

Creating a New Mindset: Building Lasting Supports for Minority Junior Faculty

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Abstract

One of the priorities at the Midwestern institution, where this study was conducted, was to create a more diverse faculty body. Beyond hiring, one component of addressing this priority was fostering a supportive environment in which all junior faculty have the tools to be successful. An initiative known as the New Faculty Collaborative, designed to create a climate of support for all junior faculty ultimately created a support network for junior minority faculty. This paper presents research based on the experiences of the New Faculty Collaborative participants.

Keywords: minority junior faculty, diversity, support, climate, higher education

1. Introduction

Many higher education institutions have a commitment to diversity, which often begins with a mission statement or vision to promote equity, tolerance, and social justice (Dumas-Hines, Cochran, & Williams, 2001). "Ensure Academic Quality" was the mission at the institution where this study was conducted. One of the priorities at our institution was to "create a more diverse faculty to ensure that students learn from faculty who reflect a breadth of experiences and perspectives." The research has demonstrated that such interactions with diverse faculty have an overall positive effect on students; significantly supporting students as role models as well as preparing students to live and work within a diverse society (Bowman, 2010; Quezada & Louque, 2004; Shinnar & Williams, 2008).

A written university-wide vision and a campus-wide philosophy are important key components in promoting diversity, however, these are only a first steps in a process (Dumas-Hines et al., 2001). Realization of a university mission needs to occur at the department level. Described as the basic and central element upon which a university vision is built, departmental initiatives have the power to significantly alter institutional mindset, resulting in long lasting change in higher education (Lee, 2007). Our department made an effort to address one component of this institutional priority regarding diversity by creating the New Faculty Collaborative (NFC). While the primary goal of the NFC was to retain and support all junior faculty, an underlying component of the NFC was to support and create an inclusive climate for minority junior faculty. This paper presents research on the experiences of those faculty who participated in the NFC, as the department made efforts to alter the climate by creating a new mindset.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Need for Diverse Faculty

Research suggests that diversifying faculty is important because it raises cultural awareness (Shinnar & Williams, 2008), serves to recruit and support minority students (Alger & Carrasco, 1997; Quezada & Louque, 2004; Sedgwick, Oosterbroek, & Ponomar, 2014), and helps to prepare all students for the diverse society they face (Camacho, Gaytan, & Prieto, 2014; Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2008). Diversifying faculty impacts not only students, but also is a crucial mission for institutions as they move forward to represent society in the 21st century. Diversification allows for variety in teaching styles and innovative scholarship (Turner et al., 2008), and provides important educational benefits and meaningful interactions for all (Bowman, 2010).

2.2 Underrepresentation of Minorities in Higher Education

Within higher education, minority faculty are underrepresented (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010; Hibbard, Irazábal, Thomas, Umemoto, & Wubneh, 2011). "According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, in 2005 faculty of color made up only 17% of total full-time faculty" (Turner et al., 2008, p. 139-140). Nearly a decade later, there has been minor improvement in the representation of minority faculty in higher education. The most recent findings from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2015), supported by the U.S. Department of Education, reported that in Fall 2013, less than 22% of full-time faculty consisted of minorities: 6% Blacks, 5% Hispanics, 10% Asian/Pacific Islander, and less than 1% American Indian/Alaska Native.

A further exacerbation of the diversification issue is the extremely high turnover of minority faculty in higher education. Identified as a "revolving door" syndrome (Hibbard et al., 2011; Kayes, 2006; Johnson, 2006), the issue becomes not only an issue of recruitment of minority faculty, but impacts the success and longevity of those faculty of color. A collegial atmosphere or climate plays an important role in retention of minority junior faculty. A positive climate not only provides support but combats the negative impacts of isolationism and alienation that is often felt by minority junior faculty. The next section will highlight the impact of the climate.

2.3 Defining Culture and Climate within Higher Education

The culture of an institution is a complex system consisting of unique beliefs, practices, and behaviors that is influenced by both the mindset of the institution, as well as the discipline (Lee, 2007). Culture is at an institutional level. In contrast, climate occurs at a more personal level. Russell (1976) found that the personality variables had significant impact on climates, i.e., the more active and positive individuals sought out support vs. passive who did not seek supports. In essence, climate can be changed by individual behaviors and actions, and fosters an overall positive environment including collegiality, support, and sense of belonging. For example, positive climate can be created by simple actions and external visible gestures such as an invitation to lunch. It is visible and action oriented. Culture, in contrast, is internal and invisible. It includes the institutional values, norms, and expectations. While the visually individual gestures associated with climate can begin to shape the institutional values, culture is more long term and constant, and slowly evolving (Morris, 2015).

