

# The burden of service for faculty of color to achieve diversity and inclusion: the minority tax

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**ABSTRACT** The exclusion of Blacks/African-Americans, Latinx/Hispanics, and Indigenous people from science has resulted in their underrepresentation in the biomedical workforce, especially in academia. Faculty diversity at academic institutions is unacceptably low (<6%) and has remained unchanged in the past 20 years. Despite low representation, faculty of color are disproportionately tasked with service to enhance diversity and inclusion of the academy, often to the detriment of their research and academic success. This essay offers a perspective on the undue burden of service placed on underrepresented faculty to achieve institutional diversity and inclusion. I reflect on the challenges that faculty of color face trying to maintain a competitive research program while serving the needs of the academy, often in a capacity greater than that of their well-represented peers. I also discuss opportunities for faculty of color to leverage related diversity and inclusion work to boost their career progression and academic advancement.

## INTRODUCTION

I am truly honored to receive the American Society for Cell Biology's Prize for Excellence in Inclusivity. This prize recognizes a scientist who has demonstrated a strong track record in research, serves a critical role in fostering cell biology research, and has made an impact on inclusion and diversity in science through mentoring, cultural change, outreach, and community. I am the daughter of Mexican migrant farm workers, a scientist, and a full tenured professor in the School of Medicine at the University of California (UC), San Diego. There can be no doubt that I am deeply grateful to receive this recognition both for my scientific achievements and for the impact I have had on creating a more diverse, equitable,



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and inclusive academic environment, but this was not how I envisioned my academic career.

I have a strong inclination toward science. I trained with excellent scientists at UC, San Diego and UC, San Francisco. I also aspire to make important contributions to the advancement of science, specifically in the field of cell biology and cell signaling. In spite of my focus on science, I have been drawn into serving the needs of the academy to advance diversity and inclusion. Early in my career, I struggled with the decision to say "yes" since saying "no" meant walking away from an opportunity to contribute to the success of trainees, especially students from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds. So, I said "yes." Over the past 20 years as a faculty member at a research-intensive institution, I have strived to excel in research with achieve-

ments equal to those of my peers. I have also extensively served the academy to educate and train the next generation of diverse scientists, in a capacity beyond that of most of my well-represented peers. Here, I reflect on the challenges and opportunities I have encountered as an academic faculty member who has tried to sustain a career in scientific research while leading institutional change to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion.

## THE ARDUOUS PATH

Becoming a successful academic researcher is no small feat and takes decades of training, undeterred focus, and at times sheer luck.

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Abbreviations used: IRACDA, Institutional Research and Academic Career Development Award; NIH, National Institutes of Health; NSF, National Science Foundation; UC, University of California.

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In fact, it is an arduous journey, especially when one is subjected to biased, racist, and sexist attitudes and behaviors and exclusionary practices that are pervasive in the academy, particularly in the training environment. These problems have been recognized in science for decades and have resulted in a significant loss of underrepresented students intending to study science, especially at the college level (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2019; Asai, 2020; Barber *et al.*, 2020). At the faculty level, discriminatory behaviors and exclusionary practices aimed at women and faculty of color have resulted in limited access to career-advancing opportunities, resources, and effective mentoring (Dzau and Johnson, 2018; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2018). Over the long term, the weathering effects caused by these behaviors and practices have caused a disproportionate loss of women and underrepresented faculty from academic science and medicine, especially women of color. Of those who remain in science and medicine, there is a well-documented negative impact on their career progression (Dzau and Johnson, 2018; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2018). Despite these pernicious inequities and unwelcoming environments, women and faculty of color remain in the profession as I have, and often do so because we are passionate and inspired by science. We are also hopeful and optimistic not only that the future of science will be more diverse and inclusive, but that leadership will prioritize and engage *all* faculty to work toward achieving greater equality.

I naively believed that as an academic faculty I would have the privilege of focusing my career entirely on scientific achievements, such as publishing in top-tier journals and receiving extramural funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), but this has not been the case. At a very early stage in my academic career, I was tasked with service on committees, engaging in educational activities, and mentoring trainees, especially students of color, much more so than my well-represented peers at similar ranks. Without doubt, the time and energy I committed to this service detracted from my scientific efforts. This uncompensated duty, deemed not important for promotion and tenure, is referred to as the “minority tax.” The minority tax (or cultural tax) is the burden of extra responsibilities placed on faculty of color to achieve diversity and inclusion and contributes to attrition and impedes academic promotion (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2015; Gewin, 2020). Although I experienced great personal satisfaction from this work, I constantly worried that my research would suffer and that my colleagues would question my credibility and commitment to science. I remember colleagues saying “why are you doing that work, you are going over to the dark side.” Nonetheless, I soldiered on and pursued my scientific research with vigor that equaled my efforts aimed at enriching diversity and inclusion in the academy.

