Faculty Diversification Must Accelerate, Report Says

> New study finds that U.S. academe can reach true faculty diversity within a generation, but that colleges and universities have to think bigger—and work together.

By Colleen Flaherty (/users/colleen-flaherty)

// December 6, 2022

College and universities will need to diversify their faculties at about 3.5 times the current pace if they want the professoriate to reflect the U.S. population in terms of race by 2050. And they'll need to work together to do it. This is the upshot of a new analysis (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-022-01495-4) in *Nature Human Behavior* that challenges the persistent idea that faculty diversity amounts to a "pipeline" problem.

"Overall, the lack of progress on faculty diversity in the U.S. is a collective failure perpetuated by our focus on institution-level changes," wrote authors J. Nathan Matias, assistant professor of communication and information science at Cornell University; Neil A. Lewis, assistant professor of communication at Cornell; and Elan C. Hope, assistant professor of psychology at North Carolina State University. "Fortunately, the available evidence offers hope for achieving faculty parity in our lifetime. This bold goal may seem small compared to university press releases and interminable when viewed as a hole-riddled pipeline. Yet, when pursued at a systemic level in an evidence-based manner, faculty parity could be within our reach."

Looking at data from the U.S. Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, the researchers found that the racial diversity of U.S. tenure-track and tenured faculty is not increasing any faster than the diversity of the American public. Across 1,250 institutions, the percentage of underrepresented tenure-line faculty members increased by 0.23 percentage points each year on average between 2013 and 2020. Meanwhile, the U.S. Census projects that the percentage of these same demographic groups among the general population will increase by 0.2 percentage points per year.

At this rate, the paper says, "higher education will never achieve demographic parity among tenure-track faculty."

Among the most selective and the most research-intensive institutions, in particular, the percentage of underrepresented tenure-line faculty members increased by 0.22 percentage points per year in the period studied. The rate was a bit higher among liberal arts colleges: an increase of 0.33 percentage points per year.

Projecting ahead at these rates of change, the percentage of underrepresented tenure-line faculty at liberal arts colleges in 2060 would be 19 percentage points behind the general population, compared to a gap of 22 percentage points across institutions studied.

Regarding the common "leaky pipeline" analogy that attributes a lack of faculty diversity to a dearth of available candidates, the authors say it "underestimates of the diversity of higher education, because it fails to account for the fact that many people can and do re-enter academic pathways after time away. As a result,

the pipeline-repair model directs institutions and researchers towards imagining small changes rather than more substantive sector-wide partnerships that could achieve parity within several decades."

Urging higher education to think bigger, the authors ask, what if higher education as a sector committed to demographic parity by 2050—and, if it did so, "would it have access to qualified candidates?"

Accounting for time to tenure, the researchers estimate that between 2013 and 2020, 45,309 Ph.D.s from 2007 onward from underrepresented groups were not hired into tenure-track positions, with the number increasing by some 3,300 people year on average during that time. So, over all, since 2007, the number of unhired Ph.D.s from underrepresented groups is equivalent to about 11 percent of all tenure-line faculty members in the U.S. in 2020, the paper says.

Circling back to their question, the authors say, "Clearly, there has been an increase in the pool of qualified candidates from underrepresented groups."

While colleges and universities are falling behind on their faculty diversity goals, there is reason for hope, according to the paper: "We estimate the sector could reach demographic parity by 2050 by collectively increasing underrepresented faculty by one percentage point per year—an increase of 0.78 percentage points on the current rate of change."

Achieving demographic parity is "impossible without a collective effort," however, the authors stress, as "individualistic solutions will not solve the larger systemic problem." Cluster-hiring initiatives, for instance, can contribute to the problem of faculty "poaching."

Coordinated innovation, along with funding, are required to move the needle, the authors continue.

"We must consistently provide people with the resources needed to do their work, pay them what they are worth, provide consistent and predictable opportunities for raises and advancement (outside of tenure), and be transparent in these practices. This financial commitment must run concurrently with the commitment to innovation, to maximize the potential for long-lasting change."

Higher education also "must acknowledge and address" higher education's history of exclusion and its "contemporary implications for how the sector values the work of faculty of color," then "commit to empowering leaders who do more than talk about these issues."

Perhaps most significantly, this commitment "must be shared across institutions to make meaningful shifts towards parity by 2050."

Lewis told *Inside Higher Ed* that if institutions take away anything from his analysis, he hopes it's that they "won't achieve the diversity goals they so often profess to have" at current rates, and, simultaneously, that it's "possible for them to meet their goals."

