The Invisible Labor of Minority Professors

By Audrey Williams June  NOVEMBER 08, 2015
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The Rev. Joseph Brown, a professor of Africana studies at Southern Illinois U. at Carbondale, is sought out as a mentor by minority students. “You never know who’s going to come through the door,” he says. “It’s like the oasis in the desert for students.”

Rachel A. Griffin is used to students she doesn’t know showing up for her office hours here at Southern Illinois University. Sometimes they come to see her on her first day of class for the semester.

The stories, by now, are familiar: Often a friend has taken a course from Ms. Griffin, associate professor in the department of communication studies, and thinks she’ll have good advice. The student sits down and tearfully describes a problem he or she is counting on Ms. Griffin to help solve. Maybe it’s how to make the transition to the campus or what to do about a much-needed financial-aid check that has yet to arrive. "I’m clearly not a financial-aid adviser, but what do you do in that moment?" says Ms. Griffin. "You hand the student a Kleenex, and you get on the phone and see what you can do."

Ms. Griffin, who is biracial and identifies as black, knew when she came to Southern Illinois seven years ago that black students at the predominantly white institution would seek her out. While other professors, particularly women of any ethnicity, struggle to balance demands for mentorship and service work, faculty members of color say that their cultural, racial, or ethnic backgrounds mean they receive a disproportionate number of requests.

The hands-on attention that many minority professors willingly provide is an unheralded linchpin in institutional efforts to create an inclusive learning environment and to keep students enrolled. That invisible labor reflects what has been described as cultural taxation: the pressure faculty members of color feel to serve as role models, mentors, even surrogate parents to minority students, and to meet every institutional need for ethnic representation.

On many campuses, cultural taxation — a term coined in the 1990s by Amado M. Padilla, a professor of psychological studies in education at Stanford University — is exacerbated by a student population diversifying faster than the faculty. College-going rates have increased among minority groups, and demographic change is yielding more Hispanic high-school graduates. Meanwhile, the pipeline of minority Ph.D. students isn’t as robust, and efforts to recruit and retain minority professors are uneven at best.

Among the largest minority groups enrolled at Southern Illinois are about 3,000 black undergraduate, graduate, and professional-school students. But there are just 31 black tenured or tenure-track professors — a ratio of 100
to 1, according to institutional research data. The university’s 24 Hispanic professors who are tenured or on the tenure track are far outnumbered by the almost 1,300 Hispanic students. (Including the institution’s full-time, non-tenure-track faculty members adds 56 black and Hispanic professors to the mix.)

Retention is a priority on many campuses these days, and technology tends to undergird those efforts, with data analysis identifying students at risk of dropping out. Such measures can help, but studies suggest that minority students who have faculty mentors they can relate to tend to stick around. In a paper that outlines a framework for retaining minority students in higher education, researchers note that "informal contact between faculty and students is more critical than ever" and that colleges need to work hard at hiring positive faculty role models.

Faculty members of color nationwide describe how frequently they advise current and former underrepresented-minority students and their friends, many of them first-generation students who need extra support to navigate college life. The professors intervene on behalf of students in sticky situations with other instructors and try to educate white colleagues on the nuances of race-related issues that impact the lives of minority students. Their offices feature tissue boxes and "crying chairs." And that’s just the time spent with students. Those same faculty members are also tapped to serve on a seemingly endless stream of committees, for their "unique perspective."

A more diverse faculty could lessen the effects of cultural taxation, but administrators might not recognize how often minority professors can feel overburdened or tokenized, even when they want to do the work. When it comes to service commitments and mentorship, says Ms. Griffin, "I’m always stretched thin." And that work is unseen, she says. "Where does that get documented, in terms of what faculty of color do?"

On most campuses, it doesn’t. That can make diversifying the faculty seem less urgent, and complicate the lives of minority professors already there. Mentorship and committee work may benefit institutions, but they don’t count for tenure or promotion in the way research and publications do. Professors who carry heavy service loads do it at a risk to their careers.

José Najar, an assistant professor of history: "I’m not required to help, but I come from where they come from. I know the struggles."

José D. Najar keeps a small desk in his office next to his own, for the students, many black and Hispanic, who seek him out. "If they tell me they’re doing poorly in class, I say, ‘You come and sit here,’” says Mr. Najar, an assistant professor of history at Southern Illinois. "‘You’re doing your work, and I’m doing my work.’"

Some know him from programs through the campus’s Hispanic/Latino Resource Center; he’s also an adviser for the Latino Cultural Association. "I’m not required to help, but I come from where they come from," Mr. Najar says. "I know the struggles."
Angela J. Aguayo, an associate professor of cinema and digital culture here, is frequently asked to speak at diversity-related events. "I’ve hit points where I thought, There’s no way I can do all that I’m asked," she says. "So I have to make strategic choices."

