

Improving Campus Climate to Support Faculty Diversity and Retention: A Pilot Program for New Faculty

**Fred Piercy, Valerie Giddings, Katherine Allen,
Benjamin Dixon, Peggy Meszaros, and Karen Joest**

ABSTRACT: We report on a series of pilot programs that we developed and carried out to support the success and satisfaction of new faculty, particularly faculty of color. We hope that others committed to retaining and supporting underrepresented faculty can apply our learning from this pilot project, as a whole or in part.

KEY WORDS: faculty retention; faculty diversity; mentoring; underrepresented faculty.

When I first came, faculty told me what I needed to do to get tenure but after that—I mean, no one really helped or took me under their wing . . . maybe they are just too busy.

Tenure-track faculty member at Banneker State University
(Johnson & Harvey, 2002, p. 297)

Fred P. Piercy, Ph.D. (University of Florida), M.Ed. (University of South Carolina), B.A. (Wake Forest University) is the Department Head of the Department of Human Development at Virginia Tech. His professional interests include family therapy education, HIV social science research and prevention, and family intervention for adolescent drug abusers. Valerie Giddings, Ph.D., M.S. (Virginia Tech), B.S. (Bennett College) is the Associate Vice Chancellor for Lifelong Learning at Winston-Salem State University. Her professional interests include anthropometry and apparel fit, cultural aesthetics for apparel, and diversity issues in higher education. Katherine R. Allen, Ph.D., M.A. (Syracuse University), B.S. (University of Connecticut) is a Professor in Human Development at Virginia Tech. Her interests include family diversity over the life course, adult sibling ties in transition, and persistence of women and minorities in IT majors. Benjamin Dixon, Ed.D. (University of Massachusetts), M.A.T. (Harvard University), B.Mus.Ed. (Howard University) is the Vice President for Multicultural Affairs at Virginia Tech. His interests include diversity, multicultural education, ethical pluralism, and equity and inclusion issues related to organizational management and development. Peggy S. Meszaros, Ph.D. (University of Maryland), M.S. (University of Kentucky), B.S. (Austin Peay State University) is the William E. Lavery Professor of Human Development and the Director of the Center for Information Technology Impacts on Children, Youth, and Families at Virginia Tech. Her interests include positive youth development, leadership issues, female career transitions, and mother/daughter communication. Karen Joest, Ph.D. (Virginia Tech), M.S. (Chaminade University), B.S. (Indiana State University) is an Assistant Professor of Child and Family Studies at the State University of New York, College at Oneonta. Her interests include adolescents exposed to domestic violence, use of qualitative research, and use of technology and feminist pedagogy.

Most educators value a diverse campus, and for good reasons. In her United States Supreme Court majority opinion regarding Affirmative Action on college campuses, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor stated, "the skills needed in today's increasingly global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, ideas, and viewpoints" (Grutter v. Bollinger, 2003). A diverse faculty, according to Turner (2000) enhances the educational quality and outcomes for all students, not just minorities. As the Association of American Universities (1997) maintained in a full-page ad in the *New York Times*, the quality and texture of the entire educational experience is diminished without racial diversity. Since graduates will be entering a diverse world, they will be well served if they are exposed to faculty of diverse cultures using varying research perspectives and teaching methods within varying or diverse curricula.

Most college and university diversity plans call for a strengthening of faculty search procedures to increase the hiring of individuals from underrepresented groups. While this goal is critical and has been under attack in recent court challenges, equally important are organized efforts to support and retain underrepresented faculty once they come to campus.

Turnover is higher for faculty of color than White faculty (Thomas & Asunka, 1995), and therefore there is a great need to create a campus climate where faculty of color feel valued and are successful. According to Olmedo (1990), Green (1989), and Davis (1998), leadership committed to diversity is a prerequisite for success. However, Olmedo emphasized that institutional commitments to retain diverse faculty must be reflected in programs and initiatives. Similarly, Davis (2002) noted that the institutions most successful in increasing diversity employ proactive programs that address campus climate and support racial diversity.

What might a successful retention program look like? The literature suggests several important components:

- *The role of committed and sustained mentorship* is mentioned by many authors (e.g., Davis, 1998; Olmedo, 1990; Plata, 1996; Thomas & Asunka, 1995). One innovative group mentoring program, for example, involved Black women supporting one another and sharing survival strategies in an environment that many experience as alien and alienating (Green & King, 2001).
- *The development of a supportive, collegial community* is important (Alfred, 1999; Gregory, 2002). Underrepresented faculty members

need to feel both appreciated (Thomas & Asunka, 1995) and engaged (Antonio, 2002).

