TOWARD A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF THE TENURE TRACK FOR MINORITIES

By Cathy A. Trower

To understand what life on the tenure track is like, the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) conducts an annual survey of tenure-track faculty. Through surveys and in focus groups and interviews, hundreds of tenure-track faculty members tell us what affects their workplace satisfaction and, ultimately, their success. The clarity and reasonableness of the criteria and standards for achieving tenure, institutional and collegial support for teaching and research, the effectiveness of workplace policies and practices, departmental climate and collegiality, and work-life balance are among the issues addressed.

In 2009, for the first time, COACHE had collected enough faculty respondents who self-identified in each racial and ethnic category (see Figure 1), in proportions similar to their representation in the faculty population nationally, to look at each group separately and see how their experiences of academe differ.

An examination of the different groups’ experiences of faculty life is important to the welfare of our students. The percentage of American college students who are minorities has been increasing: in 1976, 15 percent were minorities, compared with 32...

Cathy Trower is research director and principal investigator at the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.
Figure 1. COACHE Faculty Survey Racial/Ethnic Data, 2009

Source: COACHE

percent in 2007. The percentage of Asian or Pacific Islander students rose from 2 to 7 percent, the Hispanic share of college enrollments rose from 4 to 11 percent, and the African-American percentage went from 9 to 13 percent (Snyder, Dil-low, and Hoffman, p. 270).

Minority faculty serve as role models and mentors for minority students, which can help increase these students’ sense of self-efficacy.

Who teaches matters. In fact, the most accurate predictor of subsequent success for female undergraduates is the percentage of women among faculty members at their college. Although most women study at coeducational institutions, those who have attended women’s colleges earn two to three times as many advanced degrees as those attending coed schools. For women of color, the difference is even more pronounced: among African-American women awarded doctorates in biology between 1975 and 1992, for example, 75 percent graduated from black colleges, most notably two women’s colleges—Spelman and Bennett. Trower and Chait, 2002, p. 34

Despite the overall scarcity of faculty of color at the full-professor rank in American colleges and universities, minority faculty have increased by almost 50 percent between 1995 and 2005 and white faculty by only 8 percent. At the same time, many faculty of color are clustered in minority-serving institutions; they constitute only a small proportion of the faculty at major research universities. And faculty status is all too often a “revolving door” for under-represented minorities—they leave academe at greater rates than whites.

This is not because faculty of color are generally more confused than other junior faculty about what it takes to succeed in academe. Asian, African-American, Hispanic, and white faculty report similar levels of clarity (or lack thereof) about tenure processes, criteria, standards, and the body of evidence required in a tenure dossier. Of all the racial and ethnic groups, only Native Americans are significantly less clear than white faculty on those matters.

Something else is going on.

The Minority Faculty Pipeline

But before describing what academic life is like for members of the various racial and ethnic groups, we should look at the path into academe for faculty of color.

The proportion of minorities with doctoral degrees has increased far more than that of whites, even while their total numbers remain much lower. From 1995 to 2005, the number of African Americans with doctorates increased 84 percent, American Indians 40 percent, Asian Americans 20 percent, and Hispanics 83 percent—compared with whites at 11 percent. But the number of whites still dwarfs the number of mini-
ties receiving the doctorate: there were 29,144 white doctoral recipients in 2005, compared with almost 3,000 Asians and African Americans, 1,740 Hispanics, and only 214 American Indians (see Figure 2).

Not all doctoral recipients are intent on academic careers or take faculty appointments, of course. But the picture for the professoriate is similar to the one for doctoral recipients. As previously mentioned, while faculty are mostly white, the percentage of minority faculty increased over this period, while the percentage of white faculty grew (see Figure 3).

In part because they are recent entrants into the professoriate, minority faculty congregate in the lower ranks. The largest numbers of African-American, American Indian, and Hispanic faculty are at the instructor rank and of Asian Americans at the assistant professor level, while the largest numbers of white faculty are clustered in full professorships. Consequently, whites are largely tenured (they comprise 71.5 percent of that category); Asian Americans make up the next highest proportion of the tenured faculty at 6.5 percent, followed by African Americans (4.5 percent), Hispanics (3.1 percent), and American Indians (.4 percent). (To see all the numbers and percentages, go to http://www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=CAREE&Template=/CM/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=29418.)

**What Matters**

What happens to those faculty then becomes of serious importance to the academy, if for no other reason than they are beginning to make up an increasingly large proportion of the scholarly workforce. And if the COACHE research has a single punch line, it is this: Once they enter academe, what is of greatest significance to faculty of color is the kind of climate, culture, and collegiality that they encounter. Those three things most determine their satisfaction with their work life and their capacity to succeed as teachers, scholars, and members of the academic community.

What follows is a series of commonly asked questions about how the COACHE research probed these issues and what we discovered about them.

When you measure climate, what do you consider and what have you discovered?

