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GUEST COLUMN: PARTNER PERSPECTIVES

CREATING TRANSFORMATIVE SPACES TO BUILD OUR FUTURE FACULTY

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I recently completed two decades as an academic administrator focused on building a vibrant, diverse, and forward-looking faculty, at two different universities. I am happy to report that, in this time, I have seen change, real change in how we hire new faculty and define their work and achievements. I have also witnessed the incredible commitment and tenacity it takes to change the basic patterns of faculty recruitment and advancement. In looking back, I also now see that the research I did as an early-career professor — on the transformative space of dramatic comedy — provided a framework that has guided my leadership work as well.

WHAT DESIGN FOR CHANGE DOES COMEDY PROVIDE?

My research was focused on women playwrights and female characters in comedy and on comedy as a journey of both personal and communal transformation. A key feature of much theatrical comedy is that it creates a space where the status quo is left behind and characters test new roles, ideas, and relationships, freed from their inhibitions and their unquestioned values. In the "middle space" of comedy — between the old way, the status quo, and the yet-to-be discovered new way — there is a freedom from rigidity and a place to consider and test new ideas and opportunities. The arc of comedy leads through this rollicking middle to an ending where characters can embrace the new ways that grow out of that transformative space. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, for example, a woman dressed as a man creates multiple avenues for desire and unsettles expectations of a traditional heterosexual coupling. In Caryl Churchill's 1979 *Cloud Nine*, a farcical first half makes fun of Victorian values, preparing for a second half in which late 20th-century characters experiment with romance in spaces freed from rules.

The comedy I have studied is not a string of jokes or a funny turn of events that elicits laughs. It is a path to rethinking. And as I look back over two decades, I can see that in my experience leading conversations in the academy, I have been trying to re-create comedy's "middle space" where academics can see the constraints of established ways as well as inhabit the exciting new space we have the power to imagine and build. It's a space where a diverse faculty defines values, where more effective learning takes place, more innovative research flourishes, and meaningful service is rewarded.

HOW CAN A UNIVERSITY CREATE THE MIDDLE SPACE OF COMEDY IN EFFORTS TO BUILD AN INNOVATIVE AND DIVERSE FACULTY?

The short answer is that it takes networks and communities built out of those networks to sustain transformative work. Networks provide a structure; events built on those networks create the communities where transformation can take place. Here is what I have learned about the move into transformative community moments.

Networks. We often talk about networks as a strategy for accomplishing all kinds of academic work. In the effort to diversify the faculty, networks also provide a structure for building community. Think of how, for over 20 years, the National Science Foundation's (NSF) ADVANCE program has created a continuing network of faculty, staff, and administrators across the country, academics who all have been working on enhancing a diverse workforce. Most recently, the alliance has evolved into the ADVANCE Resource Coordination (ARC) network. Similarly, the Collaborative of Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) is a network built around shared goals and allows institutional leaders to compare challenges and successes in creating healthy climates in which their faculty can thrive.

In my time as Vice Provost at the University of California (UC) Office of the President, we have been able to do something similar. I began with a "system" of 10 campuses — a network already half built — as I set out to facilitate existing campus intentions to recruit and retain a more diverse faculty. I had to find ways to build an actual network out of org charts. The most effective way was to create events at which my partners (and potential partners) at all 10 UC campuses could come together. I developed a formula for gatherings, hopefully one that is portable to universities across the country.

The formula begins with a compact one-day event, an event with goals that are clear from the initial "hold the date" announcement. We paid for travel costs and lodging (when needed) so that would-be participants were not constrained by the costs, however modest they might be. There were always materials distributed electronically ahead of time, including the full agenda, a list of participants, a short research-based reading or two, and relevant data about demographics of faculty at UC as well as nationally. The meeting itself included one keynote speaker who brought research expertise relevant to the discussion and several other speakers who recounted their work on specific initiatives dealing with faculty recruitment, retention, or advancement. These practitioners were often not experts, but faculty and others who wanted to improve their academic unit's innovation and diversity. There was always ample time for discussion. I took on the

job of providing a narrative line through the day; and the best part about this emcee role was the chance to point out effective projects, novel approaches, and revelations, even confessions, that were unanticipated. The energy and engagement of the conversations was meant to recharge the batteries of those weary in their diversity work and to provide a launchpad for those joining the conversation for the first time. Well-designed events are the necessary first step to transformative community.

