

# Affirmative Activism: Report of the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of African American Faculty Members in English

AFFIRMATIVE action has visibly increased the presence of students and faculty members of color in English departments. Applicant pools are no longer exclusively white. A look at the racial demographics of English studies in the twenty-first century shows, however, that affirmative action can take us only so far. We are calling now for the next step, a concerted and consistent kind of action, which we call affirmative activism. Affirmative action ensured that applicants of color would be considered in hiring and admissions processes; affirmative activism changes the culture and climate of the profession.

Consider the following statistics, while keeping in mind that about 12% of the United States population report themselves as African Americans:

In fall 2003, only 6.2% of new tenure-track assistant professors in all disciplines were African Americans.

Only 3.0% of tenured faculty members at the rank of full professor in all disciplines in degree-granting, Title IV participating, not-for-profit domestic institutions are African Americans.

In fall 2003, 57.9% of full-time faculty members at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were African American; only 4.0% of full-time faculty members at all other institutions were African American (*IPEDS*).

Of the 40 institutions producing the most African American BAs going on for PhDs in English in the thirty-three-year period 1973 to 2005, 20 are HBCUs.

Over the last thirty years many prestigious universities have amassed very poor records of producing African American BA recipients who went on to complete a PhD in English.

Cornell; Duke; Harvard; Indiana University; Johns Hopkins; New York University; Notre Dame; Ohio State; University of Maryland; University of Michigan; University of Texas, Austin; University of Wisconsin, Madison; and University of Southern California have each produced no more than six, and most have produced only one.

Of the approximately 400 institutions that have graduated African American undergraduates who have gone on to complete a PhD in English, 192 produced only one in the past thirty-three years.

As reported on the Survey of Earned Doctorates, from 1973 to 2005, 2.5% of the 52,480 doctorates in English and literature were earned by African Americans; in all disciplines the figure was 3.8% of 1,379,380 doctoral degree recipients over the same thirty-three years.

How can English departments and their faculties improve the pathways by which African Americans are invited to enter and remain in the profession of English studies? An ad hoc committee of the Association of Departments of English tackled this question in late 2005. Responding to English department chairs who report they would gladly recruit more faculty members of

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*The ADE Executive Committee appointed the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of African American Faculty Members in English in March 2005. The Ad Hoc Committee met in December 2005 and April 2006. The ADE Executive Committee approved the report at its meeting 30 December 2006.*

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color if they could find them, the committee reviewed a wide range of statistics and scholarship on the question (see Steward). To make the data manageable, the ADE Executive Committee decided to narrow the present study to African Americans, unanimously agreeing that parallel research on other racial groups should follow on this project.

After reviewing the statistics and scholarship, the committee agreed that the most serious problem is the scarcity of African American undergraduate English majors who go on to earn the PhD. According to data gathered by the MLA, those African Americans who do earn the PhD in English have an excellent chance of landing a tenure-track job. Available evidence suggests that African American junior faculty members receive tenure at a lower rate than their white colleagues, but data are sparse about how these colleagues fare on the tenure track (see MLA 66). We did, however, find a wealth of ideas for ways to bring more African American undergraduates through the profession's portals, as well as to recruit and retain African American faculty members. We also canvassed those English departments with the strongest records of graduating African Americans from their PhD programs, to learn what they do to support those students during their graduate studies.

Rather than merely describe and decry the current situation for African American faculty members in English, the committee resolved to produce a list of actions English department chairs can take—or encourage their institutions to take—toward serving three purposes:

- improve the conditions for and increase the numbers of African American undergraduate students making it all the way through to tenured-faculty status
- improve recruitment and retention of African American doctoral candidates
- improve recruitment and retention of African American faculty members

Not every one of these affirmative-activism steps is possible at every school. But if enough English department chairs were to follow through on just two or three of these suggested actions, the pipeline for African Americans in English studies could be dramatically improved.

## Recommendations: Actions English Chairs Can Carry Out in Their Departments

### *For Undergraduate Programs*

- Participate in or establish partnerships with secondary schools to make early contact with promising African American students (e.g., through service learning, tutoring, summer courses and institutes).
- Initiate a modest fund to cover one campus visit by an African American undergraduate major in your department who has been admitted to a graduate program; make contact with the graduate program on the student's behalf before the visit.
- Provide opportunities for large numbers of English majors to gather in one place (e.g., lecture classes, social events) in order to make African American English majors visible to one another.
- Give students research to do. Stephen Cole and Elinor Barber write, "The more heavily undergraduates can be involved in research, the greater the likelihood that they will select college teaching as a career. Programs, therefore, should be instituted that offer students the opportunity to do research" (253).
- Regularly canvass all instructors of introductory English courses to identify promising African American students (or charge the undergraduate studies director to do so).
- Make students aware of the McNair postbaccalaureate program that aids undergraduates on their way to doctoral programs.
- Get connected with recipients and finalists of the Hurston-Hughes Legacy Award and College Language Association (CLA) Margaret Walker Creative Writing Prize, as well as participants in the Callaloo Creative Writing Workshops, to let them know of graduate school opportunities.
- Sponsor a few African American undergraduates each year to attend (with a faculty member) meetings with significant African American participation like CLA, Society for the Study of the Multiethnic Literature of the United States, or the African Studies Association.
- Create links to diverse campus programs and organizations on your departmental Web page.

Ensure that African American and pan-African literature and culture are visible and valued in your department's curriculum and exams.

#### *For Graduate Programs*

Establish rotating recruiting teams of faculty members who annually visit some of the undergraduate institutions that produce substantial numbers of African American English majors, especially HBCUs. The majority-white institutions that have graduated the largest numbers of English majors who are African American over the past thirty years are Stanford and Yale (11 each); Princeton and UNC Chapel Hill (10 each); Brown and UCLA (9 each); CUNY City College, CUNY Queens College, Columbia, Rutgers, UC Berkeley, and the Universities of Illinois and Pennsylvania (8 each); and Georgetown (7).

