Diverse Faculty An Imperative For USF

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Faculty diversity is no longer just a luxury for public and private universities; instead, a diverse faculty is an absolute necessity for institutions of higher education committed to fulfilling their fundamental mission.

Diversity means diversity of race, gender and sexual orientation as well as diversity of disciplines, ideas and approaches to learning that can only be attained by ensuring a multiplicity of backgrounds among faculty.

Universities must prepare students to survive in a diverse world by giving them the skills of understanding and appreciating differences in philosophies, cultural backgrounds and life experiences.

When faculty members have diverse backgrounds and dissimilar experiences, they bring with them the promise of forcing a dialogue and exchange of ideas about a full range of perspectives. This kind of complex dialogue challenges students to think beyond their immediate realities.

Universities also must inspire students from underserved and underrepresented backgrounds to achieve their maximum potential. Young adults need successful role models and, time after time, it has been proven that they find comfort in knowing that they, too, can reach for the stars.

According to the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University, a black male who drops out of high school is 60 times more likely to be imprisoned than one with a bachelor's degree. He also is less likely to be married, living with his children and paying taxes. Universities will fall short of meeting their true obligation if they fail to provide role models for the growing segments of their populations.

Finally, universities must make an effort to prepare the diverse faculty of tomorrow to educate and inspire the next generation of scholars. Universities that offer doctoral education are obligated to build the pipeline...
to fill this need, for no one else can do it.

At the University of South Florida, we aspire to embrace diversity as a way of life. Nonetheless, we realize that there are inherent challenges that can become barriers and often require conscious efforts to overcome.

For example, we see the paucity of academically credentialed African-Americans and Hispanics in many fields, particularly in science and engineering, and we also experience intense competition for a handful of these scholars in the market at any given time.

In my role first as dean and now as provost, I have heard all of the standard arguments regarding the difficulty of recruiting faculty of color. I have also been heartbroken to see outstanding talent leave despite our best efforts. Nonetheless, I am proud to say that we have overcome many of these historical barriers, and the numbers prove that to be true.

While only 4.2 percent of USF's faculty members are African-Americans, 10 percent of the new hires in each of the last two years have been African-Americans. In fact, in the past two years, 33 African-American faculty members have been hired.

Similarly, while Hispanics comprise 5.4 percent of the current faculty pool, the newly recruited group includes 10 percent Hispanics.

This recruitment success can be attributed to the emphasis we have placed on educating search committees about the importance of diversity. We have also replaced the passive recruitment practices of the past with new proactive strategies for identifying and attracting a pool of candidates representing a broad spectrum of backgrounds.

In addition, we have set aside funds to allow various disciplines to use new strategies more suited to their specific needs, which enhances diversity in the broadest possible sense.

While recruiting African-American and Hispanic faculty is a challenge in itself, an even bigger challenge is retaining them. Several factors contribute to attrition, including lack of a social support network, insensitive co-workers, and aggressive recruiting by other employers.

We have found that strong mentoring and a supportive community environment are among the keys to maintaining a productive and effective workplace for African-American and Hispanic faculty.

USF is committed to educating our students - minority and majority - to succeed in this rapidly changing and competitive world economy. And having a diverse faculty is imperative to realizing this goal.

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