
For a Diverse Faculty, Start With Retention

Recruiting underrepresented faculty without fixing retention problems creates a revolving door, Ann Rockquemore.

January 6, 2016

By [Kerry Ann Rockquemore](#)

Dear Kerry Ann,
Our campus (like many) is coming to terms with the fact that we have a lack of diversity among the problem. I can see that there is consensus among my colleagues that something needs to be done exclusively on hiring initiatives. My department has worked hard to hire underrepresented faculty members. For that reason, our recruitment efforts haven't resulted in a more diverse faculty over time, especially among tenure-track professors.

Shouldn't we also be talking about retention? And amid all the long-range initiatives being planned, are there any short term to help diversify our faculty?

Sincerely,

Department Chair and Ally

Dear Chair,

The current political climate has many people asking how to diversify their faculties. I am delighted and energized to tackle recruitment challenges. That's great news and positive momentum.

However, focusing solely on recruitment won't resolve the underlying issues that have resulted in the limited number of diverse faculty members you've been able to recruit. Given that, I'm going to make a radical suggestion: if you want to diversify your faculty, focus on retention. Specifically, it's time to ask a few hard questions about why your department has been unable to retain diverse faculty members you have recruited.

I know that those who identify as allies for underrepresented faculty take that descriptor seriously and have a genuine moment of reflection. So let me affirm that you *can* do some things in the short term. I know you can do this for you, in your department and in the distinct environment of your campus. But let me suggest some questions for your personal thinking and conversations with your colleagues:

1. Do you *really* know why faculty members have left your department?

Whenever people tell me they have difficulty retaining underrepresented faculty members, the first question I ask is: I've asked the person who left a basic question: Why did you leave? I have noticed that when I ask this question, the answer is often surprising.

stammering and then a story that was created by other faculty members about why the person exit story is typically one that absolves it of any responsibility for the departure.

If you have had direct conversations with those who have left about the reasons for their exit, do their responses have any patterns (such as a hostile environment, unclear tenure and promotion criteria, etc.)? If you see patterns, what can be done to address those issues? And if there's a noticeable gap between an individual's exit story, what does that tell you?

2. Have you asked current faculty members if they have what they need to succeed?

Here again, when I ask senior faculty members this question, I often get speculative answers based on their own mind instead of conversations they've had with the actual people whom they've tried to help.

Let me be clear, I'm not suggesting that you initiate a lengthy climate study. I'm suggesting that you talk to your faculty members and have an open, honest and direct conversation to ask if they have what they need to succeed. Stop talking and really listen to how they respond. This typically results in ideas for concrete actions to take to support them and create a welcoming and inclusive environment.

3. Is a structure in place to support newly recruited faculty members?

These are pretty basic questions, but: 1) Do you have a meaningful mentoring program? 2) Do you understand the distinct challenges that underrepresented faculty face, and are they prepared to address them? 3) Does your department have transparent and clearly communicated expectations for teaching, service, research and collegiality? And 4) Does your department recognize the invisible barriers that underrepresented faculty members face across campus?

If the answer to all these questions is a confident yes, that's great. But if the answer to these questions is no, identify four concrete projects that you can take action on in the short term to improve the environment for your underrepresented members.

4. Is there an ugly reality that nobody wants to face?

Faculty members who have spent a decade or two in a department often overlook consistently negative personalities and egregiously inappropriate dynamics at faculty meetings. At a certain point, people start to see it as the department's version of normal. But for new faculty members, such dynamics often communicate negative factors that push them away from any desire to be a long-term member of your department.

And let me be even more specific. Is there a department bully (or bullies)? Do packs of faculty criticize pretenure faculty members publicly? Are there open secrets that are tolerated (Professor X is always late, Professor Y harasses grad students or Professor Z yells and threatens people)? And if there are such things, are they allowed? And more important, what are you willing to do about it?

5. Are you actually *behaving* like an ally in your department?

Many faculty members understand themselves as allies in theory, but that does not extend to their actions. Does your behavior in your department match your self-understanding as an ally?

If you're uncertain, consider the last time you were in the presence of underrepresented faculty members. Did you witness microaggression toward that person. What did you do? Did you push back? Did you freeze? Did you do anything as a colleague to deal with it? Do you feel skilled and prepared to respond to such situations?

And equally important, what do you do when things come up behind closed doors, in social settings where underrepresented colleagues are not present but are being discussed? How do you respond? Are you as a sponsor or take a backseat? Are you willing to expend some of your political capital on behalf of those you have a tendency toward silence, what skill set do you need to acquire to confidently support and mentor faculty members?

6. Do you personally know how to mentor underrepresented faculty members?

What do your mentoring relationships look like? Do you have a schedule and structure in place, Do your underrepresented faculty mentees have real and meaningful benchmarks to measure writing goals? Do you provide consistent opportunities for talking with your mentees, identifying and giving directive feedback? Or do you just hope for the best and imagine that they'll sink or swim?

I hope these questions are helpful in expanding your internal and external conversations about what issues have been leading to a revolving door in your department and doing what you can to will increase the possibility that your long-term recruitment activities will have lasting success.

Peace and productivity,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore, Ph.D.

President, [National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity \(http://www.FacultyDiversity.org\)](http://www.FacultyDiversity.org)



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