ORIGINAL RESEARCH

African American Faculty Members' Career Decisions About a Predominantly Caucasian Institution in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Ethnic minority faculty enhance higher education outcomes. However, predominantly Caucasian institutions (PCIs) have been generally unsuccessful in recruiting and retaining African American scholars. Interpretive qualitative methodology and in-depth, individual interviews were used to explore factors that influence African American faculty members' (n=10) decisions to accept, maintain, and leave PCI employment. Use of audio-taped transcripts and constant comparative data analysis revealed four themes: "character", dual marketing, balance, and detour under pressure. They represent domains ranging from university attributes and surrounding community demographics to formal/informal marketing and overall balance of scholarship and personal well-being. Recommendations for recruiting and retaining African American faculty and implications for practice, education, and research are offered. Since diversity can enhance career outcomes for both faculty and students, findings hold implications for administrators seeking an ethnically more diverse workforce, especially in the health professions and sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Keywords: African American ▪ faculty ▪ recruitment ▪ retention ▪ Caucasian ▪ university

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BACKGROUND

This study describes African Americans' career decisions related to employment as faculty within a predominantly Caucasian institution (PCI) of higher learning in the southeastern United States. The place African Americans hold at a significant number of US establishments of higher learning is still affected by the effects of slavery and racism (animosity and/or perceived superiority based on ethnicity) in the country (Harley, 2008). As recently as 50 years ago, African Americans were systematically and intentionally barred from full and equal participation as scholars and students at scores of US colleges and universities. Many remain PCIs.

Prior to 1963, African American faculty were generally relegated to private institutions that solely catered to the needs of disenfranchised minority groups (Weems, 2003). The 1960s civil rights movement legitimized African Americans' entry into public colleges and universities, yet, many PCIs consistently lament the inability to recruit the desired number (Alexander & Moore, 2008a; Diggs, Garrison-Wade, Estrada, & Galindo, 2009; Niemann, 2003). Reasons offered for this lack of success range from a shortage of candidates (Niemann, 2003) to poor retention of current personnel (Stanley, 2006).

The number of African American faculty employed at PCIs in the US varies (Harley, 2008), but it is much too low, and individuals seldom hold tenure or advance to the higher ranks (Alexander & Moore, 2008b). In 2009, 498,201 full-time instructional faculty (professors, associate professors, assistant professors) served in US degree-granting institutions: public and private (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010). Only 5% (25,228) were African American. In comparison, 5% (26,760) were "other"; 9% (44,628) Asian/Pacific Islander; and 77% (384,730) Caucasian. Comparable data for PCIs only were not available.

While shocking, these aggregated reports do not aid our understanding of the nuances and experiences associated with recruitment and retention of African Americans at PCIs, preventing recognition of facilitators and barriers. The factors that influence African Americans to join, remain, or leave a PCI are unclear. In addition, studies tend to examine academic faculties as a whole, without disaggregating groups by ethnicity or racial status (Jayakamar, Howard, Allen, & Han, 2009). They frequently use the term "faculty of color" as a catch-all phrase that includes Hispanics, Asian Americans, American Indians, and "others" (Jayakamar et al., 2009).

Thus, data on recruitment and turnover of faculty of color in general are inadequate (Stanley, 2006), and virtually no published literature addresses the career decisions of African Americans in particular. Studies have shown that this group often experiences a disparate burden of mental and emotional stressors at PCIs compared to Caucasian counterparts (Burden, Harrison, & Hodge, 2005; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005). Niemann (2003) attributes these stressors, in part, to tokenism; well-being is significantly compromised by

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working in isolation, albeit among members of other social or ethnic groups. Due to the isolation inherently experienced by marginalized and underserved groups, African Americans at PCIs are frequently disconnected from informal networks and not privy to sources of vital career development information. As an added stressor, their work, ideals, and scholarly interests are often devalued (Burden et al., 2005; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005).

