

Creating an Inclusive Leadership Environment in Higher Education

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Abstract:

Our qualitative research study explored four primary questions: 1) whether and how diverse administrators experience subtle, covert and/or overt discrimination in their work environments; 2) what organizational barriers they may have encountered in formal processes such as compensation, advancement, performance evaluation and discipline; 3) the mental and physical impact of perceived discrimination; and 4) specific strategies that administrators have adopted or implemented to overcome behavioral and organizational barriers.

Keywords: Higher Education | Administration | Management | Diversity | Discrimination

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**Leadership
Environment in
Higher Education**

By Edna Chun and Alvin Evans

What is the day-to-day work climate like for diverse administrators in higher education? For our new book, *Diverse Administrators in Peril: The New Indentured Class in Higher Education* (Paradigm, October 2011) we conducted in-depth research on the experiences of diverse administrators and probed the dimensions of the collision between everyday work experiences and asymmetrical systems of power. Using ethnographic research techniques, we have chronicled the persistence of deeply-rooted patterns of subtle discrimination through the narratives of administrators in public and private research universities. We use the analogy of “indentured servitude” to portray the tenuous

they may have encountered in formal processes such as compensation, advancement, performance evaluation and discipline; 3) the mental and physical impact of perceived discrimination; and 4) specific strategies that administrators have adopted or implemented to overcome behavioral and organizational barriers.

Survey Process

For purposes of the study, we contacted administrators in public and private research universities in all geographic regions at the level of director and up and invited them to participate in an online survey. Due to the distinct challenges faced by university presidents as well as the

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and uncertain employment conditions of administrators who typically function in “at will” employment relationships without security or stability.

Unlike faculty whose careers promote individualistic accomplishments solidified through the tenure process, university administrators usually work without employment protection to support the success of the entire institution. Due to their lack of protection by unions, civil service requirements or tenure, administrators at higher levels in the educational hierarchy usually serve at the pleasure of an executive officer or the president. In difficult budget eras, faculty often call attention to the number of administrators and their salaries, based upon a view of administrative positions as in competition with the purposes of the instructional enterprise. Yet many are unaware of the continual balancing act involved in the daily work lives of administrators or the constant barrage of challenges posed by their precarious employment conditions.

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significant body of existing research on presidents, we chose not to include them in this study.

Our primary initial point of contact was chief human resource officers, and we asked them to participate in an online survey and to connect us with other administrators on campus. Following completion of the online survey, we invited respondents to participate in a follow-up interview. The interviews provided a rich resource and detailed commentary on the working environment in the research university. Our survey sample was diverse and balanced in terms of race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. The sample reflected a high level of educational attainment and included representation from all major divisions of the university.

Research Findings

The research findings document the shape of discriminatory experiences — i.e., how variation is produced in institutional processes that control access to opportunity, resources and career success. For example, significantly higher levels of mistreatment due to race were reported by African American administrators when

compared to white administrators. African American administrators also rated their own degree of decision-making authority compared to the level of their position as significantly lower than white administrators. Similarly, Hispanic administrators reported their decision-making authority as lower than white administrators.

In the book, we share specific accounts that illuminate the interactions, behaviors and processes that serve as the medium for subtle discrimination. One example: a high-ranking white female academic administrator relates how earlier in her career her supervisor had combined bullying with unethical demands toward her. Since the supervisor

frustration in their roles due to uncertainty about the extent to which their work was genuinely supported. The interviews also underscore the lack of psychological safety in the work environment. A number of minority and/or female interview respondents expressed genuine fear and concern about sharing their stories, due to the potential for retaliation or retribution. As a result, we have eliminated identifying factors from the narrative accounts.

Our study documents the persistence of a covert system of subtle discrimination in the administrative ranks that has replaced the more blatant forms of oppression characteristic of the pre-Civil Rights era. This system

[The] chief diversity officers and affirmative action officers [we] interviewed ... expressed frustration in their roles due to uncertainty about the extent to which their work was genuinely supported.

had the ear of the administration, she felt her only choice was to leave the institution. The female administrator clearly believed it to be a case of gender discrimination and knew that her supervisor really wanted a male in her role. Lack of support from supervisors, differential treatment, lack of participation in decision making, bullying and forms of emotional tyranny including threats and psychological domination were some of the concerns reported by the diverse administrators in our study.

The interview narratives in our study reveal that the contours of subtle discrimination are remarkably similar, irrespective of institutional prestige, public/private university status and geographical location. And due to the relative isolation of diverse administrators, the impact of discriminatory experiences is significantly intensified. Diverse administrators are not always aware of the commonality of their experiences, since they are often the “solo” individual representing diversity in upper-level administration.

Ironically, chief diversity officers and affirmative action officers interviewed for the study expressed

is reinforced and reenacted in institutional settings through cumulative, everyday micro-inequities — small, repetitive, yet difficult-to-prove acts of exclusion and marginalization. Exclusionary behaviors, acts and events exact a particularly high personal and professional toll upon diverse administrators. And the precarious employment conditions of administrators provide an opportunity structure for the exercise of discriminatory behaviors and practices.