2.4 The Impact of Climate on Minority Junior Faculty

The climate of an institution can have a significant impact on the success of minority junior faculty. Just as Russell (1976) asserted that climate can be altered and changed by the involvement of individuals, a positive climate where the minority junior faculty perceive that their experiences are valued, can lead to a stronger sense of job satisfaction which leads to productivity and success. A positive climate can also aid in breaking barriers for minority faculty including enhanced stress about promotion and tenure, feelings of tokenism, and unfriendly colleagues (Laden & Hagedorn, 2000). Additionally, lack of supportive infrastructure and feelings of isolation can be combated by creating an environment of support and collaboration (Dumas-Hines et al., 2001; Morris, 2015). Building a community of support enables institutional culture and climate to change over time because, "People create the climate, not vice versa" (Trower, 2009, p. 42). By providing opportunities for reflection, dialogue, and community building (Layne, Froyd, Morgan, & Kenimer, 2002), minority junior faculty can combat isolation and stress, which may result in retention and higher tenure rates (Camacho et al., 2014; Cox, 2004).

In addition to the stress and feelings of isolation, minority junior faculty are challenged by the overall process of balancing teaching, service, and scholarship, as well as obtaining answers to questions about the day-to-day tasks and responsibilities. The culture and climate of a university can send both positive and negative messages. The environment can either encourage participation and welcome members into the university community or result in further isolating and alienating minority junior faculty (Camacho et al., 2014; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Sedgwick et al., 2014). For example, a well built-in system of support and mentoring for faculty sends a clear message that the university's mission to not only increase but also support minority junior faculty is valued and authentic (Quezada & Louque, 2004).

Changing the culture and climate of an institution internally provides opportunities for participants to work together to create meaningful changes (Petroni & Ortquist-Ahrens, 2004). Internal changes enable minority junior faculty to be personally invested in altering the culture of an institution (Morris, 2015), that in turn supports their success to "become comfortable in the university community, overcoming the great stress often felt" (Petroni, 2004, p. 73). Positive climate has the potential to both provide support and an invaluable resource that enables the success for minority junior faculty.

2.5 Support through Mentorship

Support must be continuous and ongoing. Engaging in mutually supportive relationships is one key to success and longevity of minority junior faculty. Formal and informal opportunities for socialization and support not only create a welcoming climate and culture within the organization (Bryman, 2007), but also are a resource and guide for expectations that foster collaborative interactions and create a collegial work environment that supports minority junior faculty (Camacho et al., 2014). Formal and informal mentorship plays an integral part of success in higher education. Paraphrasing an old African proverb, it takes a department to nurture minority junior faculty members (Turner, 2003). Such is the power of mentorship and support.

Mentorship provides opportunities at a variety of levels, particularly in the area of reappointment promotion and tenure (Turner et al., 2008), which has been identified as a major factor associated with a discriminatory work environment (Laden & Hagedorn, 2000). Mentorship provides a senior level colleague who can serve as a resource and guide for minority junior faculty. Whether assigned formally or sought out informally, relationships with such mentors facilitate success by providing insight into the expectations and how to overcome institutional challenges (Stanley, 2006). In addition to providing a guide to navigate the hidden expectations (i.e., “rough waters”) of faculty life, mentorship also provides access to resources, opportunities for collaboration and scholarship work, as well as the possibility for developing friendships; thereby, combating feelings of isolation and alienation for especially minority faculty (Laden & Hagedorn, 2000).

3. Methodology

3.1 New Faculty Collaborative (NFC)

In an effort to provide formalized support and mentorship of all junior faculty, including minority junior faculty, our department made the conscientious decision to create the New Faculty Collaborative (NFC). The NFC was designed as a learning community for all new faculty. The participants in this study consisted of NFC faculty: tenure-track junior faculty and full-time lecturers within the department during the 2007-2009 academic years. The structure of the NFC consisted of formal two-hour long monthly meetings held throughout the year where various information related to institution’s student population, teaching, service, and scholarship was provided by department administration and other tenured faculty. The NFC facilitators, who happened to be the department administration at that time, informed and invited all non-tenured junior faculty and new full-time lecturers within the department to participate in the NFC. Because participation was voluntary and never mandated, not all eligible faculty attended every monthly meeting, in fact many faculty attended the meetings that fit their schedule and/or interests. Topics for monthly meetings consisted of a combination of pre-determined topics the NFC facilitators felt would be useful and relevant to junior faculty and topics generated or requested by the NFC participants at the end of each meeting. The purpose of NFC was to assist all non-tenured faculty, whether they were in full time tenure-track or full-time non-tenure track lecturer positions, with their adjustment to academia and to facilitate (hopefully) success within higher education.

3.2 Data Tools and NFC Participants

The research question guiding this study was “In what ways does a targeted learning community help with the challenges faced by new faculty?” The data for this qualitative study consisted of two sources: transcription of focus groups of NFC participants conducted at the end of each academic year (May of 2008 and May of 2009), and individual faculty mid- and end-of-year self-assessment survey responses to open-ended questions for both academic years. Within the 2007-2009 academic years, there were 12 faculty hired. Of these, 5 were identified as minorities. The NFC participants were selected via criterion sampling (Patton, 1990) and included all new hires (tenure-track junior faculty and full-time lecturers within the department), as well as the administrators facilitating the NFC. During year 1, there were 14 participants, of which 2 were minority faculty. In year 2 there were 13, of which six were minority faculty.