This study is based on the assumption that the level of diversity African Americans infuse into PCIs enhances the academic scholarship and career outcomes of faculty and students (Alexander & Moore, 2008a). Being able to predict the success of efforts to recruit and retain a diverse workforce can play a crucial role in: a) attracting other ethnically diverse faculty and students (Cheatham & Phelps, 1995); b) mentoring and career development of junior faculty and students (Alexander & Moore, 2008a); c) exposing students to a wider range of scholarly perspectives and life experiences (Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2008); d) generating new research questions and views that intellectually stimulate students and faculty; e) helping students to become more confident in interacting with a multicultural society (Gurin, 2004); and f) dispelling ethnicity-related myths and stereotypes (Fries-Brit & Kelly, 2005; Harley, 2008) that impede teaching, service, and research outcomes.

This study aims: 1) to describe factors that influence African American scholars' decisions to accept employment at a PCI; 2) to identify factors that influence African American scholars' career decisions at a PCI; and 3) to uncover factors that influence African American scholars' decisions to leave PCI employment. It exposes the benefits of ethnic diversity at PCIs and the lack of evidence about factors that determine recruitment and retention of African American faculty.

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METHODOLOGY

Design

This study sought to describe the meaning faculty ascribe to their career experiences (Creswell, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009). A qualitative interpretive descriptive design was deemed appropriate because it collects insights that reveal the meaning of particular experiences, situations, cultural elements, or historical events (Burns & Groves, 2011).

Sample and Data Collection

The purposive sample consisted of faculty members (n=10) selected according to the following eligibility criteria: a) full-time, 9/12-month assistant professor, associate professor,

or professor; b) pretenured or tenured; and c) African American. The University (TU) is used to represent the actual study site. It is a land-grant PCI that has maintained an annual national ranking between 22nd and 27th among public institutions (*US News & World Report*, 2010). In 2010, TU had a total enrollment of 14,823 undergraduate and 4,630 graduate students (Office of Institutional Research, 2010). Of this enrollment, 78%, 14%, 6%, and 2% were Caucasian, "other," African American, and Hispanic, respectively.

The study was approved by the TU Institutional Review Board (IRB). The principal investigator (PI) recruited the sample using a database that included the rank of all African American faculty. Faculty were contacted via telephone and/or electronic mail and provided a letter describing a) the study's purpose; b) what was expected of respondents; c) eligibility criteria; d) foreseeable risks and benefits to participation; e) extent to which confidentiality is maintained; f) statement of voluntary participation and freedom to withdraw from the study at any time; and g) contact information for the PI.

The PI assigned respondents an identification number, and scheduled time for an individual, in-depth interview at a convenient and private location. Recruitment continued until 10 faculty volunteered to participate in at least one interview. The PI obtained informed consent at the beginning of each audio-taped interview.

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Data Collection

Interviews were deemed the most appropriate data collection method due to the sensitive nature of the research questions (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). After informed consent was secured, a semi-structured interview protocol (see Table 1) included eight open-ended questions to generate all possible perspectives about career decisions and plans. They ranged from "What comes to mind when you think about your decision to accept employment at TU?" to "What comes to mind when you think about your 'ideal' work environment in academia?"

A 10-item demographic survey was also used to collect descriptive data about participants' age, gender, and length of employment. The survey has been successfully used in prior studies to characterize respondents (Timmons, 2010; Timmons, 2009). No names or personal identifiers were required on the demographic survey or audio-taped recordings. The confidential master list of participants' names and assigned identification number was kept in a locked file in the PI's office. After data collection, the audio-tapes, demographic surveys, and consent forms were stored in an unmarked, sealed envelope and locked in the PI's office, where access was limited.

Table 1: Interview Guide Questions

1.	What comes to mind when you think about:
	…your decision to accept employment at TU?
2.	… TU characteristics that prompted you to seek employment there?
3.	…your reasons for maintaining employment at TU?
4.	…your experience as a faculty member at a predominantly Caucasian university?
5.	…your faculty role at a predominantly Caucasian university as compared to your perceived or actual role at a predominantly African American university?
6.	…your future at TU?
7.	…your "ideal" work environment in academia?
8.	What have we missed, if anything?

