

## The Critical Role of Universities to Address the Leadership Gap Among Women and Minorities



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“Universities can make a tangible difference to reduce the leadership gap among women and minorities by hiring diverse faculty, providing effective bias training and encouraging inclusive classroom practices.” In this post, Dr. Patricia Faison Hewlin shares her insight as an expert on the intersection of diversity and leadership in the workplace.



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While women earn more than half of all undergraduate and master’s degrees in the U.S., they remain substantially underrepresented in leadership positions. The gap is even wider for students of color, and widest among black students as the majority of black undergraduate and graduate students are women. The gender gaps in pay and leadership positions continue to receive attention, and have triggered discussions and efforts in corporate and educational institutions, as well as the research community.

Universities, however, are uniquely poised to address these gaps because campus life is in many ways a microcosm of society. The university setting is embedded with formal and informal norms that convey to students acceptable and unacceptable rules of engagement for interacting with diverse populations, academically as well as socially. In light of this, those of us in faculty and leadership positions in universities have an opportunity to show our students what is possible in work and society by fostering an environment in which every student truly feels supported and

empowered to self-actualize. In so doing, we can address the leadership gap among women and minorities.

For decades, some universities across the US and Canada have endeavored to tackle issues of equity, student support as well as empowerment in the context of gender and diversity. Many others have rendered these issues as too riddled with conflict, too complex, and therefore too difficult to address in a meaningful way. In the absence of action, spoken or written values of promoting “diversity and inclusion” rarely find their way into the DNA of the university.

Addressing the leadership gap among women and minorities begins with faculty and administrators becoming more attentive to the benefits of leveraging diversity, as well as promoting inclusion and empowerment among all students. Research shows that diverse groups tend to be more innovative and make better decisions. In particular, students’ integrative thinking capacity benefits from diverse collaborations and friendships. These are important outcomes that can chip away at biases that often hinder the degree to which women and minority students thrive in their universities and beyond.

Achieving the benefits of diversity for our students (and ourselves for that matter) begins with diversifying the university leadership. In my close to 20 years in academia and engaging with students across different universities in the US and Canada, a persistent concern raised by women and minorities is the lack of role models. This specifically relates to the diversity among faculty members and administration, and it is certainly not a new idea; however it is often confronted and subsequently stymied by the perception that there are not enough qualified women and minority applications. Moreover, many jump to the convenient assumption that diversity readily leads to lower quality in hiring. Such perceptions (and they are perceptions because they are often raised without supporting evidence) predictably and persistently prompt an unfortunate, stifling effect on progress. This gives way to existing norms and routines in which diversity is overlooked and at worst, ignored.

Universities committed to empowering women and underrepresented minorities are assertive. They understand that building a diverse faculty and administration requires a long-term commitment and the willingness to try new approaches such as cluster hiring and building relationships with organizations such as the Association for Women and Science and The PhD Project. For instance, by offering a base for networking and mentoring, the PhD Project has helped over 1200 minority students obtain their PhD’s since 1994. An overwhelming majority of the graduates hold tenure track positions in universities throughout the US, Canada and other countries.

In addition to diverse faculty hiring, an immediate step must be taken to address the issue of bias within and outside the classroom. While training is the usual “go to”, it is critical to select training programs that encourage authentic discussions around

gender, race and other categories in which students feel marginalized. For instance, comments regarding a female's appearance (e.g., hair, height of skirt, etc.), or a surprised look when she performs well on a quantitative assignment are memorable and can deflate her sense of empowerment. We must also be aware of students we actively call upon in class, whose names we remember, and with whom we readily and naturally hold conversations. Do these students mostly look like us, or are we assertively interacting with a diverse set of students within and outside of the classroom? Who do we encourage to take on leadership positions in student organizations, or participate in influential university committees? Who are we mentoring? Do they all look the same? Raising questions such as these can prompt actionable steps for improving how universities engage with women and minority students. All faculty must take on this responsibility--not just women and minority faculty members.

In my leadership course in McGill University's Desautels Faculty of Management I integrate reading material and business cases that address diversity, privilege, race, gender and cross-cultural dynamics. I also share my experiences as an African American woman raised in the 1970's, having worked in different corporate and academic contexts. Sharing my story opens the door for "real talk" and perspective-taking. For example, I share that my family was one of few black families in the Queens, NY neighborhood where I was born, but by the time I turned 11 years of age, most of my white friends had moved out of the neighborhood. I discuss the implications of this demographic shift on the diversity of my social network as well as the social networks of the families who moved away. This leads into a discussion about the overall implications of community segregation on diversity in workplace. I encourage the students to share their stories as well, and develop relationships with others from different backgrounds. Feedback from my students confirms the importance and appreciation of these types of efforts, which can come in different forms depending upon the course topic and the professor's teaching style.

In small and large ways, universities can make a tangible difference to reduce the leadership gap among women and minorities by hiring diverse faculty, providing effective bias training, and encouraging inclusive classroom practices. We (faculty and university administration) have the unique wherewithal to set a strong foundation upon which our students can build their careers and personal lives, thereby affecting positively their spheres of influence within larger society.