The faculty who participated in focus groups answered questions about the facets of the higher education culture, and the enculturation of new faculty members such as socialization, mentoring, dispositions, and how NFC created legitimate participation in the department (see Figure A1 for specific focus group questions). The focus group interview occurred in May of 2008; the 10 faculty who participated, 2 were minority faculty. In the second year, the focus group interview was held in May of 2009; 10 faculty participated, of which 4 were minority faculty. The mid-year and end-of-year self-assessment surveys consisted of open-ended questions and focused on five areas including questions about new beginnings, issues of transition, impact of the NFC on teaching, impact on scholarship and impact on service (see Figure A2 for specific questions). For these self-assessment surveys, response rates were 90% for year 1, and 90% for year 2. The focus groups were audiotaped with permission by all of the participants, and

the self-assessment surveys (mid-year and end-of-the year) were e-mailed to individual NFC participants, allowing for voluntary completion of the surveys.

3.3 Data Coding and Analysis

The process of finding emerging themes for this study consisted of four steps. First, each of the four authors engaged in the thematic analysis of the data (transcriptions of focus groups and combined self-assessment survey question responses) individually. Second, the four authors met together and shared their individual coding and initial themes or categories. The group, then, continued in the content analysis process by engaging in open coding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The group looked for recurring regularities in their individual coding and convergence of categories. Third, themes resulting from prior step were contemplated, revised, and agreed upon by the authors through the process of combining, re-sorting and re-categorizing. The authors used the themes that resulted from this third step to negotiate any of the focus group responses or self-assessment survey question responses that fall under each of the agreed upon themes or headings. The final step in the data analysis was to verify the revised final themes through identification of core meanings through revealed patterns. This approach to research, the above four steps, involved constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) of the two qualitative data sources both individual analysis and whole group analysis, thereby enhancing validity and methodological triangulation of data. The utilization of constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) in our journey of “making sense” of the data facilitated trustworthiness and transferability, which are necessary elements in strong qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The three themes that emerged from this qualitative analysis were: Professional Learning Community, Positive Climate, and Managing Job Demands. These three themes will be explored and elaborated in the next section.

4. Findings

4.1 Creating a Professional Learning Community

Faculty expressed that they grew and learned individually and with each other, (i.e., they experienced continual learning as they learned about topics, skills, rules) and had opportunities to share resources as well as unofficial mentorship, which resulted in exposing the hidden rules of academia. The NFC provided opportunities for participatory learning for all and facilitated the creation of a professional learning community. One component which the NFC participants especially appreciated was having the opportunity to get to know more about their colleagues’ professional lives. Not only between minority junior faculty but also with veteran faculty who participated in the NFC. The professional learning community created by the NFC enabled strong supports in scholarship, teaching, and service and resulted in opportunities to share strategies and philosophies/beliefs:

I really liked the opportunity to hear about how others navigate through the academia. I appreciated the session on using your course evaluations to improve teaching from Bethany and Makenzie (pseudonyms as all names are), the scholarship and publishing tips from Samantha, as well as the presentation and publishing advice from Sam and Craig. I also appreciated the opportunity to learn from each other as we shared our best practices, and as Bethany shared ideas for organization.

As indicated above, new faculty gained knowledge about the three required areas of academia: teaching, service, and scholarship by being exposed to faculty with proven track records of success. Additionally, one faculty member reflected, “I am constantly learning more about scholarship and I appreciate the focus on scholarship without neglecting the importance of good teaching.” NFC participants even expressed wanting “more participation from veteran faculty” because as the participant continued,

Often more is learned from those who... have experienced the same things that new faculty are going through and this also brings the veteran faculty members into the ‘group’ which will help to promote that collegiality and bring about the changes in climate that we are striving for.

Thus, hearing from other faculty and having scheduled topics focused around scholarship, teaching, and service throughout the year helped demonstrate the importance of balancing and continually working on each area.

4.2 Building Relationships in a Professional Learning Community

The sharing of knowledge, strategies, and ideas by NFC members and invited faculty participants resulted in new faculty members who have more confidence in gaining access to academia, its hidden rules, and their colleagues as exemplified by faculty who wrote:

I learned a lot about my colleagues’ personal research interests and agendas, in addition to many of the hidden rules and secrets of surviving in the academia (e.g., choosing the right professional organizations, from presentation to publications, choosing the right collaborations).

Getting to know each other and other colleagues as professionals provided new faculty with insight that typically comes with maturation of time. More than one faculty reported that “through the [NFC] topics, [questions] have been brought up that I would never have thought to even ask, and not just questions I had but things I never even considered,” which resulted in gaining “an insight into the culture of the department and the college that would otherwise have to be learned on its own.” Faculty also noted how the “informal atmosphere [of NFC sessions] served as a catalyst for the socialization that occurred within the group” and “created some strong bonds.” Participation in monthly NFC meetings where new faculty could “ask questions in a safe place and build a bond with new people and not feel like a lost soul by yourself,” helped new faculty feel a sense of cohesion. This sense of cohesion among NFC participants contributed to facilitation of inclusivity of all within the department as evidenced by a group of new faculty, who became an entity through the NFC, began extending invitations to non-NFC faculty:

There are two [non-NFC] faculty members in particular who have started to join us [NFC participant group] for lunch on a regular basis who have said things like, “I have never ever gone out to lunch with anyone from work before” and I think that is pretty powerful and at first when we asked them they said, “You want me to go to lunch with you really?” and they were sort of like shocked and now they are like, “Sure, I would love too” and it has all just built on itself.