Data Analysis

Verbatim interview transcripts comprised the unit of analysis. They consisted of over 70 pages of data. Constant comparative data analysis was used so that information collected could be analyzed interactively (Hewitt-Taylor, 2001). It proceeded as follows: a) the entire set of data for each interview was read; b) each descriptive statement or observation was labeled with a code; and c) each code was compared with other codes, so all similar observations were labeled (categorized) with the same code. Codes and categories were then used to generate unique themes that captured the study aims. Analysis was revisited until no new categories or themes became apparent. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences was used to analyze descriptive data.

Along with adherence to the constant comparative method, rigor of analysis was ensured by attention to the auditability, credibility, and fittingness of the data (Lobiondo-Wood & Haber, 2010). Auditability was addressed by detailed documentation of the coding to maximize consistency in data analysis. Credibility was insured by taking ample time (approximately 1.5 hours) with each respondent to allow for unencumbered and liberal data collection and accessing at least 3 respondents to determine whether the analysis accurately reflected their faculty role experience. In addition, all codes and categories were consistently checked for adherence to the constant comparative method while attempting to capture participants' views versus those of the PI interviewer. Fittingness or transferability of the data was addressed by selecting participants who varied in such characteristics as discipline, length of employment, and gender and by soliciting discussion about various career experiences at TU.

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RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

All participants held earned doctorates, had a mean age of 42.2 years (SD, 7.6), and had been in their current faculty position for an average of 8.05 years (SD, 6.7). Ranks of assistant, associate, and professor were held by 20%, 40%, and 40% of participants, respectively. They represented each of TU's five academic colleges: health and education, engineering and science, business, architecture, and agriculture. Two (20%) held 12-month, and eight (80%) held 9-month appointments. Seven (70%) were men, and three (30%) women.

Results about their career decisions are classified under recruitment, retention, and decision to leave (see Table 2). Findings resulted in 10 overlapping, integrated domains

Table 2: Factors that Affect African American Faculty Recruitment, Retention, and Decisions to Leave a Predominantly Caucasian University

Themes	Domains
Recruitment	
I. Character (i.e., the university's "personality")	1. Location and Community
	2. Reputation: Formal/Informal
	3. Scholarship: Opportunity for Fulfillment
II. Dual Marketing	1. Outside Promotion
	2. Inside Promotion
Retention	
III. The Balance	1. Progress In Action
	2. Support Realized
	3. Personal/Family Well-being
Decision to Leave	
IV. Detour Under Pressure	1. No throughway (i.e., no tenure)
	2. Elective Alternative

represented by four abstract themes that convey factors related to career decision making: character or common attributes of the university; b) dual marketing, or advertising the same product through formal and informal means; and c) the balance, an even distribution

of career and personal well-being supported by the work environment. Finally, choosing to leave the university was defined by the theme *detour under pressure*, which connotes voluntary (e.g., elective pursuit of alternate career route) or involuntary departures due to lack of advancement, promotion, and tenure. Domains are described, and representative direct quotes from participants are included.

RECRUITMENT

Character

This theme represents the unique attributes of the university. It consists of three primary aspects: location and community, formal and informal reputation, and perceived opportunity for scholarly fulfillment.

Location and Community

Geographic location and regional demographics (e.g., ethnic composition, socioeconomic status, history) were revealed as features that attracted participants to the institution. Rurality and ethnic diversity, especially related to other African Americans in the surrounding community, were emphasized. One respondent said: "I don't like urban spaces... this is the place I'd rather be...to get in a more rural area..." Even though a less crowded rural setting was appealing, as-needed access to urban locations was also attractive. At least two cities are located within a 2-hour drive on interstate highways from TU. Location, as a prime recruitment consideration, was reiterated in the statement, "...because of proximity...when I need to go to a larger city, so I think it's convenient..."

