

Moving more than the Needle: Prioritizing UTK efforts towards Inclusive Excellence

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Despite some positive movement, UTK is far from successful in meeting the needs of all stakeholders for an institution of higher education that strives for inclusion and the acknowledgement that excellence of the enterprise requires inclusion in all its processes and activities. These comments are from my perspective as an admittedly highly privileged member of our community on some particular actions that the University could take, focusing on the academic and faculty affairs practices, to do more to enhance faculty diversity objectives. It derives from my experiences over forty years here, from participation in numerous activities and projects over the years on STEM diversity, and from being ashamed of many quite appalling stories over this time on UTK actions related to diversity. I am convinced that we as a community can do better, and below are some suggestions to be considered and discussed with faculty, staff and administrators who have different experiences from my own.

1. *Asymmetry in loss of acclaimed faculty.* Role models in academia provide one important route to ensure that the entire community (students, staff, administrators and faculty) feel included. While UTK's student composition over the past four decades has become somewhat more aligned with the diversity of our stakeholders, a similar response at all faculty levels has not been adequate. There is asymmetry because the loss of highly acclaimed persons of color cannot be "made up" through hiring even several individuals at junior levels and associated hope for "rebuilding" (as would typically occur in academic units when senior distinguished faculty leave and a particular area of scholarly expertise needs to be filled). The loss is more pronounced and felt more by our limited cadre of faculty of color, who naturally wonder then even more if this heavily white institution is where they should devote their career. Due to this asymmetry, I posit that special efforts should be taken to reduce the impact of such losses to the campus community.

Over the past two years UTK has lost at least four highly acclaimed faculty of color, and as far as I can tell there was no attempt whatsoever to be flexible about maintaining their relationship in some way with UTK. Of course, every effort should be made to keep them, as with any faculty member who is lost to us, because "replacement" is extremely expensive. There are numerous ways that we can strive to keep faculty in the UTK family in some changed role (e.g. advisory distinguished faculty, external distinguished chair, etc.), if indeed they do leave. Though we may not have their full attention, at the least they can continue to be available to provide their unique insights in some manner.

2. *Growing our own.* We do not do this at all well. I have argued for years that we simply cannot compete with many other institutions for highly-recruited junior faculty due in part to the history of racism, homophobia, and sexism that has pervaded the institution, and the tremendous hindrances thrown in our path by a retrograde legislature. We all have stories

about the difficulty in overcoming these issues to get potential candidates to even consider applying for positions. Some options other institutions follow are to have a formal postdoc program in place, essentially as “potential faculty” positions, so that an expectation is that the position moves to a tenure-line position after two years given adequate progress. This gives the candidate time to see what living here is really like, and hopefully convinces them that joining us is a good career move. To be effective this program needs to be significant (e.g. for UTK perhaps 20-30 positions each year) and be extremely open to partner/spousal joint hiring. As it is, partner/spousal faculty hiring is catch-as-catch can with seeming changes year-to-year in how the program works, is funded, and relies heavily upon the willingness of particular Heads and Deans to expend the effort to make these work. A forward-thinking institution will make the commitment to spousal/partner positions, make it very clear that it is high priority and advertise the program broadly. Further, paying much more careful attention to child and dependent care matters will help in recruitment (e.g. extend our current program of supporting travel for a “medically-necessary” caregiver for a visiting faculty member to cases of our own faculty traveling).

Though controversial, we should also consider programs that allow us to effectively recruit-back to our campus students who complete their degrees here. This is often considered anathema, but just imagine how effective our graduate student recruitment could be if indeed we pointed out that there was a route in place, for highly successful graduates to stay here in a faculty line. We could establish specific graduate-student recruiting for such positions, and perhaps couple this with planned postdoctoral experiences at partner institutions.

3. *Enhancing our Network.* There is a complete lack of effort associated with building the network of connections that can enhance the diversity of our faculty. There is no central effort at all, just a call for “opportunity hires” that is irregularly supported and very limited in scope. What we could be doing is what the major head-hunter firms do – keep very careful track of all kinds of potential hires (not just the senior ones these firms deal with). All faculty have our own networks of connections and there has never been any coordinated effort to mine these connections for potential hires. I and many other faculty serve in various capacities on national and international boards, agency review panels and professional societies and give talks at other institutions. Through these we meet potential recruits for positions here, yet never have I been asked to use these interactions to build a potential UTK hiring pool that would either enhance recruiting for a particular future position, or potentially targeting a position. As part of the travel authorization for every trip, faculty should be asked to supply names of potential candidates they encountered, before they receive reimbursement. This tells all faculty that diversity recruitment is all of our responsibility regularly, and not just limited to STRIDE training.

4. *Equalizing the Service Burden.* The challenges of “invisible labor” that faculty of color are faced with is draining, inequitable and reduces our ability to attract and keep the diverse faculty UTK needs. Service is often the least compensated aspect of a faculty member’s responsibilities and yet falls much more heavily on faculty of color than on the white majority. We all know faculty who take on huge service loads, well beyond expectation, but this is mostly a personal decision rather than one forced on the individual due to their genetics. Though there is no

simple solution I am aware of, at the very least we should be as explicit about service expectations for ALL faculty in the same way we are for research and teaching. One approach is to have all faculty regularly make an explicit “service plan” that allows Heads and Deans to ascertain when someone is really doing much more than others, and be certain that student and colleague mentoring is appropriately accounted for in this plan. Having explicit university guidelines for Heads to reduce other commitments if the service plan includes particular activities that faculty of color face, in the same way that high scholarly commitments may reduce other responsibilities, could be helpful. Extra-service pay for extensive service should also be considered.

5. *Being Forceful in Distinguished Faculty Hires.* UTK has a horrible record in diversity hiring in the most distinguished positions (Chairs of Excellence and Governor’s Chairs). I encourage that no one be hired in any opening associated with these positions (all of which were associated with very large amounts of State funding) unless this individual enhances the diversity of the university faculty.

6. *Formalizing our Objectives.* Institutional commitments seem to vary here with every new administrator, along with the metrics for evaluating success. Classic strategic planning has not helped us deal effectively to move towards inclusive excellence. There are formalized programs that UTK could participate in that require long-term commitment, provide clear metrics of success and would be in place independent of the administrative changes that have haunted us for decades. A major one I have encouraged is the Sea Change initiative of AAAS (seachange.aaas.org), but no doubt there are others that could be established and be institutionalized and an expectation that any administration will follow.

Paying for all this. Only #2 above requires any major new commitment of resources. The others can be accomplished at very low additional cost, though they certainly require effort and firm administrative and faculty commitments.