

Although many women of color attest to the positive aspects of holding joint appointments, such as getting feedback on their work from a wide range of colleagues, being engaged in lively discussions, establishing generative collaborations, and having the freedom to develop new courses, taking advantage

of these assets becomes impossible when the administrative requirements from each department become overwhelming. The answer, as one woman of color suggested, is not to turn all joint appointments into single appointments but to make the work required from each department manageable. In this way, women of color will have the time to actually produce the innovative research that brought them to the University in the first place and contribute to the intellectual vibrancy of Michigan's interdisciplinary academic culture. When a woman of color faculty is hired as a joint appointee, the chairs of each department must work together to concretely define the expectations and terms of her appointments in a way that allows her to have time to focus on research and teaching. On an annual basis, the joint appointee and the department chairs should meet to assess how the terms of the joint appointment are working and to make any necessary adjustments. Brenda, a current faculty member with a joint appointment, expresses the strain and negative impact that joint appointments can create:

It gets very demanding and the negative things that come along with it are not recognized. A lot of the labor that goes on gets lost and it can push people out. If I leave this university, I am going to a place where I have one appointment. I think the joint appointment is one of the biggest weights in my life here.

VI. Tenure Transparency

Each department should generate a comprehensive manual for tenure track junior faculty to supplement training on the topics of tenure attainment and departmental and university expectations as part of ongoing, structured junior faculty group mentoring. Chairs must also be trained in how to effectively communicate the tenure process to faculty and broadly distribute information regarding critical issues that affect tenure.

Time and time again, women of color report that the tenure expectations within their department are vague, inconsistent, and shrouded in secrecy. Often key requirements are not written down or verbally communicated in a formal way, but discovered through the faculty grapevine or stumbled upon randomly. This haphazard way of disseminating and gathering information about the tenure process only insures women of color's failure in settings where their marginal status makes receiving the necessary information even more difficult than for their non-minority junior faculty peers. Angela, a faculty member in the social sciences, makes a strong statement about the unacceptability of the secrecy and mystery surrounding the tenure process and what this means for outcomes associated with women of color faculty:

Nobody should be surprised when tenure comes up. If you don't get tenure, that should not be a surprise to you, but for so many women of color it is, unfortunately.

VII. Formal Acknowledgement and Rewards for Student Mentoring

Women of color faculty have a disproportionate share of the advising workload in departments. An official system for course reduction should be implemented for those faculty members who demonstrate a commitment to carrying out the informal teaching, advising and mentoring of students not formally assigned to them as advisees. Departments could also create additional opportunities to support the research of women of color so that they are not penalized for their advising and other service responsibilities. Tamara, a faculty member in one of the professional schools, discusses the difficulty of mediating the significant time commitment mentoring students requires with the tremendous importance of mentoring, while lamenting the fact that women of color faculty bear an overwhelming amount of this responsibility:

...of course, it also takes up a lot of time when you could be writing. And, it's not one student, it's every black student who wants to come talk to you about something. It can be time intensive. Having more black people would mean we could spread it out...nobody cares at all. You don't get credit for that.

VIII. Hostile Classrooms: Chair Training and Official Statement of Intolerance for Disrespectful and Threatening Behavior

Women of color are particularly vulnerable to experiencing both physical and verbal threats to their authority in the classroom from students who do not perceive them to be legitimate scholars or educators. The factors that contribute to hostile classroom environments for women of color faculty include the inability to assert control and authority without being labeled angry or their behavior deemed inappropriate; student expectations that they will be overly nurturing and act as mother figures students' inexperience with women of color in positions of authority; and the inverse power relationship demonstrated through student evaluations and complaints.

Chairs should be trained to be attuned to the specific concerns of women, especially women of color in the classroom and develop concrete and effective ways for advocating on behalf of women of color when they are confronted with a hostile classroom environment. In addition, departments must consider the sensitive nature of many of the subjects that women of color in particular teach around issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality when assigning course requirements for students and when creating mandates for faculty to grow courses from seminars to large lecture classes.

We recommend also that each year the President send a message to all students expressing the University's commitment to creating an environment of inclusion and respect and calling upon students

to honor these expectations. We understand that this message must be carefully worded and its intentions made clear so that it does not imply the infringement of free speech and critical debate so essential to a vibrant academic community.

Rita, a faculty member with a joint appointment, highlights the unique challenges women of color must contend with in the classroom environment:

A huge concern is the challenges that women of color face in the classroom. And it is not so much the challenges to their authority that we experience from male students both black and white, but it is the way that they are handled institutionally that needs to improve.

IX. Supporting Family and Work Life Balance

The University should publicize existing policies and implement policies which are under review that are intended to improve the quality of life for faculty and student families on campus.

Women of color across the board express the difficulties of balancing family life and the work necessary to achieve tenure. If the University of Michigan is seriously interested in retaining women of color faculty, flexible work-life policies are essential to achieving this goal. Although gender roles and expectations are evolving within the contexts of the home and the academy, women still carry a disproportionate amount of the responsibility for maintaining their households and raising children. The University should insure that all department chairs and unit directors support and inform junior faculty about tenure-clock extension policies to allow faculty members time (typically a year) that will not be attributed to their tenure probationary period. In addition, new procedures need to be developed to better enable tenure-track faculty to work part-time for a limited period while pro-rating time counted on the tenure clock.