Faculty liked the relatively large African American population near TU and its historical presence in the state: "It had a surrounding area that had an African American population...It's an underserved state"... "It's in the Southeast where we know a lot of African Americans are migrating this way." Participants viewed these demographics as an added opportunity to help facilitate their scholarship and career goals while helping to address the citizenry's traditionally underserved bio-psycho-social needs. One faculty member framed this notion: "We want to give back...I call this the 'Mecca'...that social need is important for me—for what I do."

Participants also viewed working with the TU student community and integrating their research interests with this group as appealing. One respondent noted: "I have a community of people around me with need...when I see an underserved community or an underserved student, it means something"... "If I'm not benefitting or at least bringing others along, for me—that's failure"... "It is a place where there is a need in the com-

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munity and outside the university—your research could flourish in a place like that." The value of location and community as primary recruitment incentives was captured in the comment, "...feeling that you can reach out to somebody who is in the community tends to be a more attractive decision to join."

Faculty also viewed the proximity of extended family as meaningful to their recruitment. Having a regional support network was valued. While some faculty were born and reared in the state, others maintained close family ties in the area. One said: "If I could get closer to home, I would be much happier." This sentiment was emphasized in the comments: "...plus my family is here..." "...because of my having been reared here..."

Reputation: Formal/Informal

Esteem for the institution of higher learning was identified as a significant recruitment tool. Participants readily recalled that the school's publicized strong research productivity and superior academic programs influenced their decisions to accept employment. One informant indicated, "One of the things I discovered immediately that I like was that it's a research intensive university." Faculty welcomed the opportunity for employment and acknowledged the associated academic rigors at a highly touted institution. They also recognized and anticipated the availability of infrastructural support; for example, information technology, internal research funding, travel funds, and other resources.

Informants perceived the university as growing and changing due, in part, to the relatively high number of retiring faculty. They viewed employment in a dynamic setting as appealing. They were attracted to the institution's strong academic reputation as well as welcomed the opportunity to contribute. One observed: "The requirements for tenure were rigorous, but accomplishable."

Other, less formal notions about the university were also considered in employment decisions. Faculty believed in the general public's overall positive impression of the university: "People love TU—love TU..." and "...perception of higher value—surprisingly quality institution."

Scholarship: Opportunity for Fulfillment

Respondents were attracted to a setting that they believed offered conditions favorable for attaining goals related to success as an academic scholar. One participant said: "... was looking for a new opportunity and challenge." Opportunities included professorship, "start-up" package, "good-fit" in terms of teaching and research interests, endowed chair position, and/or a combination of these elements ("...doing something similar to what I had been doing"). One faculty member offered: "They had a position suited just for me... that was very appealing." In addition to opportunities that complemented their individual

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skills and talents, faculty also desired a supportive environment: "Feeling like I have the support I needed…"

Dual Marketing

Marketing seeks to make information known. Faculty learn about available positions at the institution via external and internal promotion.

External Promotion

Advertisements specifically designed for external dissemination were found to increase faculty awareness of the university and its workforce needs. They included notices posted in relevant hard-copy and on-line journals, such as the Journal of Higher Education and the Chronicle of Higher Education. Faculty generally relied on computer resources to search for relevant positions: "The initial information, I got on-line." Ads also provided easy access to additional information about the school. The importance of external promotion is reflected in the statement: "I saw an ad and responded—it was a publication in the…" One faculty member summarized the value of external marketing to his successful recruitment to the university: "They advertised a job."

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Internal Promotion

Participants also identified the positive impact of informal or less systematically implemented promotion. They recalled that contact by, or affiliation with, TU faculty and administrators prompted their submission of an employment application. In these cases, some faculty felt they had been "hand-picked" for an available position. Others knew or had met current TU employees during undergraduate or graduate study at the institution, through on-campus visits and interviews in response to a job inquiry, or attending conferences together. Communication with non-TU peers who predicted that some TU administrators would be positive and supportive was influential. This sentiment is reflected in the statements, "he was conducive or friendly toward African Americans…they gave him praise"; and "there would be some mentoring that maybe I couldn't get elsewhere…I think that was part of it."

Faculty recruitment strategies were diverse, promoting the university's attributes and scholarly endeavors through marketing campaigns, but they overlap and are integrated with others that influence retention.