Thus, the NFC ensured that everyone had equal value. Although individual members had prior experiences that were different from one another, all were honored and accepted. An authentic discourse requires a leveling of hierarchical situations, and NFC became a venue through which every participant, whether new or veteran to higher education as well as of different race or ethnicity, had opportunities for input and sharing. Participants learned they shared common concerns about being new to this particular institution and found strength in support within the group. The professional relationships that formed from participating in scheduled monthly NFC sessions also helped to establish a level of collegiality beyond the NFC circle of new faculty.

4.3 Creating a Positive Climate

The social networking that resulted from the NFC participation was extremely helpful in addressing the isolation of the university environment. A sense of camaraderie was created through dialoguing with colleagues. The more faculty that were involved in the NFC, the more the participants were able to connect to one another. Relationships within the college were changed, not only among the new faculty, but also between the faculty and administrators. The NFC served as a catalyst for change within the department. One NFC participant faculty reported hearing, “you have really changed the way the culture feels down the hallway” from non-NFC faculty and believes that NFC “drew them [all faculty] in a positive way.” According to one NFC participant:

The NFC can change someone from being on the evil side to being on the light side. I think that there are a number of people that tread that middle space and it takes a powerful force to swing them and if you can have that, it can be what is required to swing them to the good side.

Another faculty interpreted the NFC in this way: “it is such a positive culture; it is kind of like when you're not, you're the oddball.” To others, the change was more evident at the individual level: “It has inspired my teaching. I keep hearing about the other great ideas faculty are using in their class and I want to try them in my class. It keeps the bar high for the expectations I have of myself for teaching.” Thus, the NFC positively impacted faculty individually and at the whole group level where the current members and non-members’ mindset were being changed.

The emerging change within the department faculty, which had its roots in the NFC, led to increased conversation among faculty. This was not just between NFC members but all faculty members in the department.

The NFC allows you to see similarities and commonalities with others allowing for comfortable interactions both in and out of the NFC... I was also more likely to approach a tenured faculty member... It provided a license to expand my circle and reach beyond my comfort zone.

Another shared “I think our interaction here [in the NFC] and the development of our relationship outside of these [NFC] meetings drew other faculty members to our groups outside of here,” thereby creating a social network of support. “The NFC was an awesome unofficial mentoring system... we were really able to learn from each other and express our thoughts and concerns in a safe space,” said one NFC participant highlighting the support systems as a direct and positive influence of the NFC.

4.4 Positive Climate Impacts Self-Confidence

The regular NFC group meetings also helped with the assimilation process as noted by one NFC participant, “I found that this was a very good context in which to introduce new faculty... this is a great way to have new faculty members

be oriented." Furthermore, there was a notable increase in the self-perceived confidence as faculty developed their academic identities. For example, one member said, "I feel more confident in myself as a teacher and as a scholar" and another declared "I have been able to identify faculty who share my interest and values." One of the strongest benefits of the NFC occurred through the socialization, i.e. informal social networking that allowed for the opportunity to build friendships and meaningful working relationships.

The NFC may have had significant content, but it was the "meta" NFC that provided me with the most benefits - the relationships, the confidence, etc., that all made me feel more assured of my position as a faculty member... I think that the socialization benefits are endless.

NFC participants commented repeatedly about the strong relationships that evolved as a result of the NFC. Faculty's comments included, "To me it is kind of like family," "I...became more connected with faculty in the department," and "[the NFC] has helped me to connect with new faculty and 'old' faculty." This was an important factor recognized by many and as one participant stated, "new professional relationships that probably would not have occurred if I did not participate [in NFC]."

4.5 Learning to Manage the Demands of a Job in Higher Education

The challenges associated with being a faculty in higher education was one of the big topics that was discussed at the NFC meetings. For example, NFC participants struggled with balancing their own personal and professional needs with meeting the needs of others, (i.e., their students, their colleagues, committees, and the institutional demands of the job). One faculty noted:

There is an expectation that faculty are engaged and attend as many events, classes, and opportunities as possible. It is not encouraged to stay in your office and work, disconnected from your colleagues. This is good, but also a challenge.

Overall, faculty enjoyed their work and found it satisfying, yet sometimes felt pressured to competently fulfill all three aspects of their responsibilities-teaching, scholarship, and service. Below are three perspectives on what it means to be faculty at the university despite one faculty's claim that there is no one prototype because "being a faculty member [of our institution], can mean a variety of things to a variety of faculty members!" One of the new faculty members described that, "It is way more work than I expected but also a lot more fun. Most of our faculty takes pride in their teaching and there is a real expectation to excel." For another faculty, it meant "teaching, service and scholarship are very important towards faculty promotion, tenure and reappointment, [and] teaching with technology is very important." A third faculty stated that they "learned that being a member of [our institution's] faculty, but particularly in this department, holds an expectation of quality teaching from faculty and students alike."