Other policies that are critical for the retention of women of color (and all) faculty juggling the demands of home and work, including sick time and modified duties policies for child birth and dependent care, should be well integrated into each department and supported by department chairs and colleagues. It is critical that department chairs are able to communicate that these policies do not represent special treatment or lowered expectations for the faculty members who need to utilize these them. The adoption of these policies has been a huge step in the direction of family and work life balance; however, they will not work if faculty members feel they will be penalized or stigmatized when they are used. Mary, a faculty member in one of the professional schools, presents the struggle of balancing work and family below:

It is tough to balance everything with scheduling time for child and working. And, I don't see it getting better for women after they get tenure. Now that illusion is gone. I think it gets harder. Most women get their degrees in their twenties and thirties when they want to start a family. I don't know how they are doing it and managing it, a baby or a serious relationship.

X. Social Networking: Facilitating Social Support for Single Women of Color Faculty

An important aspect of overall satisfaction for women of color at the University of Michigan that often gets overlooked or downplayed is the issue of their social and emotional lives. Almost all women of color interviewed stated that having venues where they could meet other junior faculty and develop a more expansive social network outside of their department would greatly improve their ability to create balance in their work schedules, create a greater sense of being connected to and an integral part of both the University and surrounding community, and greatly decrease their desire to seek appointments elsewhere. This is especially true for single women of color.

Based on the very concrete suggestions which emerged from many candid conversations around this topic with women of color faculty, women of color faculty recommend that the University host a regular social event for single faculty members to meet and interact with one another in an informal, relaxed environment. It is important that these events happen regularly and are designed in a way that is sensitive to issues such as cultural differences and sexual orientation. Aside from this recommendation to institute a regularly occurring social event, women of color faculty additionally recommend that chairs are made aware of the tendency to overburden single female faculty with administrative work and other non-research or teaching related assignments under the assumption that they have more disposable free time than married faculty or faculty with children. Angela, a faculty member in the social sciences, explains the importance of supporting single women of color's social networking capabilities within the university setting:

It takes time to nurture children, but it also takes time to meet people to start a family. I don't think there is the same consideration if you are single. But, if you don't have a family, you need time to go out and develop your network – probably more time than someone who already has a family.

XI. Counteroffers: Acknowledging the Value of Women of Color Faculty

Department chairs and division heads cannot wait until an offer from another university has been made to demonstrate respect and value for women of color's research, collegiality, departmental service, mentoring and teaching contributions. Chairs and administrators must strategically implement both

formal and informal ways to recognize the achievements of women of color faculty while they are here and actively work to make counter offers that reflect their value when they are thinking of leaving. This is a commitment that must be made by department chairs as well as deans.

Women of color who left the U of M, as well as women of color at the U of M who have friends and colleagues who have gone on to other institutions, say that in most cases they could have been convinced to stay if there was some effort made to articulate their value to the department. Although an increased salary and additional research money are generally the types of considerations that are overtly on the table during counteroffer negotiations, women of color state that one critical bargaining chip is missing from these conversations: a sincere acknowledgement of their contribution as scholars, teachers and colleagues. Chandra, a former jointly appointed faculty member, explains how the reaction of the chairs in both of her departments represents this lack of commitment to retaining women of color faculty:

I could have been convinced to stay had one of my chairs just simply asked me to stay – if one of them just expressed that they valued my work.

CONCLUSION

The implications of this research extend well beyond the concerns of women of color and far beyond the particular context of the University of Michigan, especially in light of the current political climate. As anti-affirmative action campaigns spread across the nation, it is becoming increasingly clear that not only is there a profound misunderstanding among the population at large of the value of diversity but also no clear understanding of what diversity really means in the first place. In lieu of creating spaces for informed dialogue and education around the question of diversity, anti-affirmative action proponents play on the fear of difference by promoting policies, laws, and political campaigns whose primary purpose is to uphold systems of inequality. Unlike higher educational institutions in California prior to the passage of Proposal 209, the President and other upper level administrators of the University of Michigan have supported fighting anti-affirmative action efforts and the racism, sexism and class based xenophobia they represent. This expressed institutional commitment to equality puts the University of Michigan in a uniquely influential position within the current discourse on diversity and difference.

Based on the University's determined stance in the fight against anti-affirmative action efforts during both Grutter's unsuccessful petition against the University's law school and the case won by Gratz and her supporters, other educational institutions, the corporate community, and individual citizens are anticipating the action the University will take to protect the ideals of academic excellence and diversity in light of the outcome of these political battles. Concrete actions that demonstrate the University of Michigan's refusal to succumb to status quo politics will provide valuable clues for how we, as a society, can take decisive steps to promote social, economic and political equality. This will also help us refine how we utilize the terms generally used to define equality, such as *multiculturalism, equal opportunity, and diversity*. The experiences and perspectives of women of color faculty at the University of Michigan provide clear direction in this regard.

The position of minorities and the underrepresented in society has been equated to that of canaries in the mines. Scholars such as Lani Guinier and Noliwe M. Rooks⁴ have used the metaphor of the canaries that sniff out the first signs of methane gas in the coal mines and, therefore, warn and save the lives of the coal miners, to highlight the critical importance of paying attention to the experiences of marginal groups as they both reflect the current state and predict the future status of the overall health of our social institutions. Thus, the narratives of the women of color in this study are more than individual idiosyncratic stories; within the analysis of these collective experiences are recommendations for transforming the structures that perpetuate inequality and oppression on the University of Michigan campus, as well as throughout our increasingly global society, for all constituents irrespective of race or gender.

⁴ See Rooks, "Like Canaries in the Mines: Black Women's Studies at the Millennium" in *Signs* vol. 25 No. 4 Feminisms at a Millennium, Summer 2000, pp. 1209-1211.