RETENTION

The Balance

Faculty experience of balance in meeting professional, personal, and social responsibilities is related to employment decisions. Balance was gauged based on progression and perceived support in the faculty role and overall perception of well-being.

Progress in Action

Faculty stay in their current positions when they perceive that they can fulfill their goals as scholars, including tenure. They expressed the desire to realize adequate teaching, research, and outreach outcomes: "...developing a long-range research and outreach program...you've got to get your research done or you can't stay...I love teaching and I think that's one of the biggest things that drive me..."; "being here is to hopefully be able to pass along to other young people like myself when I was coming along..." Participants were also content with their progress when they could serve as role models for other faculty.

Support Realized

Not only did faculty cite commitment to their role as impetus for retention, they also identified the significance of a supportive work environment. Environments that provided the resources needed to meet role expectations were valued. One participant summarized this view: "I don't feel like I'm restricted in what I can do...I think it's up to me." Another said: "So far, I feel like I've had support...a supportive institution—the kind of environment where you have the opportunity to shape your own destiny..."

Participants felt that the university conveyed support by awarding resources and facilitating collegial relationships within the organization. Collegiality was described: "The TU family: that's real in a lot of ways...I like my colleagues...these are the people I really like...I feel good about promoting my department as some place where I like to be." Another affirmed "TU has been good to me...I think it's one of the best decisions I've made."

Personal/Family Well-Being

Retention was related to overall quality of life, especially as it affected immediate family members. Family well-being was affected by the quality of the available education systems, employment opportunities, and social/recreation options for children, spouses, and all family members.

Faculty noted the "albatross" of ethnicity-related cultural isolation, yet they did not perceive it as an insurmountable threat to retention, especially since it was familiar to members of a traditionally marginalized group. Instead, they highlighted the overall well-being of their families as a more salient retention factor. One respondent summarized: "As long as they [family] are comfortable and I feel like there is opportunity for them to grow and do things they want to, then, I can survive...they like the place."

Being able to maintain the balance between scholarship and family needs fostered retention. However, faculty acknowledged other influences that could precipitate their exit from university employ.

DECISION TO LEAVE

Detour Under Pressure

Factors influencing departure were categorized as either without or within their control.

No Throughway

Respondents would leave employment due to "pressure" from others (i.e., administrators) in the university that detoured them away from their planned career path. Tenure denial and/or termination were identified as the most obvious reasons for nonelective departure. No participants had been denied tenure (postapplication) at the time of data collection, yet all readily indicated that tenure status was an ongoing concern, particularly for "pre-tenured" professors: "Tenure is key." Another said: "If I felt that my opportunities were restricted...if opportunities weren't availing themselves, I may not be here."

Elective Alternative

Faculty were likely to leave the university in pursuit of a "better" opportunity or different career path. None of the participants was actively seeking to leave the university at the time of data collection, but all recognized that they might. More attractive opportunities included stronger possibility of tenure award, an endowed chair position, fulfilling destiny ("wherever God leads me"), more responsibility, and increased salary. In general, faculty indicated that if they did not see immediate opportunities at TU, they would leave. Still, perceptions of opportunity appeared relative, as inferred by one respondent: "If Barack [US President Obama] called me up, I would definitely give that a second thought."

In summary, faculty career decisions about joining or staying at a PCI incorporated a number of factors: university attributes, position description, marketing strategies, and ex-

pectations and fulfillment in scholarship and well-being. Imbalance among these elements predicted voluntary or involuntary departure.

DISCUSSION

This study uncovered factors about African American faculty career decision-making at a PCI: character, dual marketing, balance, and detour under pressure. While these concepts are supported by similar findings (Diggs et al., 2009; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Jayakamar et al., 2009), they add key concepts in relation to recruitment (location and environmental demographics, formal and informal reputation, accessible opportunity, marketing strategies) and retention (progress in action, realized support, overall well-being).