Balancing the demands of the job, while navigating through the expectations and culture of the university, was a challenge for minority junior faculty members. Within this context, NFC supported all junior faculty, by helping them to figure out the expectations and by providing tools regardless of individual faculty member's interpretation:

I think the [NFC] has given me the information about the nuts and bolts and so I can go above and beyond the nuts and bolts and maybe helped me to do a better job this first year than I would have been able to do had I had to spend time trying to figure out what the rules were, and it got me into the meat of everything more quickly.

4.6 Having the Support and Tools to Be Successful

Being a member of the NFC fostered faculty's confidence level in their competence to be successful faculty as they became privy to information and available resources which the faculty categorize as "nuts and bolts" as identified in the quote above. Faculty not only learned about concrete knowledge regarding teaching, scholarship, and service but also made connections with other faculty that positively impacted their development as faculty. According to one faculty:

...the relationships that I've gained through the [NFC] have impacted my scholarship - I'm collaborating now when that's never been my experience until this point... I do feel that the confidence that I obtained, at least partly from the [NFC], may have made me more willing to put myself out there and join organizations, contribute to discussions, etc.

Another faculty stated,

...Suggestions that were given to me at the [NFC] kind of helped to re-remind me and refocus on things I kind of needed to do with regard to scholarship. It is so easy to get caught up on the day to day stuff and forgetting

what you need to [do] with scholarship has been something that has been a big challenge so this was kind of a reminder or a wake-up call that continues.

Thus, the NFC activities helped new faculty to better manage the demands of the job by staying focused on the expectations for tenure, especially a component like scholarship that tends to be more difficult to sustain because of the immediate demands of daily scheduled activities like preparing for a course session that occurs at a set time and day. Minority junior faculty were able to learn within the supportive environment that was the NFC.

The NFC participants also found themselves stretching out of their comfort zones and practices. One minority junior faculty reported that she, “Immersed myself in a group of people who have high expectations drove up my expectations, but maybe I bit off a little more than I could chew.” However, thanks to the supports received from the NFC was able to acclimate and succeed. Another NFC participant re-examined and re-evaluated the relevancy and appropriateness of the institutional activities they chose to take part. They stated, “In the service aspect, I think some of the discussion about what is considered service were very helpful.” Having questions answered in more nebulous areas like what counts for service was critical in facilitating new faculty’s development as members of the unit and the institution as they work toward meeting the expectations for tenure and promotion.

4.7 Navigating the Landmines in Higher Education

Another esoteric area of being a full member of the academia included the faculty’s ability to handle the politics inherent in the unit or institution. The institutional hierarchy and procedures exist and affect the individual faculty member’s success, especially for minority junior faculty members. Since they are the most recent addition to the institution, they are often placed at the bottom rung of the hierarchy ladder. Veteran-tenured faculty members, who may or may not be a part of the NFC, had seniority as well as the capability to evaluate minority junior faculty on their work performance. Thus idealistically making efforts to positively change the climate so that “faculty are very supportive of one another, and this faculty is a part of a family,” created an atmosphere of support and collegiality within the NFC group, however, this sense of collegiality may or may not always extend to the rest of the unit. This was a difficult, but necessary learning step for NFC participants. One faculty stated:

I have needed to learn to be more savvy about who I trust (rather than blindly trusting everyone until it’s proven to be a problem). An issue for me has been trying to deal with a few faculty members in particular who I find myself in frequent situations with but with whom I feel very uncomfortable.

Another participant reinforced this political balancing act of struggling in the understanding of the deeper subtle nuances of academic life by stating, “I would like to see a discussion of how to, in a political savvy way, stand up to people who have more tenure than you and are not using that in nice ways. Those who are not playing well with us and might have tenure before me...” Therefore, NFC participants were aware that the differences existed and that there could be political ramifications for their actions. However, NFC participation aided in offsetting the power and authority imbalance that is inherent within academia’s infrastructure for new faculty to a certain degree as they were able to express their perspectives and even disagree or debate within the safe confines of the NFC.

4.8 Persevering through the Challenges

Two NFC participants indicated that “[faculty] are here [with] different expectations so being a group together, we sort of balance each other” and “it is getting the differences of opinion that is important.” The overall supports gained from participating in the NFC helped minority junior faculty to “feel included, in the know [and] faculty have gotten to know one another who probably would not have otherwise.” This feeling of being “in the know” and being balanced in terms of group dynamics came from having a diverse group of faculty members within the NFC and the larger institution. The presence of minority junior faculty within the NFC enhanced the breadth of opinions rather than inhibiting the sharing of concerns or issues. The sheer presence of more than one minority junior faculty member helped with reducing the particular minority junior faculty member’s sense of isolation, as well as increasing the inclusiveness of participation in the NFC:

We are more diverse this year and when Haley came, it was interesting for me as I was in the same group as another and it helped. We shared about things and I could just spit out these names and she would understand. It (the NFC) made me be more approachable and that was more helpful. It does not seem to matter this year as much that it was really only for the first year people.

