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## The importance of having diverse administrators on college campuses (essay)

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It's the gray chair. You know, the one across the desk or at the edge of the cubicle occupied by a financial aid counselor, academic adviser or other staff person on campuses everywhere. As colleges and universities have welcomed students back to school and freshmen have begun their much anticipated college years, these gray chairs have been in high demand. As an undergraduate then medical student, I occupied that chair more times than I can count, and more than a decade later, I still remember it well. More important: I remember the staff members who sat across from me.

Today I am an academic pediatrician at an Ivy League institution. When I retrace the path that brought me here, I recall my relationships with staff members as much or more than those with faculty members. In their own way, they were equally -- or even more -- important.

That was especially true for my undergraduate years, when as a female minority student, I watched the rapid decline of pre-meds who looked anything like me. During those years, you would often find me perched in my gray chair, talking to my favorite staff members about life, goals, relationships, clubs and organizations. They were the ones who supported me through the sorrow of my mom's losing battle with cancer, the joy of planning my wedding and the excitement mixed with apprehension of having a baby. They were my academic family.

There are more than 1.7 million staff members at postsecondary institutions in the United States, a number that continues to grow. In addition to their core functions, they often serve as advisers to student clubs and organizations, teach students life lessons as they navigate their newfound independence living away from home, and serve as support systems as students deal with personal and peer conflicts. Often these additional activities require staff members to attend events or student meetings after business hours, cutting into their personal lives. Yet they still show up smiling.

The role of staff assumes added importance as colleges and universities make plans to increase diversity initiatives in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement. Many of these student-led movements across the country called for increased student support and a more diverse presence within the classroom. Staff members from a diverse range of identities are also integral

to the overall student experience and the creation of inclusive campus environments. At many institutions, the staff is much more diverse than the faculty. However, that trend often dissipates when you look at senior administrators across college campuses.

To address that, some institutions are incorporating staff initiatives in to their diversity plans. For example, Brown University is starting initiatives to help foster the professional development and career growth of staff members. If other institutions are committed to changing the cultures of their campuses, they should acknowledge the vital role of administrative staff members and ensure their diversity plans incorporate ways to foster those staffers' career growth.

While we as faculty are experts in our fields, we are not the experts in all fields. As we ascend to leadership positions, it behooves us to keep a finger on the pulse of the larger campus community and to foster an opportunity-rich environment for all. Staff members have goals, career plans and ambitions that need to be supported. No one would accept a job if they were told from the beginning that they would have minimal to no potential for growth. But for many staff members at academic institutions, that becomes the reality. They often receive little, if any, career mentoring from supervisors and have to consider other job opportunities (often at other institutions) to advance or reshape their careers. Many of us have had annual reviews that simply serve the purpose of checking the box. While perhaps simple in theory, we should make these opportunities meaningful and substantive. Faculty or leadership development programs may be necessary to support supervisors in providing meaningful mentoring and career advice.

In recent years, inflated administration paychecks have come in for attack as one reason for the soaring cost of student tuition. But let's be clear: few staff members are making impressive salaries, let alone the jaw-dropping seven-figure packages that have drawn the most attention. This is not an argument for or against increased pay or an increased number of administrators on campuses. Rather, it means to highlight the importance of diversifying the current staff and faculty at colleges and universities. If increased attention were given to current staff members, noting their skill sets and future ambitions, perhaps it could lead to more productivity, lower turnover and increased job satisfaction. All of which could save money in the long run.

In his last State of the Union address, President Obama asked, "How do we reignite that spirit of innovation to meet our biggest challenges?" I believe the challenges that many colleges and universities will need to address over the coming year as they create inclusive environments, valuing diversity of all types, will be solved by retaining and strengthening all members of the team. That includes the countless campus staffers who welcome students to their gray chairs.

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