

Minority Faculty Experiences – Questions, Questions, Questions

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Let me submit the following disclaimer: My experience may not be your experience, but it may sound familiar, especially if you are searching for a tenure-track appointment, just accepted one, or are hoping to maintain one.

As a minority faculty member, I am often concerned whether I have asked too many questions of my colleagues. There is not one handbook that offers a detailed discussion about the protocol of how many questions a new faculty member should ask, but there sure can be a lot of wrinkled eyebrows, twisted mouths, and wringing arms if you ask too many questions. Unfortunately, many minority faculty members may believe that the statute of limitations for asking questions ceases after the interview period. So, what is a new minority faculty member to do? Ask questions, I say.

I believe that it is essential to a minority faculty member's survival in a department to ask questions of everyone equally, without taxing any one individual's time. Regrettably, many minority faculty members believe that inquiries show weakness or raise eyebrows, suggesting a fraudulent existence in academe. I beg to differ. If you do not ask questions, you will regret each day that you go to work and eventually question why you decided to pursue a job as a professor when there were so many other safe job opportunities available.

I do suggest asking a question when one needs to be asked, not simply as a means of exercising your intellect in the department. Asking questions should offer a minority faculty member a clearer explanation of her expected responsibility, performance, and future goals. There were several occasions when I attended a faculty meeting or committee meeting and was unsure of my assignment or objective. Admittedly, at first I pretended to be clear of my duties, but I found myself compelled to ask a colleague or my department head, "Now what exactly do you want me to do?" Initially, I thought that they would ask themselves the larger questions like, "Why did we make a minority hire?" or "Do minority faculty really need this much guidance?" I discovered that my apprehensions were unfounded and that my colleagues respected my inquiries and were willing to assist me.

I also suggest asking questions that extend beyond the academic corridors. Minority faculty members, especially those who secure employment on predominantly white campuses, may have inquiries about social and lifestyle issues that are not readily available from the local chamber of commerce's Web site. I encourage new minority faculty to ask questions of students, colleagues, and staff about local salons and barbers, churches, and community groups that focus on minority community uplift and enrichment. To turn a phrase of the early twentieth century, you may not want to be identified as a "*race man/woman*," but the lack of inquiries of this type may make for a painfully long and isolated experience in your new job. Your diversity has no doubt

already been recognized as important, so questions about the availability of certain ethnic products and services should not be viewed as threatening or radical in nature to your colleagues or the university community.

Of course, as a minority faculty member you may still believe that by asking questions you are infringing on your colleagues' time, but it is better to ask questions and receive a modicum of clarity than to remain hopelessly in the dark searching on your own for the answers. If you practice a two-pronged approach—junior-faculty inquiry plus senior-faculty inquiry--you will receive a balanced and experienced response to your questions and reduce the number of headaches that you would have experienced searching aimlessly on your own for an answer. I discovered that if my colleagues, junior or senior, did not have an answer readily available or acceptable, they referred me a knowledgeable administrator or staff member. Their proactive behavior removed them from expending valuable time and assisted me with receiving the appropriate answer quickly.

We have been taught to ask primary, subsidiary, and tertiary questions in our research, so why should we abandon this mode of inquiry once we receive an academic appointment? It is our ability to think and question that sets us apart from other creatures.

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