The shared cultural understanding between minority junior faculty facilitated a sense of legitimacy and a level of comfort as illustrated above, but it also led to increased openness of minority junior faculty to others within the NFC, regardless of background, race, or gender. The minority junior faculty also felt that they “had the support of the people in this room [NFC] and it made me feel more confident to go in front of our department and say, ‘Let’s do this and let’s

be part of this [in terms of diversity sessions and activities].” Therefore, new faculty connected with each other, regardless of their professional experiences or racial backgrounds.

The feeling of being connected to others and belonging to a group attributed to their job satisfaction as demonstrated in this faculty’s statement below:

Disheartened folks becoming less disheartened and Samantha said she is energized to come into work and I think it is this group this year, socializing outside, reaching out to the staff, reaching out to others who are not part of [NFC]. You have extended this culture to others... because of your disposition you go out and invite others and I think you are paving the way.

As alluded to in the above quote, the NFC, therefore, not only provided new faculty with “some sort of a map, a lay of the land” for facilitating new minority junior faculty as they attempted to fulfill expectations and roles, but also “helped to lift” faculty in terms of morale.

5. Discussion

5.1 *Moving from an Outsider to an Insider*

While distinct, the themes of Professional Learning Community, Positive Climate, and Managing Job Demands overlap and all relate to having the supports and developing the skills to be successful in higher education. The creation of a positive climate is an integral part of retention of minority junior faculty (Quezada & Louque, 2004). Creation of a professional learning community allows for more collaboration and less isolation (Cox, 2004). Transitioning from outsiders to insiders, (i.e., developing a clear understanding of expectations of one’s role) and developing relationships with colleagues, is critical for success in both academia and work life satisfaction (Trower, 2009). In essence, the key components for success appeared to be moving from outsiders to insiders, preventing feelings of isolationism, and marginalization by developing a positive climate, supportive relationships, and clear communication of expectations (Bates & Feldstein, 2014). The lifting of morale and social support, along with concrete knowledge gained, helped with combating the inherent power differential and hierarchical structure embedded within the academy. The NFC created an initial space for a positive climate and extended that climate throughout the department. Rather than relying on individual variation in personality, climate was addressed intentionally through the NFC. It provided a shared context with opportunities for all minority junior faculty, regardless of an individual’s comfort level in seeking out supports. The NFC was a natural outlet or venue for interactions and engagement, thus became the catalyst for climate change as the department strove to create a new mindset.

Supportive relationships developed within the NFC began as a professional learning community with the intentional effort within the department to support and extend both personally and professionally. Making expectations explicit allowed for managing the job demands with a clear understanding of priorities and supports. The NFC opened the doors to the hidden or intangible rules and expectations of academia and requirements for faculty success. The minority junior faculty came to feel more like veteran faculty as a direct result of participation in the NFC. The minority junior faculty began on the periphery as new faculty, but then quickly moved through the spectrum of roles mentioned by Lave and Wenger (1991): subordinate, learning practitioner, sole responsible agent in minor parts, and aspiring expert as result of engaging in legitimate activities comparable to veteran faculty status in terms of service, teaching and scholarship. Participation in the NFC allowed all new faculty the luxury of negotiating their level of participation within the institution (i.e., NFC, department and college), befitting to own comfort level and style. As Lave and Wenger (1991) state: “Legitimate peripheral participation refers both to the development of knowledgeable skilled identities in practice and to the reproduction and transformation of communities of practice” (p. 55). Therefore, the NFC helped with the “transformation of communities of practice” through its impact on new faculty who were the participants of the NFC. Trower (2009) noted that people matter (i.e., what and how people do) when shaping the climate.

5.2 *Creating a New Mindset*

The significance of belonging to an entity as a full member becomes crucial, especially for minority junior faculty, when trying to combat common barriers such as feelings of marginalization, isolation, and/or feelings of discrimination (Johnson, 2006; Maynard & Watts, 2006; Stanley, 2006; Turner, 2003). Lave and Wenger (1991) assert that “the issue of conferring legitimacy is more important than the issue of providing teaching” (p. 92) and engaging directly in the activities of the position or the unit allows for mastery or moving from the periphery to the center as “learning occurs through centripetal participating in the learning curriculum of the ambient community” (p. 100). The NFC provided all junior faculty, but especially minority faculty, full access to the institution’s, and in particular the department’s, conversations as an insider. Within the unit and professional “talk,” informal and formal mentorship

enabled a positive step in the enculturation process. Bryman (2007), Stanley (2006), and Turner et al., (2008) note as essential for success of the new faculty enculturation occurred via NFC for minority junior faculty.

