

Diversity in Academic Careers

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Advice for Minority Professors on the Tenure Track

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Blannie E. Bowen, vice provost for academic affairs at Pennsylvania State University, has coached many minority professors over the years. He has worked at Penn State since 1988, starting as a professor in the department of agricultural and extension education. He also served as senior faculty mentor in the university's Center for Minority Graduate Opportunities and Faculty Development. As vice provost, he helps oversee all promotion-and-tenure cases. He spoke to Robin Wilson of The Chronicle.

Q. *Can you talk about minority professors you have mentored and what kind of advice you've offered?*

A. An African-American student graduated from Penn State three years ago and was one of my Ph.D. advisees in agricultural sciences. When he started looking at universities, clearly the top position was at Iowa State. That's the only one he applied to. It was a great job because he's from the Midwest, and it was an excellent situation in terms of having the resources you need to succeed — not just the monetary aspect but an excellent track record of faculty making it through the process.

Since he's been at Iowa State he's had at least four or five other universities trying to get him to apply for positions. I've said you need to establish yourself as much as possible and prove you can make tenure in one research university before moving. One university tried to lure him away with the offer of department head, but I thought that would have

been a terrible move. It would have been career suicide. He's not tenured, he doesn't have the years of experience or the credibility. I told him, be flattered that someone thinks so highly of you but tell them: Come back in about 10 years and we can talk.

Q. Is it ever smart to move before earning tenure?

A. I've seen some faculty members lured away to another university pretenure, and the department head who does the hiring does not do a lot of consulting with his faculty members, and some of them are probably not very enthralled with the new hire. Administrative positions turn over in five to six years, and the next thing you know, you get a new department head, and let's say it's one of the individuals who didn't want to hire you to start with. All of a sudden your work is not valued. I've seen that happen many times. The lesson there is find your place, achieve tenure, and if you want to move later the opportunities will be there.

Q. Is the faculty job market strong for all minority candidates?

A. The answer is that it comes down to discipline. In some areas of education, the social sciences, and some of the liberal arts, you have a good supply of available minority faculty members — so the demand for them is not as high. But in some fields, particularly in engineering and in the sciences and agriculture, to name a few, the supply is very weak and so the demand for these minority faculty is very high.

Q. Tell me about some other success stories for minority professors who have started at Penn State.

A. We had an African-American female professor who was here from 1998 to 2004. She was promoted to associate in 2004. The following year, she went to Buffalo College at the State University of New York with the offer of professor and chair of the department. It was a good move for her. There was another African-American woman who came to Penn State with a brand new Ph.D. from Ohio State in 1993. She was in our business school. Our normal promotion-and-tenure cycle is review during the sixth year, and she was so excellent, she was reviewed during the fifth year and tenured early. The following year, she was recruited away to the University of Arkansas as a full professor with an endowed chair, and while she was at Arkansas she received a second endowed chair at the university that had a higher value than the first. Two other universities were trying to lure her away. One offered to bring all of her graduate students. They'd fund them, plus she could bring a junior faculty member along with her. But she decided to leave academia in 2003 to start her own company.

Q. What about the flip side of these stories — young minority faculty members who may be having problems getting tenure at a place like Penn State?

A. Somehow in academia we've built the allure that the best faculty positions are in big-time research universities like Penn State. That's not necessarily true. There's a case I

have now, a minority faculty member who probably isn't going to make tenure and is looking to get out before a negative decision.

My advice is to leave before you get a no, so you won't have it on your record. That may entail you moving to a less-rigorous research institution. To sit and stay and hope is not very prudent. A lot of faculty will stay in hopes of the situation turning around. But then they don't make it, and they end up being very bitter. The whole situation could have been avoided.

Q. What about at the associate-professor level? What's the danger of a minority professor getting stalled there?

A. There's a high probability of that happening because they don't have minority full professors as role models. In terms of making full professor here, one of the things we look at is the national and international reputation. You can't continue to spend a lot of time advising students and doing a lot of the same local, within-Pennsylvania type of things and become a full professor. You have to associate with other scholars, do the editing of journals, the higher-level review work. You need to have contacts within the major peer institutions. We ask for outside letters of evaluation, and they're coming from Texas A&M, Florida, the big land grants. If you aren't involved in the professional societies and organizations and becoming a leader and getting elected and doing the kinds of things where your work becomes noticed by those individuals, it's a losing proposition.

One case that comes to mind is a person who has been on two sabbatical leaves with the idea and promise of developing a book that is the crown jewel and getting promoted to full professor. Well, I'm still waiting on the book. The person gets sidetracked serving on the Faculty Senate, serving on search committees, the Graduate Council, things that won't count for promotion to full professor. That may give you a good feeling, but it's not going to help you get promoted.

Q. Is recruitment of minority professors still a priority in higher education?

A. Yes, it's a major commitment at Penn State. I think with some of the negative impacts and court cases, a lot of people are trying to decide how to approach affirmative action. Most universities have some type of target hiring program. I don't see that changing. We subscribe fully to the principles and tenets of fair and open searches. But as with any university, if there's someone you want to hire and you have the resources, we'll target faculty. We don't do this just for minority faculty. We also go after white faculty, as well as faculty from other countries.

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Section: Diversity in Academic Careers

Volume 53, Issue 6, Page B18