Communities. Each network-based event had the power to create the "aha moments" that conversation and in-person learning can unleash. We had convened a community-for-a-day during which a liberating middle space was possible. The best examples in my time at UC came in our "Fostering Inclusive Excellence" seminars for deans and department chairs, half day meetings built around an interactive theater performance that engaged attendees in identifying and then managing micro-aggressions, all acted out in a skit about a "typical" department discussion of a tenure case. The mix of familiar and unfamiliar, with both blatant and subtle bias on display, unsettled assumptions about objectivity and excellence. We had MFA student actors, theater professionals, and experts on micro-aggressions all teaming up to create breakthrough moments for audience members. Each performance had a scripted scenario of a faculty committee meeting followed by multiple opportunities for give-and-take among audience members and actors. Most of the deans and chairs went away buoyed by the intensity of the discussion of thorny issues, armed with the experience of talking through fraught moments with experts helping them to move beyond discomfort to understanding. The 10 seminars were highly rated by the nearly 600 participants, many of whom had been directed to attend because of their administrative duties. We were not just preaching to the choir of those fully committed to a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) agenda; so the transformations, when they came, were often visible to the group. This was the liberating middle space of comedy, regenerative for some and uncomfortably new to others. In this comic space, a network became a community.

In using a theatrical scenario with actors, we had a relatively easy time in creating a transformative space. But we built other community events without the direct use of theater as well. A three-year NSF ADVANCE award partially funded our "Meeting the California Challenge" Roundtables, each of which created a single-day meeting where faculty, provosts, deans, chancellors, and chief diversity officers gathered to probe key issues in diversifying the faculty. Those attending had the experience of acquiring the skills to build a stronger and more diverse faculty. One particularly successful Roundtable was focused on the option to include "contributions to diversity statements" in faculty recruitment, very much an emerging issue in 2013. A highlight was when over a hundred participants sorted through sample statements seeking to build a *common* method to identify solid achievement. The buzz in the room that day was electric.

UC's ongoing "Advancing Faculty Diversity" (AFD) program provides final examples of building and sustaining a community focused on long-term efforts to establish a strong, diverse faculty. With an ongoing budget to fund projects across the 10 campuses, AFD has built a productive network over seven years. The funding is necessary, but efforts to move into the somewhat unpredictable and unsettling middle space have been the lynchpin of the program's success. In one case, during a COVID-era Zoom convening of current principal investigators (PI) on pilot projects, one faculty member who was facing a racist rejection of her recruitment activities recounted the difficulties she had encountered. Her honesty and careful analysis galvanized the Zoom audience and opened up a new space where others were equally honest about the resistance they were facing. Even in a Zoom-square space, she felt safe in sharing her frustrations. Several others offered strategies they had used to overcome such resistance. In another Zoom convening, two white male department chairs shared the particular challenges they faced in leading faculty recruitment efforts in their STEM disciplines. Their willingness to expose a very different kind of vulnerability was encouraged by the inclusiveness of this community.

A final example of the power of the AFD network and its breakthrough community moments came in April 2023, at the convening of current-project PIs and campus academic leaders. The provost and the chief diversity officer of one UC campus gave a compelling presentation about three years of well-designed, innovative efforts to recruit new faculty, faculty who were recruited for their research expertise as well as for their culturally sensitive teaching and service commitments. The two spoke of 30 newly hired faculty, each with a social justice commitment, and of a cross-department faculty cohort that is creating a welcoming, multi-racial academy. Their effort is impressive; but my point is that during this presentation, the two leaders ignited a powerful community moment for the multi-campus audience. The question-and-answer period revealed an audience in awe of what this campus had done, and inspired others to seek similar achievements on their home campus.

Each of these moments encapsulates the transformative middle space of an event, a space in which members of the community feel free to express the buoyant feeling of building their own hard-won transformative spaces outside the constraints of their own routines or to complain about the stubborn power of the status quo. Those present wrestle with the viability of new ideas for change or acknowledge the strategies that do not work, that do not advance the university's goals. Attendees find allies and confirm their commitments to continuing the work through the regenerative transformations of the middle space and the communities they build in that new domain.

It is remarkably re-energizing to enter such space and build on the collective enthusiasm available in that space. It inspires the hope that transformation is achievable, and it makes the entire community feel like the hard work will pay off.

WHAT ELSE DOES IT TAKE TO SUCCEED?

I believe these community events can make all the difference. But they do not stand alone and are only effective when they are built on a foundation in policy, funding, and committed people. These three ingredients come into play — and all three are needed — when an institution says it wants to become a place where we embrace difficult conversations about the mission of the university; where we hire, value, and learn from a more racially/ethnically and gender diverse faculty; where we can see that past practices and cultures are often not just rigid but also exclusionary. Building the foundation is hard work but remarkably straightforward.