How one experiences the climate in a department or at an institution is largely
a function of the people with whom one interacts regularly. People create the climate, not vice versa. COACHE measures the ten aspects of climate that pre-tenure faculty most often mentioned as being especially relevant, including:

1. the fairness of supervision,
2. the interest tenured faculty members take in their junior colleagues’ professional development,
3. opportunities to collaborate with tenured faculty members,
4. professional interaction with tenured colleagues,
5. personal interaction with tenured colleagues,
6. professional interaction with peers,
7. personal interaction with peers,
8. a sense of “fit” with the department,
9. the intellectual vitality of the tenured faculty,
10. the fair and equitable treatment of pre-tenured faculty members.

There were significant gaps between the satisfaction of minority racial and ethnic groups and that of white faculty with many of these aspects of climate. For instance, all minority faculty groups except Hispanics were less likely than whites to feel that they had satisfactory personal interaction with tenured colleagues and a good fit with their departments. Both Native-American and black junior faculty were also more apt than their white colleagues to think that they had few opportunities to collaborate with tenured faculty, and both groups were less prone to agree that junior faculty were treated fairly and equitably. Native Americans were significantly less likely than others to believe that tenured faculty took an interest in their professional development and more skeptical about the intellectual vitality of senior faculty. Asian, Pacific Islander, and black faculty were less satisfied than whites with their amount of personal interaction with other junior faculty; Asians also registered less satisfaction with their professional interaction with both junior and senior colleagues and with the fairness with which their immediate supervisor evaluated their work. (For a chart containing the findings, go to http://sites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/cbc.topic436591.files/COACHE_HighlightReport_2008.pdf.)

Socialization has been defined as the process by which newcomers transition from being organizational outsiders to being insiders (Bauer et al., 2007) or by which newcomers acquire the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). Van Maanen and Schein

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claim that the socialization process "neces-
sarily involves the transmission of infor-
mation and values...[and is] fundamentally
cultural matter." They go on to say,

Any organizational culture consists
broadly of long-standing rules of
thumb, a somewhat special language,
an ideology that helps edit a mem-
ber's everyday experience, shared
standards of relevance as to the criti-
cal aspects of the work that is being
accomplished, matter-of-fact preju-
dices, models for social etiquette and
demeanor, certain customs and rituals
suggestive of how members are to
relate to colleagues, subordinates,
supersiors, and outsiders, and a sort
of residual category of some rather
plain "horse sense" regarding what
is appropriate and "smart" behavior
within the organization and what is
not. All of these cultural modes of
thinking, feeling, and doing are, of
course, fragmented to some degree,
giving rise within large organizations
to various "subcultures" or "organiz-
ational segments." (p. 210)

Junior faculty members on the tenure
track are, of course, outsiders who are
seeking to understand and fit within
the culture of their profession and institutions
and within the subcultures of their discipli-
nes and departments.

We know from the meta-analysis
conducted by Bauer et al. (2007) that
newcomers must learn about and adapt
to their organization rather quickly
during the socialization period, in part by
reducing uncertainty. Uncertainty-re-
duction theory suggests that newcomers
seek to increase the predictability of
interactions between themselves and
others within the new organization and
to create predictable environments.
Saks and Ashforth (1997) showed that
uncertainty is reduced through social
interactions with superiors and peers;
insiders serve as "sounding boards"
by providing information that helps
newcomers diagnose and interpret the
surprises they encounter.

During the newcomer adjustment pe-
riod junior faculty ideally develop three
things: 1) role clarity (understanding what
the job tasks and priorities are, as well as
appropriate time allocation among them);
2) self-efficacy (learning the job tasks and
gaining confidence in their capacity to
carry them out); and 3) social acceptance
(coming to feel liked and accepted by col-
leagues). Taken together, these attributes
affect five outcomes: job satisfaction, job
performance, institutional commitment,
intention to remain, and turnover.

Role clarity is related to all of these
outcomes except turnover; self-efficacy
is related to all except commitment and
job satisfaction; and social acceptance is
related to all five, placing a premium on
social acceptance.

Employees who are clear about role
expectations are more likely to per-
form well, and those who believe
they can accomplish their tasks tend
to have greater goal accomplishment.
Employees who are socially accepted
by peers may perform at higher levels,
given that the relationships they form
with their peers may serve as social
capital that facilitates their job perfor-
mane (Bauer et al, 2007, p. 710).

So the relationships junior faculty
form with senior, tenured faculty and
with their peers are critical to their suc-
cess early in their academic careers.
And difficulties in establishing those
relationships may help us understand
the "revolving door" for scholars of color
on the tenure track. The lower satisfac-
tion that all minority faculty groups
except Hispanics expressed regarding
personal interaction with tenured col-
leagues—Asians regarding professional
interaction with tenured colleagues and
peers, and African Americans regarding
their personal interaction with peers—
cannot help but affect their sense of so-
cial acceptance, as well as clarity about
their roles and sense of self-efficacy.

