

Foreword

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is committed by mission to the advancement of both liberal education and inclusive excellence, and to the braiding of strong connections between college learning and the needs of a diverse democracy. In this context, AAC&U has focused strongly, both through its continuing programs and through its major funded initiatives, on the important role of faculty in fostering liberal learning—learning made rich through study of the arts and sciences—so that students can thrive and contribute in their lives, their work, and their roles in a globally engaged democracy. Similarly, AAC&U is working intensively on supporting new levels of scientific fluency and success for all students, with particular attention to students underrepresented in science and closely related fields of study.

This report turns a spotlight on a major site for liberal learning and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fluency: the work of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as leaders in the education and graduation of STEM students. The report focuses in particular on the underexplored role of STEM women faculty of color, both in supporting student success in STEM fields, and, over time, in driving campus changes that can make any college more effective in supporting student success in these fields.

With generous support from the National Science Foundation’s Office of HBCU–Undergraduate Program, AAC&U launched in 2011 the Preparing Critical Faculty for the Future (PCFF) project involving thirty-six HBCUs and seventy-two STEM women faculty of color and their colleagues. PCFF addressed both the adoption and the implementation of engaged practices and pedagogies particularly linked to persistence and success for underserved students and the need to strengthen leadership paths for STEM women faculty of color at HBCUs.

Each selected HBCU nominated two STEM women of color to lead its campus involvement in PCFF. It was clear across the entirety of the project that the STEM women’s top interest was their students’ retention and success. The PCFF leaders already were using active pedagogies, which research shows work best for STEM persistence and learning. But in the main, they had not seen themselves explicitly as leaders in driving broad educational change and reform, either on their campuses or in their disciplines. They had sought to be—and were—good teachers and supportive mentors to their students.

The PCFF project worked to position the STEM women faculty of color as change agents to make the use of evidence-based pedagogies in STEM more pervasive and more systemic. The project was designed to help these faculty place their knowledge within the context of the larger national STEM and liberal learning reform movements as well as mobilize their leadership to advance the use of effective STEM pedagogies within their own disciplines and institutions. PCFF also engaged participating faculty with new pedagogies—for example, culturally relevant ways of teaching science—toward which this group has a powerful orientation. Their experiences are applicable and transferrable to the experiences of STEM faculty on any type of campus.

As PCFF broadened participants’ horizons and positioned them for advancement, the project surfaced and had to confront a host of systemic issues that effectively block women of color, both as change agents and as leaders. These included instances where departmental and institutional leaders see the PCFF leaders’ race and gender

as deficits rather than as assets, as well as unrealistic demands frequently placed on women of color leaders to perform all the traditional faculty roles at high levels in addition to carrying oversized mentoring and advising loads with minimal support.

PCFF and its efforts to advance engaged pedagogical practices and institutional support for STEM women faculty of color leadership brought to the fore all the unresolved issues related to race and gender that still pervade the academy, even at HBCUs. Faculty of color cannot, and should not, face these leadership challenges on their own. Departmental and institutional leaders have a responsibility to open the doors, to appropriately support the multiple roles that STEM women of color fulfill in their professional development as scholars and teachers and as primary mentors for students of color in STEM higher education. “Making excellence inclusive” is everyone’s work.¹ It cannot be the work solely of selected faculty, no matter how talented and dedicated.

This report calls attention to STEM women of color as a critical force in advancing needed educational change. But it also underscores the role of leaders at all levels in creating an environment that supports, rewards, and advances educational changes focused on underserved student success.

As AAC&U noted in *Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence: A Campus Guide for Self-Study and Planning*, by 2027, 49 percent of high school seniors will be students of color (2015, 3). Yet students of color are less likely than students from other racial and ethnic groups to enter and complete college (Witham et al. 2015). As stated in *Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence*, “to serve students and society well, higher education will need to make a pervasive commitment to equity and inclusive excellence—both preparing students for and providing them with access to high-quality learning opportunities, and ensuring that students of color and low-income students participate in the most empowering forms of college learning” (AAC&U 2015, 4).

Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence provides a framework for self-assessment, dialogue, and action to create an equity-minded environment on all campuses. It encourages educational leaders to pose questions that emanate from the PCFF initiative, for example: How are your faculty and staff developing cultural competence so that they are prepared to teach all of today’s diverse students? How is your institution investing in leadership for equity?

As this report goes to press, college, university, and community college campuses of all kinds are alive with “new demands”—or, to be more accurate, old concerns that are rightly being raised once again across higher education—that institutions must create more hospitable and supportive environments for students from diverse backgrounds and from often dramatically underserved communities. The PCFF initiative reminds us that we already have talented leaders, on every kind of campus, who can help in that work. But equally important, this report reminds us that making excellence inclusive is everyone’s responsibility. Succeeding in that long-term change agenda is the necessary key to our diverse democracy’s shared future.

— CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER

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1 Making Excellence Inclusive is AAC&U’s guiding principle for access, student success, and high-quality learning. It is designed to help colleges and universities integrate diversity, equity, and educational quality efforts into their missions and institutional operations. For more information, see <http://www.aacu.org/making-excellence-inclusive>.