Positively altering the perceptions and culture of a department and institution enabled minority junior faculty to not feel the need to prove their professional worth because they were accepted as a valued member of NFC, the department, and the larger unit. The minority faculty were in fact one of the core faculty who invited other faculty (i.e., being “in” crowd). The minority junior faculty, as well as all junior faculty who participated in the NFC, did not feel like they were on the outside, or were “kept out of the loop” (Maynard & Watts, 2006). This status of being an insider also did not come at the expense of only doing what is expected of them or what Padilla (1994) called “cultural taxation” where minority faculty had to participate in diversity related topics, committees, etc., and to be the diversity representation for the unit and the institution because the NFC provided an outlet and became a tool for minority junior faculty to make their voices evident through reciprocity. The NFC created a professional learning community where all new faculty, regardless of color, experience, gender or age, were accepted and appreciated for who they were. Rather than a “wait to fail” approach, having the NFC provided the minority junior faculty with a framework for success that benefitted all new faculty. The “new mindset” referred to in the title, is about going beyond the NFC. It is intended to build explicit supports from the onset that give minority junior faculty the knowledge, skills and dispositions to succeed at any institution of higher education. While minority junior faculty may have some unique needs and issues, supports for them are likely to help all junior faculty.

All NFC participants had questions, and could express the differences of opinions within the confines of the NFC without fear of retribution. Even though not all answers to the political questions within the unit and institution were obtained, the unofficial mentorship and circle of like-minded faculty who are in the same situation became a strong support base to stretch their professional selves and acclimate into life within academia. Managing job demands entails developing a professional balance. All NFC participants, and especially minority junior faculty, became full-fledged members of the institution, and were able to construct and cultivate their professional identities. As a result of the “new mindset,” the minority junior faculty were enculturated faster into life as a faculty member. The connections, relationships formed between the members of the NFC, as well as with veteran faculty who shared their expertise and resources throughout the NFC meetings, resulted in the minority junior faculty gaining a better understanding of institutional nuances. The tangible rules and expectations were exposed as well as opportunities to succeed as faculty within academia.

6. Limitations

One limitation of this study is that only one department was studied. There is no way to know whether the findings or the positive impact on the culture of this department could be duplicated at other institutions for a variety of reasons, including, but not limited to, institutional mission, organizational structure, and cultural properties within various institutions. The authors recognize that the discussion of the findings may not be applicable to all academic departments, therefore care should be taken with the interpretation of the results, and that the findings may not be generalizable across all academia.

A second limitation of this study was the use of qualitative self-reported data, (i.e. individual survey question responses and focus group interview transcriptions). Although these various types of data were selected to provide a voice for the participants, they also have the potential for bias. The authors recognize that the biases of data stems from each participant’s interpretation of personal experiences.

A third limitation is the duration of this study. The findings are representative of the data from a two-year period. The authors recognize that while the climate was positively impacted by the NFC participants during that time, within that context. Culture, however, changes more slowly and would need to be examined over a longer period of time. We recognize that the culture of the institution has yet to be investigated.

7. Conclusion

The departmental culture was impacted by the institution’s mission to “Ensure Academic Quality” through diversification of faculty. The NFC was an attempt by one department in helping to meet the institutional priority by supporting minority junior faculty. The NFC provided an opportunity for professional learning communities among all junior faculty members including minority junior faculty. The NFC provided opportunities for faculty to examine their personal and professional identities. Additionally, informal mentoring was occurring within different combinations of faculty and staff. The various activities, some intentionally hoped for and some accidental, paved way to new “patterns” (Lee, 2007) that transformed the departmental culture from within. New faculty as a whole stated feeling a higher level of job satisfaction and legitimacy as faculty. Veteran faculty identified that they were rejuvenated

professionally by interacting with and supporting new faculty. The new culture being established was one where all faculty and staff can contribute to the well-being of the unit. The hierarchical rank, years of experience, one's skin color or background did not matter as much as what one had to offer to the professional learning community. The significant message of this study is to emphasize "situated" within the Situated Learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), that "everyone can to some degree be considered a 'newcomer' to the future of a changing community" (p. 117) and can contribute to "the sustained character of developmental cycles of communities of practice" (p. 121).

8. Implications for Practice

Kameny et al., (2014) identified four kinds of barriers to success for minority faculty researchers in the behavioral sciences: institutional, cultural, skills and personal. Institutional barriers include lack of mentors and support. Cultural barriers may include discrimination and low expectations. Additional barriers can include research, time management, and goal setting. Lastly, personal barriers include the balance of demands personally and professionally. This paper described "take-aways" for any higher education institutions by highlighting the benefits of supports that address all four barriers. The bonds formed among the individuals in a group such as the NFC afforded opportunities for faculty to make connections for collaboration. This collaboration then enhanced institutional support, fostered relationship with peers with whom to discuss cultural issues, and provided explicit supports with skill development and social support for coping with personal barriers. Additionally, outlets like the NFC assisted minority junior faculty with acclimating into the department, college, and institution and avoid barriers and obstacles which may occur at all levels within higher education (Turner et al., 2008). In the case, the NFC became a structure of support that facilitated success for the participants; it created a successful work climate and more inclusive departmental culture. It formed a foundation where situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) occurred for all faculty including minority junior faculty, ultimately benefitted ALL students and faculty (Alger & Carrasco, 1997). It is our hope that this research is a beginning point for other institutions and researchers to explore a long-term impact that a professional learning community, such as the NFC, can have on changing the climate and alter the culture of an institution.