Policy. The best foundation for creating conditions that will support equitable practices of recruitment, retention, and advancement is policy that is explicit about how the institution values principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion. In 2005, the University of California adopted such a policy by stating that review of faculty performance includes recognition of such values. The core policy statement, updated in 2015, reads as follows:

> *The University of California is committed to excellence and equity in every facet of its mission. Contributions in all areas of faculty achievement that promote equal opportunity and diversity should be given due recognition in the academic personnel process, and they should be evaluated and credited in the same way as other faculty achievements. These contributions to diversity and equal opportunity can take a variety of forms including efforts to advance equitable access to education, public service that addresses the needs of California's diverse population, or research in a scholar's area of expertise that highlights inequalities. Mentoring and advising of students and faculty members, particularly from underrepresented and underserved populations, should be given due recognition in the teaching or service categories of the academic personnel process. (*Academic Personnel Manual *210-1-d, 2015 revised language)*

Note that these expectations about contributions to "equal opportunity and diversity" are not supplemental but integral to expectations about research and intellectual leadership. In other words, the policy confirms that UC's mission as a high-quality public research university is based on communal values, including equity, diversity, and inclusion.

A similar alignment of policy and values existed at my prior institution, Iowa State University (ISU), also a public research university. The innovative promotion and tenure policy adopted at ISU in 1998 re-imagined the traditional triad of research, teaching, and service, and in doing so, set up a structure perfect for later efforts to build a more diverse faculty. Two qualities of the promotion and tenure policy allow for a more expansive definition of faculty achievement. First, faculty members advance in rank when they can show achievements that include "excellence" (promotion to associate professor) or "distinction" (promotion to full professor) in scholarship; and scholarship is defined to occur not exclusively in research, but also in teaching and outreach. Second, the policy has a sophisticated description of teaching expectations, including distinctions among "scholarly teaching," "effective teaching," and the "scholarship of teaching and learning" as possible paths to advancement. (*ISU Faculty Handbook*, section 5.2.2.3)

The policies at both institutions invite new configurations of faculty achievement and erase unnecessary boundaries, making space for communal transformation.

Funding. While expanded and explicit policy on what we need from faculty is necessary, it rarely is enough to ensure transformation in how the University makes important decisions. The values of equity, inclusion, and diversity also need to be funded, just as institutions fund other mission-central efforts, like ensuring student success or increasing external research awards. The NSF's ADVANCE program has, for over 20 years, brought its stamp of approval (and funding) to efforts to diversify the STEM faculty. Serving as PI on a $3.3 million ADVANCE "institutional transformation" award at ISU from 2006 to 2010 gave me a campus-wide platform to recruit deans, department chairs, and faculty leaders to join in efforts to transform department structures, cultures, and practices so that underrepresented faculty could thrive in a more equitable environment. The work would not have happened, and the commitments to reimagining department community would not have been as strong without external funding.

At UC, the State of California provided $11.5 million to support an "equal employment opportunity in faculty employment" program over six years. The expectation was for UC's 10 campuses to recruit a faculty dedicated to UC's diverse student body and to the wide-ranging research mission. The state allocation prompted an even larger investment of systemwide funds that created and have sustained the UC AFD program, about to enter its eighth year. As noted above, a community of practice has developed over the 10 campuses as hundreds of faculty and faculty administrators have — with AFD funding — displayed amazing creativity in the way they build a more diverse faculty, ensure more equitable decision making, and expand the community of academics who understand the importance of a strong gender- and race-diverse faculty.

Money provides incentives and buys people's time. This incentive invites commitment and rewards creativity.

Committed people. A foundation in policy along with sufficient funding promote an institutional setting in which the actual diversity work has a chance to succeed. Then it takes people — faculty, staff, students, along with campus leaders — who are making time, among their other commitments, to prioritize the work that has the potential to transform their academic community.

Let's start with the involvement needed from campus leaders — presidents, chancellors, provosts, and deans. These leaders need to be vocal about DEI in difficult conversations about funding priorities

and institutional values. They need to listen to our impassioned new faculty, especially the under-represented faculty, and learn from them. Many leaders get accused of "performative," superficial support for DEI. Saying the words is better than not saying the words, but it's not enough. The commitment by leaders needs to be demonstrated to be authentic.