Jayakamar et al. (2009) conducted a relatively large study of faculty of color (n=4131, convenience sample) to assess the extent to which racial climate and job satisfaction were related to intentions to leave the academy. Of the 942 African American, 1,630 Asian/ Asian American, and 1,097 Latino faculty members; 39%, 27%, and 36% left the academy respectively. The researchers concluded that lack of autonomy, independence, and career progression fueled this decision. The study also found that subjects were more likely to endure racism-related barriers (i.e., heightened scrutiny and devaluation of scholarship) if they felt that their careers were progressing.

Although not focusing on recruitment and retention factors, Diggs et al. (2009) conducted a qualitative study on the tenure-related experiences of two African American and two Latino faculty members at a PCI. They found that the university was seen as supportive but socially and collegially isolating. The faculty members noted the importance of developing an academic identity as scholar while striving to balance their personal, cultural, and professional lives.

The experience of "making progress" and "balance" as significant to retention is a resounding theme in the literature (Diggs et al., 2009; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Jayakamar et al., 2009). Others have found that African American scholarship is often devalued by colleagues and administrators (Burden et al., 2005; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005), and we found that some African American scholars are attracted to their roles and work locations, in part, because they enable them to serve the needs of the underserved. Taken together, these findings raised the question of whether PCI colleagues and administrators are unaware, uninterested, and/or ignorant about the lived experience of racism and exclusion and how it can foster concern for, and commitment to, the plight of other marginalized groups with whom African American faculty identify.

This question is related to our finding that African American faculty, like all faculty, seek and find intrinsic reward in the perceived support of their work by colleagues and administrators in their organizations. When rewards are not forthcoming, professional and

personal well-being are likely to suffer, contributing to attrition and compromising future recruitment. The limited amount of knowledge on this topic calls for studies on the overall well-being and scholarly aspirations of African American faculty and how both are perceived by PCI colleagues and administrators.

Since an ethnically diverse faculty can enhance career outcomes for both faculty and students, our findings hold implications for administrators who seek to change their ethnically underrepresented workforces, especially in the health professions and the science, technology, engineering, and math disciplines. Findings can also support US efforts to improve postgraduate education (US Department of Education, 2011) by enhancing the availability of faculty mentors and exposing all students to diverse thought and experience. To this end, Table 3 presents specific recruitment and retention-related recommendations.

Table 3: Recommendations for Recruiting and Retaining African American Faculty at a Predominantly Caucasian Institution

1. Target scholars who are familiar with the community as "home" or have family/friends in the region.

2. Target scholars whose academic/career goals complement needs and opportunities in the community.

3. Tell current students that their future return as faculty is welcomed, valued, and anticipated.

4. Market the unique attributes of the institution and surrounding community through various print and on-line media.

5. Promote community support and resources (e.g., employment opportunities for spouses, proximity to major cities, quality schools and recreation) to prospective/current faculty.

6. Motivate current faculty/administrators (deans, chairs, presidents, provosts) to participate in ongoing recruitment campaigns that include personal contact and outreach to prospective and current faculty.

7. Implement systematic discourse and behaviors to enhance the overall well-being of ethnic minority faculty.

8. Increase current and prospective faculty awareness of expectations and mechanisms for achieving tenure.

9. Support diverse and ethnically-centered research interests and contributions of all faculty.

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LIMITATIONS

This study has a few limitations. First, the broad interview questions may not have allowed exhaustive data collection about career decision-making or evoked all possible responses. Second, the homogenous sample limits the study's ability to clarify how culture might influence decision-making. Since respondents were all employed by a research-intensive university, faculty at other postsecondary settings might have responded differently due to variations among their roles. Finally, findings can only be generalized to the study sample. Nonetheless, they represent a significant contribution to answering an understudied and urgently asked question about diversifying faculty at predominantly Caucasian US institutions of higher education.

CONCLUSION

African American faculty contribute to the breadth of academic outcomes for both students and faculty. Their career decisions are affected by the internal and external environments of the universities with which they affiliate. Understanding the evidence-based factors that inform their decisions holds promise for efficient management of the faculty workforce, a major concern at US colleges and universities.

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