After a recent panel for National Hispanic Heritage Month, three young women approached Ms. Aguayo, who identifies as Chicana. "I want to be like you," she remembers them saying. "They weren’t even in my department. It brought me back to that place when I was so hungry for someone who looked like me and had made it."

The Rev. Joseph A. Brown’s office in the Africana-studies department is a go-to place for minority students across Southern Illinois’s campus. Father Brown, an 18-year veteran of the faculty, has been a steady presence here, mentoring countless students, not all in minority groups, some of whom have gone on to become professors themselves. He often counsels students with little family support on how to succeed in college. Sometimes he asks a student sitting in his office a question as simple as whether he’s eaten today.

"You really do have to listen on two or three different levels," says Father Brown, a full professor. "You never know who’s going to come through the door. It’s like the oasis in the desert for students."

It feels "almost like a reunion," says Brione Lockett, a graduate assistant in the department. Mr. Lockett first met Father Brown as an undergraduate, and now he’s pursuing a master’s degree in public administration and public health. The faculty and other students in the department are a close-knit group, he says. "They make me feel like I’ve been there forever."

Students aren’t the only ones who ask minority faculty members for their perspectives or guidance. Administrators, for a different purpose, do the same. They often request that faculty members of color serve on committees and task forces of various kinds.

When Mary Yu Danico was on the tenure track at California State Polytechnic University at Pomona, she once served on a half-dozen committees — in addition to those she volunteered for herself — at the invitation of the president or dean.

"You feel flattered that they’re asking you to be on these committees," says Ms. Danico, who is Asian-American. "They say, ‘We need your voice there, we really need your perspective.’ But when you have so few people of color on campus, there’s only so many people you can ask." A sociologist, Ms. Danico is now an associate dean in the College of Environmental Design. She says that later in her career, whenever she could determine that she had been asked to serve on a committee "just to be a name," she would step down.

Faculty members of color take extra commitments in stride even as they struggle to balance them. That’s because, many say, they realize that if they don’t step up, students may not ask for or get help elsewhere, or a committee might be all white.

"We know there’s a need," says Ms. Danico. "We know what it’s like not to be represented."

Faculty members across the country report being acutely aware of the importance of serving as role models, perhaps spurring minority students’ interest in joining the professoriate.

"It absolutely matters" to black students "to have professors who look like you and are connected to the African-American experience," says Novotny Lawrence, a black man who is chair of the radio, television, and digital-media department here at Southern Illinois. "The mere presence is important, and so is being willing to listen and use your position to advocate for them."
Janice D. Hamlet quit her first academic job, she says, to escape the crushing weight of cultural taxation. More than 20 years later, as an associate professor of communication at Northern Illinois University, she finds her obligations more manageable, in part because her workplace is more diverse.

In Ms. Hamlet's first tenure-track job, at an institution she declines to name, she was the sole minority faculty member. "When I was hired, the president of the college gave me a brief compliment on my credentials," she says. "Then she said, ‘You have something extra,’ and she kind of winked at me, and I learned that the ‘extra’ was my ethnicity." Ms. Hamlet is African-American.

Word spread to black and Hispanic students that she had been hired; sometimes they would walk by the classroom where she was teaching and wave at her through the window.

Ms. Hamlet found it increasingly difficult to mentor students and advocate for them while serving on numerous committees at the behest of administrators and teaching four courses. She was also finishing her dissertation at the time. She left the job after a year.

"I was naïve enough to think that I had been hired as an assistant professor," she says, "but I really was there to be a one-person minority-affairs office." Now, at a much larger institution, students have more places to turn, she says. "I can make my contributions to students of color, and all students for that matter, and there’s not so much pressure."

Rachel Griffin, an associate professor of communication studies: When it comes to service commitments and mentorship, "I'm always stretched thin." And that work is unseen, she says. "Where does that get documented, in terms of what faculty of color do?"

Ms. Griffin, communication-studies professor at Southern Illinois, says she's gotten better at "effectively positioning myself as a bridge." That means setting limits. "I’m not saying that I don’t want students to ask me for help, but I can’t provide long-term emotional support for a student," says the professor, who earned tenure last year. She also now turns down requests for feedback on papers from students who aren’t in her classes.

"My first couple of years, I didn’t have that boundary," says Ms. Griffin, whose department chair gave her tips early on about how to deflect requests for her time. "If students asked me to read something, I would read it."

In his interviews here, says Mr. Najar, the history professor, administrators acknowledged that he could be faced with multiple service and mentoring opportunities.