Take, for example, the account of one study participant, an African American female administrator. She describes how her supervisor described her in an open university meeting:

‘Oh, I don’t mean you. You’re different, you’re an Oreo.’ ... I said to him, ‘I think most people would recognize that as being a racial slur.’ And he says, ‘Oh I don’t mean that. You’re one of them that has common sense.’ That was when I asked him to please stop talking because any more compliments from him might really upset me ... A couple of days after that meeting, I went and talked to him [about what he had said] and used that as a teachable instant.

She proceeds to describe how her supervisor continued to single her out, sometimes calling her late in the evening to give her work assignments due early the next day. The stress she experienced due to the need for constant vigilance was, in fact, life threatening. As she reports:

When I had that discriminatory supervisor, I had extremely high blood pressure. I was on three medications. They were at the maximum dosage and my blood pressure was still uncontrollable. My doctor kept telling me I needed to quit my job because ... I was going to have a stroke or heart attack because my blood pressure was so high. [Since being] terminated ... I don't take any medication. It was clearly the stress from that job.

Key aspects of this survey participant's story are echoed in a number of other narratives in the study. Her experiences reveal the severe mental and physical toll arising from discriminatory treatment. In fact, an emerging body of research identifies perceived discrimination as a unique and chronic stressor, creating differential vulnerability to risk factors that affect health outcomes.

The minority stress model developed by leading researchers is an important construct that captures the

double standards with severe consequences for missteps and the need for constant vigilance in response to day-to-day micro-inequities and micro-incursions.

For example, one administrator we interviewed — a black affirmative action officer — describes how his new white male supervisor did not value his years-long experience and dismissed his expertise, despite his documented record of exemplary service. The administrator explains that he felt he was measured by a different standard, having to perform better and be better in every transaction. Due to the significant stress he experienced, he chose early retirement from the university.

An important focus in our exploration of the leadership environment in the research university is the demographic context of university leadership. Nearly 85 percent of the top-ranked positions in doctorate-granting institutions are held by whites and 66 percent are held by males. The only exception to this pattern is the chief diversity officer position — 70.8 percent of these positions are held by African-Americans, with white incumbents holding 12.3 percent.

A significant body of empirical findings over the last two decades has examined the explanatory potential of relational demography on workplace outcomes,

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incongruence between a stigmatized individual's needs and the social structures and discriminatory behaviors that deplete and exceed adaptive resources. Diverse administrators interviewed for our study report the cumulative stress arising from their multi-marginality and the need to perform and succeed in the university environment. Their accounts reveal the application of

supporting the proposition that those in power tend to prefer others similar to themselves. Researchers have documented the intensification of the similarity-attraction paradigm and in-group preference at higher levels of the organization as job responsibilities become more consequential, non-routine and amorphous.

Best Practices and Future Recommendations

In our study, diverse administrators made no bones about the challenges they face in gaining the respect and authority associated with a high-level position with responsibility for supervision of largely majority staffs. As one African American female administrator explained:

We don't control things we should control ... It's a guessing game. I don't have much say in my own budget; hiring—very limited in determining what the level of the position should be; serving on committees — there are some committees that [someone in] my position should represent, [however], I don't even know if I will get an opportunity to be there, nor am I participating in the discussions that would [inform] that decision ...

Within the university environment, we note the absence of attention or acknowledgement of the influence of relational demography upon the career success of diverse administrators. Our study also includes an extensive analysis of how differential treatment can occur in the processes of hiring, promotion and advancement, compensation, and discipline.


We also studied the role of bystanders and the tendency of majority group members to make light of harassing acts or to explain them as isolated incidents. As a white male academic administrator perceptively explains, majority group members on his predominantly white campus perceive discriminatory incidents as isolated events and frequently imply that women and minorities are over sensitive. As he states:

... they have it in their heads ... that racism, homophobia and gender discrimination don't really exist here. And so, there's always an explanation as to why so-and-so said this ... 'Oh well, you know him', ... or 'oh that's just an isolated incident.' [But] [t]hese isolated incidents keep happening over and over again ...

The belief in a just system causes some bystanders to blame the victims of discrimination. And we see through the survey's narrative accounts how acts of subtle discrimination escape institutional notice under the cloak of meritocratic justification. The administrative system itself contains few, if any, safeguards to protect diverse administrators from such exclusionary treatment.

The overarching purpose of our research is to assist university leaders, human resource and diversity officers, faculty and key governance groups in the development of more inclusive, empowering leadership practices that replace hierarchical, coercive models and reflect the democratic purposes of higher education. Diverse administrators themselves expressed the hope that the study would contribute to the improvement of their working conditions and would increase awareness of the challenges they face.

A number of human resource professionals in our sample articulated their desire to influence the change process. Yet, surprisingly, only a few HR professionals offered examples of systemic approaches, initiatives or programs they have implemented to counteract the impact of subtle discrimination in organizational processes and campus culture. This finding may be due to the often secondary role of human resources in the organizational hierarchy as well as the lack of explicit identification of diversity issues as a human resource responsibility. One prominent HR professional noted the lack of acknowledgement of subtle discrimination by HR practitioners that hinders efforts to correct existing practices.

The poignant yet courageous testimonials of diverse administrators point the way to needed structural, cultural and behavioral changes that will strengthen employment stability for administrators and ensure their retention. Since talent is the driver of institutional vitality, these changes will not only enhance the success of diverse administrators, but will immeasurably contribute to the dynamism, viability and competitiveness of our American institutions of higher education. 

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