9. Epilogue

Today, the NFC, which began as a departmental initiative from 2007-2009, has evolved into a college wide initiative. While not all of the participants involved in this study have remained at the institution, they have maintained relationships and continued to support one another's teaching and scholarship efforts. The intentional supports at the departmental level through the NFC resulted in sustaining of relationships (professionally and personally) among the NFC participants. Being colleagues at different institutions, today, allows for trans-disciplinary and cross-institutional collaboration as well as sharing varying perspectives arising from different institutional experiences. The validation of each individual's prior experiences that Laden and Hagedorn (2000) cite as one of the essential elements of a positive climate for new faculty, but especially for minority faculty, is enacted upon by former NFC participants. This process of supporting one another at different institutions through various formats affords a better understanding and navigation of the different programs where the former NFC participants currently reside professionally. The shared safe space created in and from the NFC has remained. Former NFC participants continue to share strengths and discuss challenges while at different institutions without worrying about the potential negative or political consequences that could arise. In essence, a third space, that is separate from the individual institutions, has been created by former NFC participants. This third space also substantially serves as a personal networking avenue.

One fact remains constant within higher education in that faculty, programs, and funding change over time. Given this context, the best way to support new faculty is to not just to simply create a single program and judge its success as a program, but to consider the single program's impact through individual faculty members' successes over time. Providing the tools and supports to move from outsider to insider standing fosters and strengthens development of faculty members who can continue to support one another long after the duration of a single program like NFC.

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Appendix A: NFC Focus Group and Self-Assessment Survey Questions

Figure A1. Focus Group Questions

NFC Focus Group Questions

Facets of Higher Education Culture

- Does the NFC make the tacit more explicit for new faculty?
- Does the NFC honor the academic orientations of new faculty?
- Does the NFC help new faculty understand teaching methods for higher education in general and the NKU population in particular?
- Does the NFC help new faculty understand the varied administrative duties for which all faculty members are responsible?

Successful Enculturation of New Faculty Members

- Does the NFC contribute to the socialization of new faculty?
- Does the NFC contribute to the mentoring of new faculty?
- How does the NFC support new faculty of "color" or of diverse backgrounds?
- Can the NFC be a positive "selling point" during the recruitment process?
- Does the NFC have an effect on dispositions?
- Does the NFC contribute to the new faculty's decision to accept/reject the new culture?
- How does the NFC contribute to new faculty of "color" or of diverse backgrounds' negotiation process of the new culture (i.e., the specific institution's culture)?

Legitimate Peripheral Participation

- Does the NFC bridge the gap between graduate school experiences and the "real work" professors are expected to do?

- Does the NFC support new faculty as they put their knowledge into practice as part of their work?
- Are new faculty members asked to participate in cultural situations in meaningful ways?

Figure A2. NFC Mid-year and End-year Self-Assessment Questions

NFC Mid-year and End-year Self-Assessment Questions

Mid-year Self-Assessment of the NFC:

- 1) What were your questions and concerns about becoming a faculty member at this institution when you arrived in August? What did you need to know coming in? (For second year faculty and facilitators, what were your questions and concerns about this coming year, when you began in August).
- 2) What have you learned about being at this institution as a faculty member during this past fall semester?
- 3) What are the issues you have found as you transitioned from your former job to this institution's job? (For second year faculty and facilitators, what are the issues you have found in your job that arose from last year to this year?)
- 4) What do you still need to know? What should we be focusing on in the NFC during the spring semester?
- 5) Describe what you have liked about the activities and structure of the NFC.
- 6) How has your experience with the NFC impacted your teaching, your scholarship, and your service/and or community outreach work?
- 7) Discuss your perception of the socialization and enculturation benefits of the NFC.
- 8) What have you learned that you probably would not have, if you had not participated in the NFC?
- 9) What have you contributed or could contribute to the NFC?
- 10) What else is important for us to think about the NFC that wasn't asked in these questions?

End-year Self-Assessment of the NFC:

- 1) What were your initial questions and concerns about becoming a faculty member at this institution?
- 2) How did, if any, did your initial questions and concerns change during the year as you participated in the NFC?
- 3) What do you still need to know? What should we be focusing on in the NFC during the next year?
- 4) Describe what you have liked about the activities and structure of the NFC.
- 5) How has your experience with the NFC impacted your teaching, your scholarship, and your service and/or community outreach work?
- 6) Discuss your perceptions of the socialization benefits of the NFC, if any. How can it be strengthened?
- 7) Discuss your perception of the enculturation benefits of the NFC, if any. How can it be strengthened?
- 8) What have you learned that you probably would not have, if you had not participated in the NFC?
- 9) What have you contributed to the NFC?
- 10) What else is important for us to think about the NFC that wasn't asked in these questions?