- *Leadership opportunities* can help underrepresented faculty feel engaged. Many minority faculty value the prospect of effecting societal change (Turner, 2000). Leadership opportunities positively involve underrepresented faculty in the life of the institution and give them an opportunity to make a difference. However, it is important not to overwhelm faculty of color with activities that are invisible and/or not valued in tenure and promotion evaluations (Cuadraz, 1998).
- *Participation in program planning* involves underrepresented faculty in creating and shaping support programs, and they are then more committed to these programs (Green, 1989), and the programs are better as a result.
- *A means for complaints to be heard and acted upon* is particularly important (Green, 1989). Underrepresented faculty should be able to get the ear of senior faculty, department heads, the dean, and others in senior administration (Plata, 1996).
- *Inclusiveness in retention programs* avoids the appearance of providing special treatment, it is critical that any climate/retention program should support all new faculty, not just those from underrepresented groups (Plata, 1996).

All of the above principles have helped us shape the faculty retention programs we recently developed and carried out at Virginia Tech. In this article, we report on what we learned from each of these programs.

Our Faculty Retention Project Initiatives

Members of the Diversity Committee of the College of Human Sciences and Education (now the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences) began working in 2002 with the Office of Multicultural Affairs to develop a proposal for programs to support the success and satisfaction of new faculty, particularly faculty of color. Specifically, the faculty retention programs we proposed to our Provost and for which we subsequently received funding included a) a benchmarking project that examined the minority faculty retention projects at the top 15 universities in current National Science Foundation (NSF) rankings, b) focus groups to explore the experience of untenured and underrepresented faculty on campus, c) untenured faculty mentoring

breakfasts, d) a University-wide faculty retention workshop, and e) a College-wide diversity summit.

Benchmarking Retention Project

We wanted to learn more about the recruitment and retention practices of the National Science Foundation (NSF) top-15-ranked universities. To do so, we interviewed, via telephone, provosts or designated representatives from each of the institutions. We used a semistructured interview protocol and audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed the interviews for themes. We asked about current, successful strategies for recruitment and retention.

The interviewees most frequently mentioned strategies that included a strong leadership statement from the president and provost, provision of new positions, funding for start-up packages, and decentralization of the search process with central oversight and training of search committees. They also described retention strategies that included understanding the needs of faculty members, providing financial support incentives, offering mentoring programs, attending to spouse and partner needs, and devising community initiatives. They emphasized the importance of focusing on the individual faculty member to create supportive departments with clear expectations and strategies for success. They also agreed that it was *not* helpful to rely on initiatives from overburdened and slow administrative structures or on unorganized mentoring programs.

Most of the institutions we contacted have strong leadership statements about their commitment to diversity, funds to both recruit and retain a diverse faculty, and multiple ways to support and retain underrepresented faculty with a focus on meeting individual needs. Clearly, the most successful NSF-ranked research universities have both a strong commitment and action plans to support faculty diversity.

Focus Groups

We conducted three focus groups of new, untenured, and underrepresented faculty members to learn more about their feelings of support and lack of support and about what they believed the University could do to better support their success and retention. Two focus groups (total $N = 15$) were conducted with only new and untenured faculty members from the College of Human Sciences and Education (CHSE). The third focus group ($N = 5$) was opened to any University faculty member who

was new and untenured and from an underrepresented group. (Two were African American, one was Hispanic, and two did not identify their group status.) An African American female and a Caucasian male worked as a team to facilitate the first two focus groups. Both were community members not affiliated with the University. A Caucasian female conducted the third focus group.

Participants were each given the list of questions, including (a) Why do faculty in general stay at Virginia Tech? Why do they leave? (b) Is the answer the same or different for faculty of color? Why? (c) What would an ideal mentoring/retention program for new faculty look like? (d) What are the types of retention strategies that would keep you at Virginia Tech, in the event you were offered another position elsewhere? (e) What can Virginia Tech do more of to create a culture of inclusion and support? and (f) How do new faculty see the tenure and promotion system at Virginia Tech? What can the administration do to make the process less onerous?

