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The Precarious Status Of Black Faculty

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Some 175 Black college and university teachers and administrators from all over the nation convened at Howard October 23-25 to launch a new organization to promote the interests of Black faculty.

The creation of the National Congress of Black Faculty (NCBF) comes at a time when the Black presence on the nation's campuses seems in peril. The number of Black faculty is diminishing. Black student enrollment is down, particularly at the graduate level. Many Black studies programs either have been cut or are limping along without adequate financial and other support. Predominantly white campuses have witnessed an upsurge of racist incidents.

Given this larger picture, the overwhelming sentiment of those who convened at Howard was that "The National Congress of Black Faculty is an organization whose time has come," reflected the organization's founder, Howard political science professor Ronald W. Walters.

Indeed, the inaugural meeting of the group seemed part communion, part homecoming, part rallying call to action.

Conference participants heard Reginald Wilson, director of the American Council on Education's Office of Minority Concerns, describe the status of Black faculty in one word — "precarious" — and share a series of statistics to back up his assertion.

They heard U.S. Rep. Major Owens (D-N.Y.), chairman of the

House Select Committee on Education and of the Congressional Black Caucus' Braintrust on Higher Education, decry what that precariousness portends. "We are in danger of losing our braintrust. We are in danger of losing that pool of people who are not only well trained and very disciplined, but who also identify with the concerns of Black people."

Following such presentations, conference participants vowed to make the NCBF a permanent organization. To this end, they elected an interim slate of officers, hammered out an interim charter, formed a board of directors, a review commission and councils to deal with such specific concerns as hiring, promotion and tenure; research and education; and institutional relations. They also appointed a committee to plan for a second far larger meeting in another year.

Walters, unsurprisingly, was elected the NCBF's interim president. As for the whys of his efforts to create and perpetuate the organization, he answers: "I personally believe that a Black faculty member represents one of the most progressive voices in America and I think to have an organization that fights for the stability of Black faculty, that advocates for their use in the public policy arena, their assistance to Black students and so forth is something that is going to move the entire Black community along."

In the following article, adapted from remarks he made at a Newsmaker Breakfast sponsored by Howard's Department of University Relations, Walters discusses his own awakening to the endangered status of the nation's Black faculty, the dimensions and consequences of this crisis and the role he hopes the NCBF can play in responding to it.

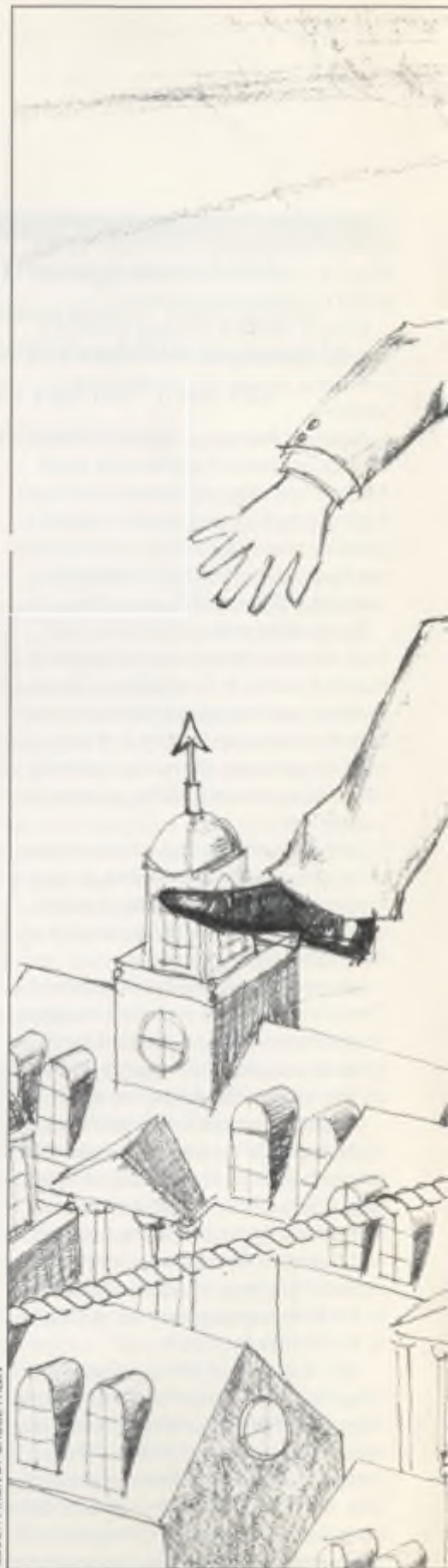


ILLUSTRATION BY BRUCE FAGIN



The Precarious Status of Black Faculty

By Ronald W. Walters

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Over the years, I have written a number of letters in support of Black faculty members who were coming up for tenure at predominantly white institutions. But because of the ad hoc nature of my efforts, they had little effect. As an individual, I could not follow up such cases, nor was I confident that these candidates for tenure would be supported by the major disciplinary organizations in their fields. Would these organizations come to the defense of these individuals as they were attempting to negotiate within their institutions and, as such, further their careers, or were they part of the conspiracy of exclusion which was part of the problem? So, increasingly, I felt that Black faculty members were exposed to a certain vulnerability that only their own efforts might effectively combat.

