10 Small Steps for Department Chairs to Foster Inclusion

In times of crisis, it becomes more important than ever, as stress can cause well-intentioned leaders to resort to bias and exclusion, write Ethel L. Mickey, Ember Skye Kanelee and Joya Misra.

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Improving the campus climate for faculty members remains an important and elusive goal for leaders in higher education. After all, the term "climate" itself signals something both all-encompassing and intangible: a facet of campus life that is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. So how can campus leaders go about fostering climates that are, in fact, truly inclusive? How particularly is this possible at a time when faculty of color are witnessing and experiencing racist violence (https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-Higher-Ed-Can-Fight/248897) across the country?

Rhetoric around diversity has flourished in academe, with institutions investing heavily in programs like diversity trainings, implicit bias tests, diversity offices and task forces. Many programs, like the STRIDE (https://advance.umich.edu/stride/) program, focus on reducing bias in faculty hiring. While improving diverse representation among the faculty is an important first step, colleges and universities must go further: they must create environments that help retain diverse faculty members and support their success.

Research shows that women and faculty of color feel less included at their institutions, particularly in STEM departments where it is still common to find few women or faculty members from underrepresented groups. Many faculty of color may feel both invisible in their departments and hypervisible at the same time. Exclusionary norms, interactions and values translate into an unwelcoming environment, which may lead some faculty members to leave their institutions (https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/03/06/underrepresented-faculty-members-share-real-reasons-they-have-left-various) or exit academe altogether.

With the current crises of both COVID-19 and racist violence against black people, department chairs and heads have been under pressure to make decisions quickly with limited information. But in times of crisis (https://hbr.org/2020/04/how-to-be-an-inclusive-leader-through-a-crisis), inclusion becomes more important than ever. Research shows that stress can cause well-intentioned leaders to resort to bias and exclusion.
As researchers with the University of Massachusetts at Amherst ADVANCE Program (https://www.umass.edu/advance/), funded by the National Science Foundation (https://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=5383), we have conducted surveys and interviews with diverse STEM faculty members about their careers, on how included they feel on campus and what supports could be put in place to foster a greater sense of belonging and feeling valued.

We suggest that inclusion comes from the daily, lived experiences and interactions of faculty members. Our research indicates that departmental interventions can be particularly effective in ensuring that faculty, especially underrepresented faculty, feel included on a campus. We've outlined practical steps that departmental leaders can take to become allies and foster inclusivity among their colleagues.

What Is Inclusion?

While inclusion can mean different things to different groups, it generally signals that faculty members of all backgrounds feel welcomed and supported on their campuses. Inclusive campus climates have positive effects on faculty retention and success, and inclusion efforts play key roles in addressing inequities in higher education.

Women and underrepresented minority faculty members often cite a negative campus climate (https://www.rutgersuniversitypress.org/toxic-ivory-towers/9780813593005) as a barrier to their persistence and success, particularly faculty in STEM fields that are predominantly composed of white men. Researchers have described the patterns of inequitable treatment facing women and faculty of color, especially in STEM, as a "chilly climate (https://www.napequity.org/nape-content/uploads/R1l-The-Chilly-Climate.pdf)." The chilly climate includes overt discrimination and harassment, as well as more subtle practices like being excluded from social groups or overburdened with teaching and service responsibilities. The accumulation of such exclusionary practices creates systemic disadvantages for women and minority faculty members.

A Small-Wins Approach

Colleges and universities have invested heavily in diversity efforts. While large-scale efforts are important, they have several key problems. First, research (https://hbr.org/2016/07/why-diversity-programs-fail) shows that diversity programs like unconscious bias training don't always work. Worse, these initiatives can backfire (https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2019/11/08/lessons-about-inclusion-controversy-over-social-media-post-university-missouri) to actually activate bias, further marginalizing underrepresented groups, or create anger and resistance among employees -- especially if participation is made mandatory.

More so, diversity language may be perceived as threatening to members of dominant groups, particularly white men. And, relatedly, these diversity efforts often target individuals, rather than focusing on changing the broader workplace context. Even well-intentioned efforts may undermine efforts to foster an inclusive campus climate.
What does this mean for department leaders looking to create inclusive communities? Shelley Correll (https://sociology.stanford.edu/people/shelley-correll), professor of sociology and organizational behavior at Stanford University, outlines a “small wins (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0891243217738518?journalCode=gasa)” model of organizational change. Small wins are concrete, implementable action steps that feel doable to supporters but are small enough to fly under the radar of detractors. Small wins subtly shift social norms and culture, becoming building blocks to inspire longer-term institutional transformation.