The questions were also written on flip chart papers that were posted around the room. Participants were given markers and asked to visit all the questions and write down their responses to each of the topic areas. After approximately 15 min of individual recording, the group studied each topic collectively, clarified their comments, and added additional comments. Participants discussed each question in more depth. The focus groups comments were audiotaped and later analyzed by our project research assistant using methods of constant comparison and analytic induction (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and the following themes and patterns were identified.

General Suggestions

- Key administrators must demonstrate a University-wide commitment to inclusion and enact decisions that support inclusion.
- The University must value all departments and faculty (e.g., Black studies and liberal arts, as well as science and engineering).
- Networking strategies should be built into the University culture.
- The University must develop support strategies such as a broad definition of diversity and activities that support social connection, develop partnerships between mainstream culture and marginal groups, recognize faculty who demonstrate inclusivity in their teaching/advising endeavors, and address domestic partnership.
- New faculty need more opportunity to participate in decision-making.

- Underrepresented faculty need more rewards and praise than they presently receive.
- Ideal mentors would have a cultural understanding of their mentees but would not necessarily be of the same culture.
- Mentors should be both assigned and freely chosen by mentees.
- An ideal mentoring program would develop opportunities for faculty to network with both colleagues and University administration.
- An ideal mentoring program would occur at the departmental and college levels.
- Administrators and colleagues should demonstrate ongoing support and interest in faculty work through getting to know their work and providing adequate funding for it.
- Stabilize the University structure (this comment was made when the University was involved in massive restructuring).
- The University should support the career of faculty members' partners or spouses.
- Salary increases should occur on a regular basis and should be commensurate with current market trends.

Promotion and Tenure Process

- Establish clear consistent policies, expectations, and procedures within departments, across departments, across colleges.
- Value teaching, service, and a range of scholarly activities.
- Release untenured faculty from teaching loads so that they have time to develop research early in their tenure process.
- Encourage active and invested mentors.

New Faculty Development Breakfasts

We held a series of monthly mentoring breakfasts for new faculty. Each breakfast had a speaker and/or theme meant to support the development of new faculty and their connections with other faculty, and more broadly, with the College and University. Since women and minority faculty are generally more likely than majority faculty to see academia as “chilly” and “alienating” (Aguirre, 2000), we wanted to provide a supportive opportunity for untenured faculty to come together around issues important to their success. Topics for these mentoring

breakfasts included:

- Grant writing.
- Balancing life and work.
- Three award-winning teachers on their favorite teaching methods.
- Developing tenure and promotion dossiers.
- Negotiating the politics and culture of your department.
- Mentoring and being mentored.

While the topics themselves were important for surviving and thriving in academia, the process of getting to know other new faculty was equally important. One participant said about the breakfast on balancing life and work, “There was great wisdom from my peers and (the speakers) about strategies for success.” Below are other representative comments related to various topics:

“I really enjoyed hearing people’s experiences and strategies—the range presented was very helpful. Also, I enjoyed seeing administrators committed to the effort.”

“(I most liked) meeting other young faculty . . . (and) feeling like the college cares . . . it was wonderful.”

“She MOTIVATED me! It was EXCELLENT!”

“(I most liked) the encouragement from speakers; pep talks help!”

“We have now “gelled” as a group and are comfortable.”

“(This was) a good model for creating community.”

After each mentoring breakfast, participants completed a short, 4-item rating scale (1 = *Very Poor*; 2 = *Poor*; 3 = *Good*; 4 = *Excellent*). The results support our observation that the mentoring breakfasts were well received. The mean feedback was as follows: Information (3.8), Speaker (3.9), Usefulness (3.7), and Facilities (3.7).

About 30% of untenured faculty in our college attended each session. This number is quite high compared to attendance at University mentoring programs in previous years, which were typically attended by well under 10%. The average attendance was 11 new faculty. Next year, we plan to schedule some mentoring meetings over the lunch hour since breakfast meetings, we are told, conflict with some participant’s family obligations (e.g., getting children fed and off to school). We also plan to invite both the Dean and Provost to separate meetings and talk about the place of the new faculty in the future of the College and the University. Topics suggested by the new faculty for further meetings

include:

- dealing with hostile or disengaged students,
- saying “no”/creating balance,
- grant writing for foundations, federal agencies, etc.,
- Institutional Review Board procedures,
- collaboration with senior faculty in research,
- publishing,
- and professionalism.