This same feeling of vulnerability surfaced in the drive to make known to the wider Black community the fact that the National Research Council, the major quasi-governmental body sponsoring research in the national interest, had initiated a wide-ranging study on the status of Blacks in America, which was designed to replicate Gunnar Myrdal's 1944 work, *An American Dilemma*. Yet, as I and others pointed out, this was done without consulting the research infrastructure of the Black community (e.g. Black colleges, college presidents, research organizations, scholarly organizations.) As much as this [affront] reflects the arrogance of the white intellectual establishment, it also is a profound indictment of the failure of Black scholars to achieve a level of organization sufficient to compete for resources to initiate such projects on our own terms.

In addition, last spring I became involved in a number of cases involving Black faculty, staff and students at several predominantly white universities [Princeton, the University of Michigan, Brandeis] and that experi-

ence convinced me of two things. One is that many of the agenda items, such as Black student enrollment goals and faculty recruitment targets, which were part of the push for the Black entrance into academe in the '60s and early '70s, have still not been dealt with some 20 years later. The other is that even with the modest increases in the number of Black faculty, students and staff on predominantly white campuses, there has been a concomitant increase in their vulnerability as a result of rising racism on these campuses and the lack of leverage by Blacks over these institutions. Even more enigmatic is the fact that the educational situation of Blacks is deteriorating in states where Black political power is increasing, which leads to the question of how Blacks are organized to influence the political process in regard to issues of Black higher education.

- The University of Michigan had only 63 Black faculty members out of 2,200, down 10 from a decade ago;
- Princeton University had only 7 Black faculty members out of 645, a drop from 10 in 1974;
- Harvard University was estimated to have half of the Black faculty it had a decade ago.

Percentage of total in Graduate School		
	1980	1984
White	81.0	80.2
Black	5.5	4.8
Hispanic	2.2	2.2
Indian	0.4	0.3
Asian	2.1	2.6
Alien	7.9	9.9

Source: American Council on Education Office of Minority Concerns

Full-Time Faculty		
	1977	1983
White	91.3	90.1
Black	4.4	4.0
Hispanic	1.5	1.8
Asian	2.7	3.5
Indian	0.2	0.3

Source: American Council on Education Office of Minority Concerns

The Overt Crisis

When I began to look further at the problem of the crisis of Black faculty within the general and growing crisis of Blacks in higher education, I found that, indeed, articles and studies had begun to appear on the subject.

For example, a January 22, 1985 opinion piece by William B. Harvey of the State University of New York at Stony Brook in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled "Where Are the Black Faculty Members?" concluded:

"Black professors are becoming an endangered academic species. The higher-education community must take action to reverse that ominous trend, not only for moral or political reasons, but because it is in our own practical self-interest, as well as that of the larger society, for us to do so."

An August 18, 1985 article in a summer education supplement published by *The New York Times*, "Minority Faculty: Bleak Future," reported that between 1976 and 1982, Black enrollment in the nation's graduate schools, the pipeline for teaching and administrative careers in academe, declined 16 percent.

Other disturbing statistics were cited in an April 27, 1986 *New York Times Magazine* article, "The Dwindling Black Presence on Campus," e.g.:

- The University of Chicago at the time had only 13 Black faculty members out of 1,110, down 38 percent from a decade ago;

Indeed, nationally, according to the American Council on Education's Office of Minority Concerns, between 1977 and 1983, the latest years for which statistics are available, full-time faculty positions held by Blacks decreased from 19,674 (4.4 percent) to 18,827 (4 percent), a loss of 4.3 percent. The percentage of Black faculty on predominantly white campuses stood at only 2.3 in 1983, but the number of Black faculty, especially those born in the U.S., declined at predominantly Black institutions as well.

Some Reasons for the Crisis

By now many of the causes for this decline are well known. Institutional racism is the most obvious. Some faculties clearly do not want Black colleagues.

Coupled with this has been the lack of enforcement of affirmative action within government at all levels, but especially by the Justice Department and the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights. As Thomas Linney, director of government and association relations for the Council of Graduate Schools, observes (*New York Times* summer education supplement, August 18, 1985): "Without the Federal carrot or Federal stick, the pressure to integrate has been declining."

There are still other reasons for the fading Black faculty presence on so many of

the nation's campuses. Chief among them are the attraction of more lucrative professions [than college teaching] and the lack of Black faculty role models. They have had a devastating impact upon both the selection of careers in the professoriat by Black students and their success in negotiating this choice once they become graduate students.

A 1986 National Science Foundation report, for instance, illustrated striking disparities in patterns of financial support of doctoral recipients. Whites received 14 percent more total university support than Blacks, with this largely due to the fact that whites received 17 percent more *research* assistantships (while receiving about equal amounts of fellowships and teaching assistantships.)

This question of research assistantships is extremely important. If Black graduate students are not supported in a way which makes it possible for them to connect with research-oriented projects and professors, they will be far less likely to develop the kind of research productivity that leads to upward mobility in an academic setting.