### A BALANCING ACT

Unquestionably, trying to balance efforts to maintain an active and competitive research program while simultaneously engaging in impactful work to increase diversity and inclusion is a significant challenge. Nonetheless, I chose this path because I viewed both research and service as part of my responsibility to fulfill the educational mission of the institution. This decision was also driven by my desire to pay it forward. I recognize that generations before me broke down structural barriers, allowing me access to quality education, and fought for a more equitable environment.

I also recognized that as a woman and faculty of color, I bring unique perspectives and ideas informed by my lived experiences, which are critically important for developing initiatives to achieve diversity and inclusion. I firmly believe that the creation and imple-

mentation of effective strategies require the concerted efforts of both faculty of color and well-represented faculty working as a team. This team approach reduces the workload for all faculty, brings diverse perspectives that yield prodigious results, and engages and educates well-represented faculty in work aimed at enhancing diversity and inclusion. Other benefits for early-career faculty include opportunities for expanding their professional network, connecting with institutional leadership and gaining valuable insight and knowledge from senior faculty. However, early-career faculty of color who elect to engage in work aimed at diversity and inclusion should do so in a limited capacity that meets service requirements comparable to those of their well-represented peers at the same institution. This, in turn, should minimize the loss in research efforts while maximizing fulfillment of service requirements. If one is tasked with duties beyond the expected service requirements of well-represented faculty, then compensation is expected and must be granted.

### LEVERAGE, LEVERAGE, LEVERAGE

Inevitably, faculty of color will be overtasked with service aimed at increasing diversity and inclusion of the academy. The challenge is how faculty of color can leverage this work to enhance their career progression while climbing up the academic ladder. Here, I offer some tips to leverage service for academic advancement.

Service related to diversity and inclusion must be considered important for promotion and tenure and incorporated into the academic promotion file. It is paramount that faculty describe this work so that it aligns with requirements for academic service. In certain instances, diversity and inclusion service can be leveraged to meet teaching and mentoring requirements. In addition, faculty can enhance the impact of this work by improving their skills in leadership, communication, and mentoring through workshops and courses. Such training has markedly improved the efficiency and impact of programs and initiatives that I have developed and implemented to achieve diversity and inclusion in the academy and beyond. Importantly, developing strong organizational, managerial, and mentoring skills reduces time taken from research efforts. Finally, faculty should learn about program development by engaging in well-developed and successful education training programs, especially programs that are supported by the NIH, National Science Foundation (NSF), and other foundations. This may offer an opportunity to become a program director and/or assume an affiliate leadership position that can provide important administrative experience. As an assistant professor, I participated as a coinvestigator of an NSF-supported Research Experiences for Undergraduates program. As an associate professor, I served as the codirector for the NIH/National Institute of General Medical Sciences–supported San Diego Institutional Research and Academic Career Development Award (IRACDA) post-doctoral training program. This experience provided me with important insight, knowledge, and experience that positioned me to assume higher-level administrative positions within the institution.

Moreover, engaging in program development can also provide an opportunity to learn how to develop successful training and educational research grant proposals, which require an expertise different from that of scientific research proposals. Acquiring extramural funding to support institutional efforts to increase diversity and inclusion is highly regarded by academic leadership and can bring recognition, leadership opportunities, and additional resources to the individual and/or their research programs. Other benefits include developing connections and networks with colleagues and establishing collaborations, particularly with colleagues who have similar research interests that could boost scientific research efforts. By leveraging the team effort, I have successfully received multiple

NIH-funded awards for enhancing diversity, inclusion, and research success of early-career faculty working in the area of cardiovascular sciences, neurosciences, and infectious diseases. This has resulted in leadership buy-in, support, and enhanced efforts across campus to boost diversity and inclusion. This work has also indirectly benefited my research efforts by establishing robust networks, collaborations, and unexpected opportunities for seeking extramural research support.

### INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Clearly, the current institutional systems to achieve diversity and inclusion are not effective. For effective diversity and inclusion practices to become a reality, institutions must do more than rely on symbolic structures that tend to recycle ineffective initiatives. The academy must employ and engage skilled faculty leaders and scholars to enhance diversity and inclusion, embrace data-driven strategies, and rely on metrics to identify inequities and engage *all* faculty, including underrepresented and well-represented faculty, in achieving excellence in diversity and inclusivity. Without utilizing multilevel strategic approaches to enhance diversity and inclusion, the academic enterprise will fail to thrive. Although the path is long, narrow, and firmly uphill, we must continue to move forward by leveraging all of our efforts.

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