A University-Wide Faculty Retention Workshop

Working closely with the Provost, we planned a day-long series of workshops for senior administrators to address retention issues for new and underrepresented faculty members. We titled this workshop, “Retaining New and Underrepresented Faculty: Creating a Climate of Support.” We initiated this University-wide workshop because too often diversity programs are aimed at or attended only by so-called members of the choir, those who are already convinced of the importance of an academic culture that celebrates, encourages, and embraces diversity.

We wanted this workshop to inform those in a position to do something about faculty diversity and retention with empirical evidence about the negative impact of a homogeneous workforce and the cumulative disadvantages placed on persons from underrepresented groups. As a result, we identified a scholar with the data to inform us: Dr Cathy Trower, senior research associate at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. Dr Trower is principal investigator on the Study of New Scholars funded by the Ford Foundation and the Atlantic Philanthropies. We believed that senior administrators and academy members would attend more to solid evidence than to personal testimony.

To prepare participants in advance we mailed 356 administrators (department heads, directors, deans, provosts, and vice presidents) a packet of information along with an invitation to attend the day-long workshop. The packet included an article published by Dr. Trower and her colleague, Richard Chait (2002), “Faculty diversity: Too little for too long.” The article concluded by offering suggestions on how to transform the academic culture to become more inviting to women and minority group members. Also important is the fact that the provost personally sent an invitation to each administrator, asking him or her to attend the day-long event. We believe this demonstration of support contributed to the unanticipated large turnout for the workshop.

Dr. Trower's two morning sessions and lunch were for University level administrators only, but the afternoon session was open to the entire campus community. The morning sessions were attended by 50 administrators in each session, and the afternoon session had over 135 participants.

The first session was titled "Why so many faculty diversity initiatives fail and how to make sure ours succeed." In this session, Dr. Trower presented data from her studies and from national trends regarding race and gender of the professorate. She also facilitated participant interaction with provocative questions that we discussed and processed in small groups.

During the second morning session, "Problem solving around faculty diversity: A working session with campus administrators," we were joined by additional participants. Once again responding to evidence Dr. Trower provided from national trends, we engaged in several small group exercises in which each group examined a key institutional barrier to faculty equity and institutional accountability. We worked toward key indicators for change.

During lunch, Dr. Trower followed up with a "diversity dashboard" exercise in which participants identified key indicators of institutional accountability and change. We also generated a list of "headlines" to publicize the anticipated progress we would make regarding diversity at Virginia Tech. Examples included:

- Chilly climate disappears from Virginia Tech!
- Virginia Tech voted the most welcoming campus in the USA!

The afternoon session, "Faculty Diversity: New Vision, New Voices," was organized with a diverse campus audience in mind. We chose our panelists carefully, so that each would represent a vital point of view and generate the kind of dialogue to enable us to learn from each other.

The panel reflected diversity in race, ethnic background, gender, sexual orientation, and professional position. The panel included a member from the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors, the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, the Vice Provost for Graduate Studies, the Dean of the Graduate School, and a distinguished professor and chair of the English department.

Our goal in the afternoon session was to address the creation of inclusive, productive environment where everyone is welcome and able to thrive. Following panelist discussions, Dr. Trower presented national trends and invited panelists to discuss questions relevant to the University community.

College-Wide Diversity Summit: Reassessing Our Climate

Prior to the university-wide workshop, we held a college-wide open forum summit to create dialogue surrounding concerns and perceptions related to college climate. Through this process, 28 participants (there were 150 faculty in the college at the time) participated in identifying key factors, which influence decisions of faculty, staff, and graduate students to come, stay, or leave our University. Participants discussed realistic measures the College and University could use to enhance faculty retention and create a culture of inclusion and support for faculty, staff, and graduate students, particularly underrepresented members. A facilitator asked small groups to generate diversity goals using the College Diversity Plan (College of Human Resources and Education, 2001). Participants identified several things that colleges, departments, and the University could do to enhance retention. Key themes involved opening lines of communication and developing more positive working conditions.

Participants believed that the University can do more to create a culture of inclusion and support by developing more consistent processes around existing programs; identifying environments that are not inclusive; adding a diversity component to faculty and staff evaluations; creating a sense of community for students, faculty, and staff; and holding departments accountable if they do not support diversity goals. Departments, they believed, should develop more active mentoring programs that foster a sense of community and connection. They also believed that cross-departmental/college seminars could build better intrauniversity relationships.

