Cluster Hiring for Faculty Diversification

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Black, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, and Pacific Islander faculty account for 36% of California community colleges' academic tenured and tenure-track faculty, while white faculty account for over 56% of the overall group statewide as of spring 2022 (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, n.d.). The California Community Colleges system has been striving for diversity, equity, and inclusion for decades, and yet the diversity of the student population is still not represented in the professoriate. Research shows that a diverse faculty enhances the overall educational quality and outcomes for every student and not just minoritized groups (Piercy, et.al., 2005). Furthermore, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office has stated a vision focused on faculty diversification: "By building a faculty and staff that look like the students and communities we serve and committing fully to putting diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) and anti-racism at the heart of our work, we can — and will — take a giant leap toward being a system that truly works for all our students" (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2022.)

Diversity among community colleges and higher education institutions has not caught up to the reality of the diversity of the students they educate, nurture, mentor, and support. Too often students from underrepresented communities embark on and complete their entire collegiate experience without ever meeting or seeing a Black, Latinx, Native American, or Asian Pacific Islander instructor at the front of the classroom. Another significant and glaring structural inequity that cannot help but affect the performance of the diverse students of the California Community Colleges system is the lack of diversity in the STEM fields. This problem becomes even more pronounced as STEM graduates go on to interview for STEM graduate degree programs, where they are often the only Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC) in the applicant cohort, an issue which is then often actualized and mirrored in the make-up of the college and university STEM faculty.

College students represent some of the most diverse communities, with over 66% being from Hispanic, African American, Asian, Native American, Filipino, and Pacific Islander ethnicities (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, n.d.). Given that the community college system has not yet reached its goal of a truly diverse faculty, the time has come to try something different. If community colleges across California truly intend to diversify their academic faculty, they should also be institutions aware of and invested in the importance of recruiting and retaining diverse faculty members; in this way, they would ensure commitment to dismantling systems of racial inequities in higher education. Public higher educational institutions should look like and represent the diverse communities they serve, and cluster hiring is one promising and effective way to do that.

DEFINING CLUSTER HIRING

Cluster hiring is an approach that aims to aggressively onboard diverse candidates by intentionally using strategies to promote success in the hiring of historically underrepresented faculty instructors: Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian Pacific Islander. Cluster hiring with an explicit intention of increasing diverse faculty is an approach that institutions should consider, as it has shown to be effective in hiring underrepresented, minoritized groups (Smith, et.al., 2004). This hiring strategy could also significantly impact the overall retention of employees of color by contributing to a systemic cultural implementation of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility that creates a welcoming and safe environment for BIPOC faculty.

Cluster hiring empowers diverse faculty members and creates a sense of community. University professors Cynthia Flores and Selenne Bañuelos describe their experience with cluster hiring, stating, "Since there are two of us, we can validate each other's perspectives as Latinas, allowing for a stronger influence within the university" (Bañuelos & Flores, 2019). The sense of community promoted by cluster hiring helps create a cohort experience that is highly impactful for retaining diverse faculty members. Research shows that educational institutions that make diversity goals explicit and prioritized, that gain support from deans and department heads, and that establish an infrastructure to support interdisciplinary collaborations see an increase in diversity in their faculty (Urban University for Health, 2015). For example, San Diego State University successfully increased its number of Black faculty members by committing to a cluster hire focused on serving Black populations (Wood, 2021), and Emory University added cluster hiring to its processes to successfully increase its hiring of underrepresented groups from 15 percent to 51 percent (Freeman, 2019).

UNDERREPRESENTATION AND BURN OUT

Faculty members from underrepresented communities often feel taxed and burnt out from being the only voice of DEIA in their departments or colleges. When racially marginalized and stigmatized faculty members feel these effects of tokenism, taxation, and marginalization, the result is known as racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2008); thus, colleges need to not only attract, hire, and onboard diverse faculty but also to empower and retain them. The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC) has developed a set of modules in an open Canvas course titled *Model Hiring Principles and Procedures*. [1] The course contains a

plethora of resources and tools to frame hiring processes through an equity-minded lens; it also contains a post-hiring section that provides a model for new faculty orientations and mentor programs that could be tailored for any campus. Additional information and detailed practices to support mentorship programs, both informal and formal, can be found in the ASCCC *Mentorship Handbook* (ASCCC, 2021). Colleges need to be intentional about providing and investing resources into supporting faculty of color after they are hired and as they progress through the tenure and review process.

Furthermore, to address the lack of diversity in STEM faculty members, a commitment to intentionally recruiting faculty of color should be a goal. This goal can be achieved with focused recruitments, pipelines, and reaching out to Historically Black Colleges and Universities and organizations aimed at promoting DEIA, such as the National Society of Black Engineers, the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers, the Black Healthcare & Medical Association, the Society of Women Engineers, the National Society of Black Physicists, and the American Indian Science and Engineering Society.

Another challenge is the importance of pre-hiring processes that include creating the job description and announcement. When writing job descriptions and announcements for the recruitment process, an appropriate and good practice is to name the student population of the college and the demographics that the college is seeking to serve. Faculty should consult with their college human resource office representatives to discuss how to write a fair and equitable announcement that is focused on the goal of serving students; human resource office personnel and legal counsel should know how to avoid any legal barriers.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS FOR CLUSTER HIRING

The ASCCC Equity and Diversity Action Committee offers the following suggestions regarding cluster hiring:

- Explicitly state cluster hiring as a primary goal with a focus on looking for scholars who are experienced, invested, and specialized in diversity as their primary focus or expertise.
- Engage faculty and employee resource and affinity groups early; employee resource and affinity groups can help market and announce the job postings.
- Provide robust diversity training to search committee members and ensure diverse committee representation.
- Ensure student engagement in the hiring process and inclusion on screening committees.
- Ask for support from administrators with a plan for weathering leadership changes.
- Ensure recruitment efforts are aligned with retention efforts.
  - Support new faculty hires with orientation, mentorship, and regular year-long supportive check-ins focused on the needs expressed by faculty of color.
  - Be certain that the support of BIPOC campus communities does not become a burden falling solely on the most impacted and underserved groups. Instead, ensure an equitable distribution of supporting efforts and a commitment to racial equity from every campus employee.
- Ensure applicant pools include diverse candidates for STEM cluster hiring.

- Audit and assess the cluster hire results.

Colleges need to evaluate and reconsider existing hiring practices and policies and to promote new practices that evolve the community college system and move colleges toward becoming the antiracist, inclusive institutions they aim to be.

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1. Access to this course can be found on the ASCCC website at asccc.org and at https://ccconlineed.instructure.com/courses/5733 (https://ccconlineed.instructure.com/courses/5733).