Further, the data show that relation-
ships with tenured colleagues—both
professional and personal—are highly
correlated with one's sense of depart-
mental "fit." Therefore it's not surpris-
ing that American Indians, Asians, and
African Americans also rate this variable
significantly lower than do white faculty.

Why do you think that there are no
significant differences between His-
panic and white faculty on institu-
tional climate?

This is an area into which we hope to
delve more deeply in further research. In
a paper we are currently writing, two col-
leagues—Valerie Martin Conley (Ohio
University) and Luis Ponjuan (University
of Florida)—and I speculate that, since
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What do the COACHE data reveal about discrimination experienced by pre-tenure faculty of color?

African-American and Hispanic faculty expressed less agreement than white faculty with the statement that tenure decisions are based primarily on performance-based criteria. This may mean that some minorities are skeptical about the claim that tenure decisions are entirely merit-based. They may have experienced chilliness, hostility, or outright racism, or they may have minority colleagues or friends who have. They may also be all-too-familiar with unconscious or implicit bias. And even when racism is not at work, perceptions have a way of affecting reality, as Claude Steele’s studies of stereotype threat demonstrate.

Unconscious privilege is the flip side of that coin: most white faculty basically think that the university is a meritocracy, that those who are meritorious will succeed, and that their own success is due to their merit. White men especially are likely to benefit from this kind of privilege and not realize it.

Do the COACHE findings on how important various policies and practices are for pre-tenure faculty reveal racial and ethnic differences?

There are few differences in the rank orderings of policies from most to least important by various racial or ethnic groups, with a couple of exceptions. Across racial and ethnic lines, the two most important policies are the availability of travel funds and an upper limit on teaching obligations during the pre-tenure period. But African Americans, Asians, and whites place informal mentoring in third place, whereas Hispanics place the committee-assignment limit in third place (the only evidence in our data of the service overload many minorities speak about). Asians rank professional assistance in obtaining grants fourth, probably because of the disciplines in which they teach—a high percentage are in the STEM disciplines, where faculty are expected to obtain research grants. African Americans and Hispanics rank research leave fourth, whereas white and Native Americans have limiting the number of committee assignments in that position.
But while Native American and white faculty generally gave the same importance to these sixteen practices, all of them are significantly more important to African Americans than to whites; ten are more important to Hispanic faculty; and eight are more important to Asians while two are less so (an upper limit on committee assignments and informal mentoring). This suggests that just about any policy that institutions establish to support junior faculty will be welcomed and seen as a sign of institutional support by faculty of color especially. (For more detailed information, go to http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic436591.files/COACHE_HighlightsReport2008.pdf. Tables are also available on Change’s website, www.changemag.org.)

**WHAT TO DO AND WHY**

The tenure-track years constitute a complex institutional socialization process that is not experienced the same by everyone who goes through it. Certainly junior faculty of all races and ethnicities, including white faculty, encounter problems on the way to tenure—all anxieties cannot be removed from the tenure-track years. But they can and must be reduced if US higher education is going to continue to excel by attracting the best and brightest women and men of all races and ethnicities into the profession and keeping them there.

To do that, institutions need to revise many of their policies and procedures to maximize the probability of success for all faculty. A recent study by Mary Ann Mason, Marc Goulden, and Karie Krash (2009) of more than 8,000 doctoral students at University of California System campuses, for instance, showed that the proportion of men who wanted to pursue careers as professors with a research emphasis was 45 percent when they started their doctoral programs but dropped to 36 percent by the end; for women, the corresponding percentages were 36 and 27 percent. The primary reason that both men and women turned away from research was the perceived inability to have a work-life balance; to that, women added the more specific worry about their ability to raise a family.

Generation X (born between 1964 and 1980) men and women, more than those of any previous generation, are speaking with their feet when it comes to careers: they are following paths that allow them to fully integrate their work and home lives, even if it means earning less money. As I have shown previously, for the most part, this generation is less motivated by financial aspirations than by freedom and flexibility (2008). But although the support of all junior faculty is necessary, junior faculty of color warrant particular attention, given the differences between them and their white peers that are revealed by the COACHE data. For instance, good relationships with tenured faculty and peers are especially important to them and can ameliorate some of the tensions that they disproportionately experience. Colleagues are the interpreters of policy, the purveyors of expectations, the ones who decide which outsiders will become insiders. As the COACHE data show, junior faculty can be clear about tenure expectations but dissatisfied with the relationships they form with their co-workers. And those relationships help determine their sense of self-efficacy and social acceptance, both of which are crucial to success.

As President Obama has said, “There’s no contradiction between diversity and excellence” (Boston Globe, December 4, 2008). In fact, Generation Xers and Millennials (born 1981-2000) expect academia to be a place where diversity—in all its forms—thrives. If we fail to change a system designed long ago that no longer works well, we will not only fail ourselves—we will fail society.