In interviews with women STEM faculty and faculty of color, we find they repeatedly suggest small-scale changes to create inclusive communities. While they find value in campuswide diversity initiatives, more often than not, they suggest that local-level changes in departments would do more to improve their daily lives.

We summarize here 10 small wins that department leaders can put in place to create inclusive departments. Although small, these efforts require investing time into inclusion and pay very rich dividends, as faculty will be more likely to develop strong relationships with colleagues, feel valued and ultimately succeed.

10 Small Wins for Department Chairs

1. Chair meetings. Perhaps the intervention most regularly mentioned by STEM faculty to support inclusivity is regular meetings with department chairs and heads. Key here is the regularity of meetings, which make faculty feel valued by their chairs. These meetings can be scheduled sit-downs or relatively brief doorway check-ins that provide space for chairs to understand diverse faculty perspectives and answer questions that support faculty success. Group events such as lunches with non-tenure-track or pretenure faculty are also helpful, but one-on-one interactions are particularly valuable.

2. Mentoring plans. Creating a strong departmental mentoring plan (https://www.umass.edu/advance/faculty-mentoring) can help ensure that formal procedures aimed at inclusion are in place. Mentoring plans can be explicit written documents that recognize faculty needs at various career stages and include mechanisms to make sure that mentoring is actually occurring. Relying on informal mentoring or friendships to fill in gaps can reinforce existing inequalities in access to support, information and resources.

3. Mentoring to promotion. Chairs should ensure that committees that assess faculty members moving toward promotion regularly meet with those faculty members. Meetings should provide clear, formative assessments that reflect the advice of committee members and guide the faculty member toward their goals. Such meetings create transparency around personnel decisions, informing faculty members about the process and expectations for promotions.
4. **Regular department meetings.** In departments or programs with regular meetings, faculty report having closer ties with colleagues. Chairs should consider faculty members’ care responsibilities and commuting requirements when scheduling meetings; regularly scheduled meeting times during the workday do appear to foster greater inclusion.

5. **Service assignments.** Chairs can use service assignments to integrate faculty members into the department and to build faculty connections across rank and subfield. Serving on promotion and tenure committees also provides clarity around expectations for junior faculty members. Service assignments should be rotated, giving different faculty members opportunities to interact and learn about various elements of the department. [Transparency](https://facultyworkloadandrewardsproject.umd.edu/) about the responsibilities and time commitment for different service jobs also provides important clarity that leads to greater equity.

6. **Research talks.** Scheduling regular “chalk talks” or “work-in-progress” talks that feature diverse departmental speakers connect faculty members over research. Discussions about research or new projects may lead to collaborations and can help faculty members feel recognized as researchers -- particularly if these events use practices aimed at a diverse lineup and are regularly attended. Creating smaller communities around shared research interests within the department, like working groups, can also bring people together, particularly in larger units.

7. **Social events.** Regular social events can help make departments feel more inclusive. Hosting social events inside and occasionally outside the workday can help give diverse faculty members opportunities to engage with one another. Organizing coffee breaks, picnics that welcome family members, celebrations for graduation or holidays and other events -- ideally more than once a year -- helps connect faculty members to their departments.

8. **Departmental awards.** Women faculty members, particularly those in STEM fields, can feel invisible to their colleagues and undervalued for their research, teaching and service. [Creating departmental awards that recognize the important work of colleagues, or creating nomination committees for campus and external awards, make contributions more visible. Including work that matters to the life of the department in annual and other personnel reviews also improves visibility.](https://www.umass.edu/advance/sites/default/files/inline-files/UMass%20ADVANCE%20Inclusive%20Community%20Findings_0.pdf)
9. **Writing, teaching and mentoring communities.** Establishing spaces for faculty members to come together over shared interests and experiences builds connections. Organized writing sessions create accountability and support for an aspect of faculty careers that is highly valued yet may often be sacrificed in order to meet pressing teaching and service demands. Similarly, organizing faculty communities to discuss teaching and mentoring practices and challenges can benefit both faculty and students.

10. **Communication and shared calendars.** Regular communications that highlight faculty members’ research or recognize their success can foster feelings of respect and being valued among colleagues. Shared departmental calendars and social media not only help faculty keep track of meetings and events, but may also help develop a shared norm around attending departmental events.

While many of the small steps we’ve outlined here seem to require being in-person and face-to-face, we believe that many small wins can be achieved online as well in our unprecedented circumstances. Continue to regularly check in with faculty members, be mindful of work assignments, host online departmental forums and keep prioritizing inclusive leadership behaviors. By focusing on localized, small wins, campus leaders can foster resilient, inclusive communities that support all faculty members in weathering the current crises.

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**Bio**

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