Lewis—who has previously written (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-022-01339-1) about diversity "storytelling," or how institutions' diversity, equity and inclusion policies don't always translate to action—said his newest results were only surprising "if you take all of the university press releases about their diversity initiatives at face value."

"Lots of new initiatives get announced without deeper thought about the broader systems in which those initiatives are expected to operate, and what those systems mean for the effectiveness of the new initiatives," he continued. "This paper shows what happens—how little progress gets made when you don't fully consider the broader system."

As for how Lewis and his team chose to measure faculty diversity against the general U.S. population, he said it's "in alignment with the ways that universities themselves talk about these issues. The population as a whole is increasing in diversity, and student bodies are becoming more diverse as well. So many universities talk about the need for the faculty to start reflecting those changes."

How can faculty diversity be accelerated? Lewis said he was hesitant about "speeding up the process too much. There is a danger, as we've learned from the tech world, in moving too fast and breaking things." Using another analogy, he compared colleges and universities to aircraft carriers that can't quickly change direction. That said, he added, "with all hands on deck" and the parity goal in mind, an increase of 0.78 percentage points on the current rate of change "is an achievable goal."

Part of the struggle in faculty diversity conversations is a "misunderstanding of the timelines over which change is possible," Lewis also said. "We overestimate how much progress is possible in the short run but underestimate how much progress is possible in the long run. It's not possible to completely transform these universities overnight—these are institutions with long histories, cultures and processes that have put them on the trajectories they are currently on."

Asked about the possibility that the last two years, with their many institutional commitments to racial justice, have led to unprecedented rates of faculty diversification that aren't yet apparent due to the slow nature of academic hiring, Matias, one of Lewis's co-authors, said this was unlikely.

"Up through the end of the 2020–21 academic year, our statistical models don't find any dramatic change in faculty diversity," he said. "Whether work on faculty diversity is a fight against the current or universities are just drifting, U.S. higher education is continuing on average at the same pace it has for years."

Matias added, "People often believe that while inequality was bad in the past, recent developments are solving the problem, even when that's not empirically true. Psychologists call this the mythology of racial progress (https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/the-mythology-of-racial-progress/614173/). That's why it's important to build our understanding on the data and develop realistic, evidence-based plans for change."

The *Nature Human Behavior* paper certainly isn't the first to warn that that relatively little progress has been made on faculty diversity. An analysis released last week by the Education Trust painted a troubling picture (https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/12/02/report-finds-faculty-diversity-isnt-meeting-student-needs) of faculty diversity over the last 15 years, contrasting those findings with existing research on how faculty diversity contributes to success for

students, including but not limited to those students from underrepresented groups. (The Ed Trust paper defined racial parity as underrepresented minority faculty representation relative to the student population instead of the U.S. population, as in Lewis and Matias's study, but the findings were similar.)

Another study from 2019 found (https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/01/06/faculty-members-color-see-illusion-inclusion) faculty diversity increased very little nationwide from 2013 to 2017, with large research institutions showing the least progress of all.

Miguel Centeno, Musgrave Professor of Sociology at Princeton University, whose is currently analyzing underrepresented minority representation among the faculty of seven disciplines at 60 different colleges and universities, praised the new paper Monday, particularly its "projections of future goals."

Still, Centeno said there's value in research that isn't "too aggregate," as some fields and institutions do show "areas of moving ahead, and others where no motion is visible."

Centeno's working paper, for instance, found a few significant patterns in the origins and professional homes of underrepresented minority professors: institutions with more resources seem to play a predominant role in hiring these faculty members, while historically Black colleges and universities, Latin American universities, large publics and the most selective institutions "all play important roles in producing these professors." The paper notes that institutions including the University of Michigan and the University of California system play important roles "in not only preparing future faculty, but in hiring them, as well."

By Colleen Flaherty (/users/colleen-flaherty)

Colleen Flaherty (mailto:colleen.flaherty@insidehighered.com) , **Reporter**, covers faculty issues for *Inside Higher Ed.* Prior to joining the publication in 2012, Colleen was military editor at the *Killeen Daily Herald,* outside Fort Hood, Texas. Before that, she covered government and land use issues for the *Greenwich Time* and Hersam Acorn Newspapers in her home state of Connecticut. After graduating from McGill University in Montreal in 2005 with a degree in English literature, Colleen taught English and English as a second language in public schools in the Bronx, N.Y. She earned her M.S.Ed. from City University of New York Lehman College in 2008 as part of the New York City Teaching Fellows program.