"They all had one thing to say: We want to foster an environment where you can actually get tenure," he says. "I know I can always say no to things."
Open communication with administrators can help new faculty members especially balance their workload. "I encourage people who are faced with institutional service work to say, 'I'm interested in doing this, but here's what I have on my plate,'" says Richard J. Reddick, an associate professor of educational administration at the University of Texas at Austin whose research interests include cultural taxation. "We don't necessarily know we can negotiate."

For the most part, faculty members of color still struggle to get administrators to recognize cultural taxation and how it affects them. Recent action in the California State University system is an exception.

In 2014, Charles Toombs, chair of the Africana-studies department at San Diego State University and a member of the system's faculty union, joined colleagues at a Board of Trustees meeting to share a detailed account of what faculty members of color do to promote the success of minority students.

"It's a lot of work, but I willingly do it," Mr. Toombs, who is African-American, told the trustees. "It's one of the most rewarding parts of my professorship."

The appeal from Mr. Toombs and other faculty members for the system to acknowledge their extra workload paid off. The faculty union's most recent contract takes note of it and includes a new program through which any professor with "exceptional service commitments or excessive student-contact hours" can apply for "assigned time," which is a partial release from their regular duties.

How to Handle the Invisible Workload
Here's some advice on how to better manage teaching, research, and disproportionate amounts of mentoring and service work, from faculty members who have had to strike that balance.

Don't Say Yes Right Away
"Have a discussion with whoever asked you to sit on a committee and say, 'I want to make sure I get my research done so that I'm prepared when I go up for tenure. If I do this, something else has to go. What do you suggest?''"

Make It Count for Them — and You
"Ask students to help you with your research. That's a way of interacting with them and having a mentoring relationship with them, while you get the work done that you need to."

—Janice D. Hamlet, associate professor of communication, Northern Illinois U.

Enlist the Help of an Ally
"I needed a way as a pre-tenure faculty member to say no if I needed to. My white, male department chair played an amazing role in protecting my time. He said, when people ask you to do things say, 'I'm pre-tenure. Let me check in with the chair.' That was vital because it gave me a way to get off the hook."

—Rachel A. Griffin, associate professor of communication studies, Southern Illinois U.
Think of the Big Picture
"I tell junior faculty members, You don’t have to do everything. In the long run, if you don’t take care of yourself, you’re not going to be here for the students you want to serve."
—Mary Yu Danico, associate dean, College of Environmental Design, California State Polytechnic U. at Pomona

Keep the Goal in Mind
"It’s hard to say no — especially to students. My advice to young tenure-track faculty is to just balance everything out carefully because the service work isn’t going to be of significant value when you go through the tenure process."
—Charles Toombs, department chair and associate professor of Africana studies, San Diego State U.

"Just to have the recognition that on the CSU campuses there are service commitments that faculty of color have is a positive step," Mr. Toombs says.
At other institutions, pressure from students has pushed administrators to do more to recruit underrepresented-minority faculty members.

A black student group at the University of Cincinnati has demanded that it hire at least 16 black staff and senior faculty members over the next three years. Students at Yale University have been discussing the lack of faculty diversity there since one student put up a poster last month comparing the student and faculty populations. Last week Yale said it would spend more than $50 million over the next five years to expand the faculty’s diversity. And at Ithaca College, a series of racially charged incidents led to student protests in recent weeks. The New York college has announced a new diversity plan that includes a goal to hire more minority faculty members.

At Southern Illinois, efforts to shift the makeup of the faculty revolve around a trio of approaches. There’s a program designed to give underrepresented-minority professors access to seasoned faculty members who can guide them through the tenure and promotion process, a chancellor-provided "diversity opportunity hire" fund to recruit minority tenure-track professors, and a statewide program that awards fellowships to minority graduate students seeking degrees that lead to faculty or staff positions at an Illinois university.

Linda McCabe Smith, the associate chancellor for institutional diversity, knows how the workload can escalate for minority professors. She was a tenured faculty member at Southern Illinois before moving into administration.

"I have walked the walk," says Ms. Smith, an African-American. "I know it can be overwhelming."
She talks with deans and with the provost "so that we can work to keep these individuals protected as much as possible," she says.
Ms. Smith says diversifying the faculty is "an ongoing process." Ms. Griffin and other minority professors and students see limited progress. "More people available to serve the population that we have would help," Ms. Griffin says.

Though minority students often identify with professors who look like them, faculty members of color believe more white colleagues on their campuses could step up.

"Diversity is everybody’s work," says Mr. Reddick, of the University of Texas. Sharing a racial or ethnic background with students isn’t necessary to mentor them, he says. "White professors can connect at some level. Being someone who cares about a student is sufficient."

Still, many faculty members of color will probably continue to form a support system for minority students.

"I’m honored that someone trusts me enough to send a student to me," says Ms. Griffin. But, she says, "we need to have a more transparent dialogue about the implications of recruiting the number of students of color that we do."

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