4 Steps Toward Making Endowed Positions More Equal

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Idea Lab: Endowed Chairs

COMMENTARY

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Nicholas D. Hartlep

The widespread use of endowed-chair positions to recruit and retain faculty members has been well documented in academic. These prestigious appointments, highly valued by professors and institutions, are often the highest honor that colleges can bestow. They frequently come with more pay, more resources, and more influence. Unfortunately, there is evidence that they are not being occupied equally by all groups.

Earlier this year, I led a study that analyzed the makeup of endowed chairs and distinguished professors in departments and colleges of education. We found that these positions were largely being filled with older, white males who had attended elite graduate schools. While all minorities were underrepresented to some degree, women were greatly underrepresented.

For example, Hispanics earn 6.5 percent of doctorates in education but hold just 3 percent of endowed chairs; African-Americans earn 13.4 percent of doctorates in education but hold just 2.3 percent of endowed chairs. Most striking, however, is that women earn 70 percent of doctorates in education but make up only 40 percent of endowed chairs in the field. These numbers indicate that faculty members and administrators need to do a better job of diversifying the highest level of academia—particularly when it comes to women. Research has found that women more often must leave their institutions to get an endowed chair, while men more often receive them for retention purposes. What will be required to make a change at the top of the faculty ladder?

First, white, male endowed professors will have to be an active part of the process. Correcting the individual disparities that we see in endowed positions requires their intervention because closed networks maintain the status quo in higher education—like hiring like. This means that men will have to advocate for the hiring of internal and external female candidates for endowed positions.

Second, women and professors of color who hold endowed positions must speak out about their own experiences. What experiences were formative to their professional and career development? Who mentored them and how? Recent scholarship by African-American endowed faculty members illustrates that the paths to becoming an endowed professor for women and people of color are manifold. Professors everywhere know how navigating the academy is difficult work, but those who are underrepresented in their disciplines have an even more acute awareness.

Third, early mentorship programs should be established to improve the pipeline. Currently work is being done that advocates for earlier and more focused mentorship when it comes to developing future faculty members of color. For example, the RISE for Boys and Men of Color's Grad Prep Academy is a national project that prepares undergraduate men of color for doctoral study and research-related careers in five fields: education, health, human services and social policy, juvenile and criminal justice, and workforce development. By focusing on minorities, the academy helps men of diverse backgrounds gain social and professional mentorship and create social ties that will help them be successful researchers.

Earlier recruitment of undergraduate students will potentially build up the pool of diverse graduate students, which helps equalize a racist and sexist pipeline. Research has found that this pipeline is most effective when it begins at preschool. As the pool of diverse Ph.D.s continues to grow, and with the right mentorship, more professors will be eligible to become endowed.

Finally, institutions should be using endowed chairs as a tool for diversifying. One example is Murray State University, which uses its Ashland Oil College of Education Endowed Professorship to “augment and support the salary and activities of a position within the College of Education to attract qualified African American candidates from the public schools.” Meanwhile, other research-intensive universities are taking steps in the right direction. For example, in 1974, Roland Mitchell was named the Jo Ellen Levy Yates Endowed Professor in the School of Education at Louisiana State University. Mitchell is the first African-American to hold an endowed chair in the university’s school of education.

Our research also showed a sign of progress on that minority front. For the highest-research-activity universities, the years between a person earning a Ph.D. and being named to a current endowed position were fairly uniform across race, but for all other institutions, there were significant differences. Overall, a black male holding an endowed chair had the most years and Asian-Americans had the least. This could indicate that these universities are making efforts to recruit more endowed professors of color.

But what about progress in terms of gender? Among universities with the highest research activity, women tended to have fewer years between earning a Ph.D. and being named to a current endowed position than did their same-race male counterparts. However, this pattern did not hold for all other institutions, wherein women tended to take more time to be named to an endowed chair than their same-race male counterparts did; the exception being white females, who took less time than white males.

Most people recognize that colleges need to hire more diverse professors as a demographic imperative: to right the imbalance and mismatch between those who teach and those who are taught. However, there is also a democratic imperative: Those in the academy should focus on getting more women and faculty of color in elite and influential professorships.

More research on endowed professorships is certainly warranted, but more is not needed to act. We can do that right now. As Marybeth Gasman, a professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania, in a recent op-ed reminded colleagues that complain that there aren’t minorities in the faculty pipeline: We can make the pipeline. We can grow our own.

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administrators were “completely support-ive” of his research on academically gifted black males in postsecondary institutions, he says. Yet Mr. Bonner never forgot the promise he’d made to himself when he was a doctoral student at the University of Ar- kansas at Fayetteville. He wanted to work at a historically black college or university and, eventually, lead one.

Then Prairie View A&M University, an HBCU in the Texas A&M system, came calling. The university wanted to raise its research profile, in part by hiring faculty members who were standouts in their fields. Prairie View administrators made a strong case for Mr. Bonner to leave Rutgers, offering him an endowed chair of educational leadership and counseling — and his own research center.

“I just thought a deal like this would never come along again,” Mr. Bonner says. He started work at Prairie View in 2015.

The endowed chair has given him what he calls an “unfettered opportunity” to pursue research. Last month he took three graduate students to the University of Notre Dame to help him evaluate a diver- sity program there. “You know the money you need is going to have to be right,” he says. “That makes a major difference.”

Mr. Bonner’s endowed chairs have also held a larger meaning for him as a scholar in a field where validation in the form of financial and institutional support isn’t given.

“The beauty of me having an endowed chair,” he says, “is it really gives other scholars of color, particularly African-American scholars, the opportunity to see that when you do solid work, it doesn’t have to be about traditional issues for you to be a top-tier faculty member.”

Even though endowed chairs can offer an advantage in the market to recruit and retain professors, their results can be uneven.

Sometimes the offers work as expected. Nearly all of a cluster of cinemat- ics arts faculty at the University of South- ern California who received endowed chairs 11 years ago are still at the institution.

And sometimes they don’t. James Leving- sohn recently received an endowed chair from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in an effort to keep him from going to Yale. In

“No one’s going to be a star at one place and then go to another place to be demoted.”

the end, it didn’t keep him there. At Yale, he is director of the Jackson Institute of Glob- al Affairs and holds an endowed chair. The Johns Hopkins University, perhaps to get ahead of the possible poaching of its own professors, has awarded some of its newly created Bloomberg Distinguished Professor- ships to faculty members who are already at the institution, including two Nobel Prize-winning scientists.

But there are never enough endowed chairs to go around. And that can be a source of tension for administrators to manage.

“In our department, we have a lot of