Relationships, they believe, should be forged with the larger community to connect community resources with the needs of underrepresented university members. Community connections, for example, could support partner hiring. Also, University faculty could help develop local school diversity programs and programs for the community. Likewise, diversity can be served by extending University activities to community organizations and by using community meeting places for diversity-related and community building events. Similarly, services and resources in the local community such as child/adult care and parks and recreation could be better used to support underrepresented faculty. The participants believed that, as the bridge between University and community efforts increases, faculty, staff, and students will feel stronger connections to the community, which will in turn create a more welcoming environment for all community members.

Phase II: Second Year Programs in Process

The programs above, offered during the 2002–2003 academic year, were so well received that we proposed and received approximately \$60,000 from the Office of the Provost, Office of Multicultural Affairs, and the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, to expand them in academic year 2003–2004 throughout the university and beyond. In addition to the activities above, we are presently carrying out a modest grant program to provide small (\$3,000–5,000) seed grants to encourage research on issues of diversity. We also are planning a regional conference on “Scholarship and Research on Diversity Issues.” This conference will showcase diversity as a legitimate and valued area of academic scholarship. The conference will feature a nationally known plenary speaker plus peer-reviewed presentations in breakout sessions.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we are developing a plan to transfer our programs and learning to other colleges at Virginia Tech. We are involving representatives from all colleges in outreach meetings that aim to educate faculty representatives across campus to provide similar programs within their colleges. The University’s Multicultural Fellows, coordinated through our Office of Multicultural Affairs, coordinate these outreach meetings. In these outreach meetings, we will share our lessons learned and will help the multicultural fellows to engage the participants to tailoring similar diversity programs to their own context.

Discussion

Our retention programs took place in the context of a number of University challenges—budget cuts, a freeze on raises, restructuring, and a call for increased research productivity (which some faculty perceived as being at the expense of teaching and the valuing of the liberal arts and humanities). These challenges led a number of faculty to ask if Virginia Tech is the place for them. On top of this, the Board of Visitors abolished the University’s affirmative action policy prior to the Supreme Court ruling on the Michigan affirmative action case only to rescind their decision a few weeks later after considerable faculty and student backlash. For many, the Board of Visitors’ decision was coded for “we don’t support or appreciate diversity at Virginia Tech.”

While we believe in the worth of our programs—as did most of our participants—both structural challenges (budget cuts, closure of

programs, restructuring of colleges), and challenges of the spirit (the governing body doing away with affirmative action) were barriers to our program's ultimate goal of creating and nurturing a campus climate that supports collegueship and inclusion. At the same time, we have found that these challenges brought out the best in the faculty. That is, the challenges created motivation for change, an *esprit de corps* among advocates for these changes, and a felt need for the programs we offered. Our programs brought together faculty committed to diversity and to creating a culture of support. Fortunately, the central administration was quite supportive of these initiatives. They encouraged, for example, our campus-wide diversity workshop for administrators and took an active part in it. We wonder whether, without our external challenges, our programs would have been as well supported or attended as they were. Clearly, our programs provided an important counterforce for our faculty.

Our challenge for the near and distant future is to make the programs we describe and the lessons we learned more accessible to the rest of the University. We are presently working to involve other colleges in learning from what we have learned and developing retention programs that meet their needs.

The elements of our retention programs are certainly not new (c.f., Green, 1989; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002; Olmedo, 1990). They also are not rocket science. Faculty stay where morale is high (Johnsrud, 1996); where they feel mentored (Plata, 1996); where they experience a sense of community (Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002); autonomy (Tack & Patitu, 1992), and intellectual challenge (Magner, 1999); where institutional support is clear and pervasive (Mellow, van Slyck, & Eynon, 2003); where they make a decent living (Kerlin & Dunlap, 1993), where the definition of scholarship is sufficiently broad to encompass their teaching and scholarship (Antonio, 2002); and where they feel they have a voice and a chance to be part of the leadership (Turner, 2000). We hope that our own experience will provide some of these details, and will support and inform others who wish to develop similar faculty retention programs, particularly for underrepresented groups.

Of course, the jury is still out on whether our programs create the welcoming culture we strive for and in fact increase the retention and diversity of our faculty. We remain cautiously optimistic and dedicated to our goal of creating an inclusive university where our faculty can thrive and actually look forward to coming to work. Future retention figures will provide one measure of this goal.

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