Black faculty members are, again, crucial to intervening in this practice and to the general task of mentoring Black students. Indeed, sociologist James Blackwell, in his book *Mainstreaming Outsiders: The Production of Black Professionals*, cites the presence of Black faculty members as *the* most important factor in determining whether Blacks earn degrees from predominantly white graduate and professional schools.

The Hidden Crisis

The decline in the number of Black faculty is spelled out clearly in the statistics. But

there is also a hidden crisis. And that is the increased instability in the career pattern of many Black faculty members who are hired.

That 1986 National Science Foundation report (mentioned previously) showed that in science and engineering, for example, two-thirds of whites and one-half of Blacks held tenured positions, with Blacks concentrated at the associate professor level. It also showed the Black scientists and engineers earned faculty salaries which, in 1984, were 87 percent of white salaries. Such a finding contrasts sharply with the mythology that once Black faculty members reach the associate professor level, not only do they have their choice of institutions but they also can skip from institution to institution, earning increasingly higher salaries. That simply is not true. What is true is that, relative to white faculty members, Black faculty members are underpaid and overworked. This is indicative of an existing pattern of career-related problems plaguing Black faculty, among them:

Black faculty members often have difficulties in getting published in mainstream journals in their fields, especially if their work is written from a Black perspective;

Black faculty members often have heavier workloads of university representational duties, university committees and student counseling than white faculty members, yet they get no credit for such "extras" from tenure committees;

Black faculty members often do not get adequate research funding or fair consideration from research evaluation panels, which often blocks funding from both government and private sources;

Black faculty members, especially at Black universities, often lack access to adequate research facilities as well as university support for released time in which to do research.

Such problems lead to an inordinate amount of stress, as has been noted in a 1984 article by William Banks in the *American Behavioral Scientist* (Vol. 27, No. 3) entitled "Afro-American Scholars in the University: Roles and Conflict."

The Stakes

The long-term consequences posed by the precarious position of the nation's Black faculty have recently been acknowledged.

On September 18, 1987, 37 university and college presidents, led by Stanford University's Donald Kennedy, called on

their colleagues to respond to what they termed a "national emergency" in American higher education. They recommended that efforts be initiated to dedicate new resources to increase the appointment of minority faculty and to recruit minority students into college and university teaching. And they made the critical point that in the future, minority students might account for one-third of all college and university enrollments while the teaching staff at these institutions, given present trends, would have a minority representation of less than five percent.

What would be the consequence of such a scenario? James Blackwell's research suggests that college and university life for most Black students could become even more of a revolving door of enrollment, rejection and dropping out since, in the absence of Black faculty and staff and the presence of rising racism, Black students might become alienated. More profound, however, is his view that this would mean that the shortage of Black professionals will become more acute in the future.

And there you have the stinger: The Black community cannot tolerate a reduction in the size or viability of its meager middle class, yet it faces just such a prospect in both the reduction of Black student enrollment in graduate and professional schools and the severe shortage of Black faculty. Moreover, what of those Black students who do manage to graduate? With the maintenance of the Black intellectual tradition itself threatened, how will they be socialized to accept responsibility for leadership within the Black community?

The stakes are high and the time is right for action to begin to address some of these vexing problems. It has been sobering for me to talk to my colleagues from all over the country, to hear their pain, confusion and frustration, to learn of people who have been bounced around from institution to institution or who have been deprived of tenure unjustly. And there's been no organization to leverage for these people at all.

While there are some very able Black scholarly organizations, there is no cross-cutting organization that attracts membership from throughout the ranks and disciplines of the Black faculty. There's been no organization dedicated solely to the professional concerns of Black faculty.

From my recent discussions with colleagues around the country, it is apparent that there is much hope invested by them in the materialization of the National Black

Faculty Congress as an aggressive Black faculty advocacy and career development organization, one that would deal with such specific issues as: hiring, tenure and promotion; publication; research and education; governmental relations; institutional relations and community relations.

By being bold enough to organize specifically in the interest of Black faculty, by implication we reject the extent to which our ethnicity has been "minoritized." The "minoritization" of Black faculty and students itself is a shield which has obscured the downward trends for Blacks and the upward trends for other "minorities," a fact which simultaneously obscured the necessity for an organization of people who are Black first, scholars second, and "minorities" for often the most dubious of purposes.

I end, as I began, on a personal note. When I came to Howard University in the early 1970s, I was purposefully seeking to reconnect with the intellectual tradition of our people within the context of an outstanding Black university. Howard has been and continues to be a unique and rewarding environment for my own work as a teacher and researcher. But I also have come to realize that Howard University, in particular, and many Black institutions of higher education as well, have created a legacy of graduates in every conceivable corner of the world, contributing to a veritable global "university" of graduates, professors and their students. This fact leads logically to the conceptualization that the "Black University," then, is much broader than any institution and exists potentially wherever peoples of African descent exist.

Indeed, the continuing thread from the beginnings of the African intellectual tradition until now is the common bond of the search for meaning in the world and the protection of our contribution to world civilization as African peoples, whatever the location of our residence. It is this quest which is endangered by the diminishing role and presence of African-American students and professors in American institutions of higher education.