Form partnerships between African American doctoral candidates in graduate programs and African American faculty members in non-doctoral-granting institutions to expand mentoring and advising networks.

Identify undergraduate programs that sent successful African American graduate students to your department and try to establish mentoring connections to similar students earlier in their undergraduate careers.

Ensure that graduate admissions committees retain competitive applicants who self-identify as members of underrepresented groups to the last round of graduate admission decisions.

Review admissions decisions to ensure equity, as is regularly done for hiring decisions. If a discriminatory pattern emerges, the chair should intervene.

Ensure that faculty members who serve on admissions committees are well informed about colleges such as HBCUs that have historically produced significant numbers of BA recipients who have gone on to earn PhDs in English.

Be active and visible in taking advantage of institutional programs such as visitation days for prospective graduate students.

Collaborate with the graduate school in identifying prospective graduate students from

underrepresented groups who are interested in English and in making sure they attend recruitment events on campus.

Admit a cohort of graduate students of color into each entering class.

Reallocate internal resources to create "topping off" fellowships for graduate students from underrepresented groups, as is commonly done in senior faculty searches or for hires in highly competitive fields.

Encourage students to work with senior scholars in the department, particularly in fields outside their primary area of specialization.

Share with beginning African American graduate students the current MLA statistics about average time to completion of degree and placement rates for African American PhDs in tenure-track jobs.

Counsel African American PhD students to finish the dissertation before accepting a tenure-track job. Writing a dissertation during the first years of a tenure-track job makes earning tenure even more difficult.

#### *For Recruitment and Retention of Junior Faculty Members*

Identify targets of opportunity instead of always waiting for candidates to surface in a national pool.

Attend conference talks of potential candidates and talk with them about their future plans.

Invite targets of opportunity to campus as part of regularly scheduled lecture series.

Enrich candidates' campus visit experiences by providing opportunities for the candidates to meet with a diverse group of faculty and staff members from across the institution.

Show visiting job candidates a wide range of neighborhoods where they might choose to live.

Make job offers more attractive by arranging partner accommodations, facilitating cross-disciplinary contacts, and demonstrating sensitivity to candidates' special needs and situations.

Start building curriculum and scholarly strength in African American literature and culture, whether or not your department already has African American faculty members in place and whether or not African

- American faculty members you may hire will be specialists in that area.
- Make cluster hires where resources allow, with the goal of reaching critical mass for underrepresented groups in the department or college, including senior hires in clusters when possible.
- Do not give job candidates the sense that the department assumes they will serve as the sole or primary faculty adviser to students of color.
- Assign no more advising responsibilities to junior faculty members of color than other junior faculty members.
- Be supportive of a new junior faculty hire who asks to postpone coming to campus in order to accept a postdoctoral fellowship.
- Monitor junior faculty service, informal as well as formal, and make recommendations for prioritizing. Protect African American faculty members from service overloads while respecting their ethic of service; be sure they know the fine art of saying no.
- Be aware of the double service load that sometimes comes with a joint appointment. If the junior faculty person is appointed half time in English and half in another program such as ethnic studies or women's and gender studies, that person should be carrying no more than half the service commitments of colleagues with one hundred percent appointments in English.
- Where African American junior faculty members are eligible for released time to support their research, consider granting service release in place of teaching release if building the teaching record is a priority.
- Build a culture of inclusion that improves the climate for African American faculty members by inviting them to participate in team teaching, reading groups, writing groups, and social occasions.
- Give African American faculty members opportunities to teach advanced courses in their fields, whether these fields are ethnic studies or traditional areas of literature.
- Assign new course preparations to African American junior faculty members in the same proportion as to other junior faculty members, even when they have been hired to develop a new curricular area.

Establish partnerships across disciplines and with nearby institutions through which African American junior faculty members can network with others in their research specialties and meet colleagues who share their institutional goals.

Make sure that all senior faculty members making hiring and reappointment and promotion decisions have the Guidelines for Good Practice of the MLA Committee on the Literatures of People of Color in the United States and Canada, available at <[www.mla.org/rep\\_guidelines\\_poc](http://www.mla.org/rep_guidelines_poc)> or by writing to MLA English Programs, 26 Broadway, 3rd fl., New York, NY 10004.

### **Actions English Chairs Can Encourage Administrations to Take**

- Join, or start, a consortium (such as the Institute for Recruitment of Teachers or the Committee on Institutional Cooperation's Summer Research Opportunities Program) that sponsors programs for students of color who are planning to enter the professoriat.
- Find out how to put chairs in contact with holders of Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowships to establish mentoring relationships between graduate faculty members and prospective students of color.
- Circulate among humanities majors "a promotional brochure and a videotape in which the job of college professor is described in a favorable but realistic light" (Cole and Barber 245).
- Appoint "a staff member whose primary responsibility will be to serve as an advisor to students who are interested in careers as professors." This staff person should be in constant touch with department chairs about students of color to contact (Cole and Barber 242).
- Require admissions officers to "be more attentive to applicants' career plans" (Cole and Barber 240); elite schools, especially, "should pay particular attention to the freshman career interests of African American . . . students who apply for admission" (241) and should be sure to include professorial hopefuls among the admitted students.

The ad hoc committee's research shows that at present a number of institutions are taking some or nearly all of these actions. To bring the diversity of the English faculty members of the twenty-first century closer to that of the United States population and to improve the integrity of the profession itself, departments and chairs must engage in affirmative activism to include their institutions among that number.

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