If anything, faculty leadership is even more essential; especially faculty members who are collectively ready to build more inclusive academic department climates and acknowledge structural barriers that disproportionately affect the success of under-represented faculty. For those who are in the majority, it also takes a willingness to recognize the privilege of whiteness. A UC academic leader has noted that "faculty-centric institutions make DEI optional" and this is right. We need a committed cadre of faculty to take up the option or the transformations won't hold.

In fact, much of this work can only be done by faculty. They may be chairing a faculty search committee and putting in place more extensive candidate outreach; designing a training program for mentors of new faculty; working with a new cohort of faculty of color to facilitate a smooth transition to a new academic home; running a retreat for mid-career faculty to reengage with their writing; or beginning a term as a department chair who prioritizes more inclusive classrooms. In these efforts, they must take the time to educate themselves about relevant research and institutional data to support such work. They must be ready to deal with colleagues who believe that the status quo still works best. Many faculty members have taken up this work with passion and many succeed. They learn that this is hard work because it's about changing familiar practices; but nothing happens without them. They can't be taken for granted, and they must be rewarded.

Reward can be as easy as ensuring that individuals are compensated for their work. That may mean a course release to free up time, an administrative stipend, or summer compensation to support long-range planning and research. With relatively small investments in those faculty committed to the work of building a productive and inclusive workplace, the campus avoids the high cost of managing toxic departments or replacing departing faculty. And campus leaders need to send clear messages to all faculty with administrative responsibility that this is their work. For first-time faculty administrators — department chairs and vice chairs, associate deans, center directors — their responsibility for managing local issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion should be made explicit. At UC, for example, academic personnel policy is clear that department chairs are expected "to maintain a climate that is hospitable to creativity, diversity, and innovation." (*APM* 245-Appendix A)

More importantly, taking on commitments to build a more equitable and inclusive academic community should not be seen as a sidestep in a faculty career. Rather it is a way for committed faculty to advance, just as they would with effective teaching or ground-breaking research. But this venue for advancement can be difficult for many faculty to imagine, even with good policy. As noted above, UC has model policy that is explicit in declaring the value of contributions to diversity. Yet the policy, in its seventeenth year, remains a lightning rod for concerns about what the university should value. In my experience, such concerns are not so much about the commitment to diversity and equity, which is generally acknowledged, but about a DEI focus that is perceived by some to threaten the priority of the UC research mission. Some see the increasing focus on contributions to diversity, equity, and inclusion as impinging on academic freedom by elevating one kind of research over another or as providing double credit for those doing research on issues of inequality. Even after efforts such as those I have outlined, some faculty still fear that the focus on DEI directly undermines the university's research enterprise. I am suggesting that the middle space of a community-based event provides a unique opportunity for these fundamental disagreements to be debated.

FINAL THOUGHTS

So that is what it takes to change the way we shape our future faculty — policy, funding, committed people, and innovative opportunities to jog thinking and build commitment. Such efforts can change the academy. In the first six years of UC's AFD program, for example, faculty hired through the support of the AFD recruitment pilot programs were significantly more diverse by race and ethnicity than faculty hired outside of AFD-funded efforts; the percentage of underrepresented minority faculty hired through AFD was 34%, while those hired via other recruitment efforts was 19%. Critically, all were hired with the explicit goal of building a new kind of academic community grounded in shared values of equity, strong community, and diversity.

In the structure of dramatic comedy, members of a community experiment with a brave new world and, in the end, are able to define a better place, one of generosity, acceptance, and connection. In our attempts to build diverse campus communities full of academic potential, we need to set the stage (through policy, funding, and committed people) for a comic-like exploration of options, an acknowledgement of achievements as well as failures, and a recognition that the productive and diverse communities we so desire result from hard work. Breakthrough moments may feel threatening, as if something is broken, but they can also create precious space for the new world we are working so hard to build.

ABOUT SUSAN CARLSON

Author Susan Carlson has spent over 20 years in leadership positions where a major responsibility was not only maintaining the quality and excellence of the faculty but increasing its diversity. Currently Professor Emerita at UC Davis and Vice Provost Emerita, UC Office of the President, Carlson served as the Vice Provost for Academic Personnel and Programs in the Office of the President at the University of California from 2010 to 2022, including a period as Acting Provost and Executive Vice President. Prior to this she served as the Associate Provost for Faculty Advancement and Diversity for almost 10 years at Iowa State University, including a period as Interim Provost and Senior Vice President. She was a Professor of English and a scholar of drama and theater at both institutions.

Carlson is the author of Women and Comedy: Rewriting the British Theatrical Tradition *(University of Michigan Press, 1991) and many other publications on comic drama, theater, and women writers.*