The Problem That “Lies” Within: How “Collegiality” Undermines the Academy

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he data runs contrary to the assumption of diversity’s supporters or its critics that the academy is a place where women and people of color are welcomed and included. The actualization and exclusion of people of color are relics of the past. Given the rapid globalization of our society and economy, the religious pluralism of the United States, and the changing social position of our student bodies and campuses, the pragmatic demands of diversification are obvious. Institutions must take seriously their roles to prepare the way for diversity on campuses and for communities that are increasing by color, and also have more than 50 percent of women on faculty (which is currently on average 90–95 percent white, 80 percent male, and therefore disproportionately white and male).

Caught between a besieged past and an anguished present, what was once delighted in as “the old boys’ club” has been supplanted with assumptions that the “new boys’ club” of Fauchi suggests, as the “nonwhite encomposing fear of white men as “the new endangered species.” As countless scholars have attested, regardless of advanced degrees or scholarly expertise, the entry of women and people of color into the profession can never translate into membership status within that most rarified club, the collegium. Instead, those who embody the reality of diversity within the academy ironically become the supposed “problem of diversity” — a problem that elicits either liberal pity (“because they seem so out of place”) or conservative contempt (“because they really don’t belong”).

As perennial outsiders, women and racial-ethnic faculty often must wonder: Exactly what is the role and meaning of collegiality? What are its presumed behaviors? Most importantly, is it possible to prevent collegiality from becoming a false safety mechanism for nepotism or a disguise for discrimination against women and people of color? These questions are necessary for us to ask aloud and engage, if we truly seek to advance our pursuit of knowledge production.

Not surprisingly, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has noted that collegiality is frequently employed incorrectly as an evaluative trump card used subversively which collegiality is employed as an ambiguous, evaluative trump card used subversively and unproblematically to maintain conformity, ensure deference, and silence dissenting opinions and “disobedient” personalities.

Embedded within hiring practices, peer evaluations, and promotion reviews, this ambiguous notion of collegiality not only represents a “safeguard mechanism” that protects white male privilege, but also poses a very real danger to the academic freedom and professional success of women and other underrepresented groups. Nonwhite faculty powerbrokers often anticipate the arrival of those who do not embody the norm as they are the veritable barbarians at the gate. Eventually, they come to sound the “collegial” alarm, in order to forestall in covert fashion the imminent discursive or demographic shift. That is, they will proclaim a deficiency in the underrepresented faculty member’s performance that they will ground in his or her perceived lack of “collegiality” — be it his lack of “fit” (real embodiment), her “disrespect” (real disingenuousness or opinion), or their “unwillingness to work for the better interest of the institution” (read criticism of discriminatory policies, procedures, and processes). No matter how competent, productive, or hard-working faculty of diversity may be, their presence, promotion, and possible permanence somehow suggest an undermining of the mission, identity, and traditions of the “old boys’ institution.” This result, which evokes the familiar refrain that comes to bemoan the cruciality of diversity as the crisis of our time.

Theorists such as bell hooks, Patricia Williams, and Cornel West, along with religious scholars such as M. Shawn Copeland, Karen Kane, and Miguel De La Torre, have shown how this skewed environment is one wherein “collegial” behavior is (mis)perceived as the ability of women and people of color as intellectuals and scholars to function symbolically as insiders. Indeed, feminist scholar Michelle Wallace has shown how women of color are “the least convincing in this role, the least trustworthy.”

Since no one can “outwhite” or “outman” an academic white man, women and other underrepresented faculty simply become inferior. Herein is the reality inversion and implicit mendacity of the academy: collegiality, fit, and desirability are measured by how disembodied and duplicious women and people of color can become, by denouncing and denying their difference from their white male counterparts. Therefore, to be different, or to think or do differently, is to be subjected routinely to excessive scrutiny and constant challenges concerning one’s teaching, research, or service — regardless if one is “collegial” or otherwise.

This predicament of “collegiality” is especially daunting — if not dangerous — for pre-tenured faculty, for whom it is often as if two faculty manuals exist. One manual provides an explicit guide for underrepresented groups to follow, in order to understand collegiality as a virtue (as opposed to an evaluative criterion), that one displays through her or his successful execution of teaching, research, and service. The other manual is nothing more than an implicit handbook for the “old guard,” in which collegiality is employed as an ambiguous, evaluative trump card used subversively and unproblematically to maintain conformity, ensure deference, and silence dissenting opinions and “disobedient” personalities.

Endnotes

1. Taken from “American Academy of Religion Survey of Undergraduate Religion and Theology Programs in the United States and Canada Further Data Analysis Summary of Results” presented at the Numbers Count: Gathering, Managing, and Using Census Data in Program Review and Enhancement Special Topics Forum at the 2003 Annual Meeting (Atlanta, Georgia, November 24, 2003) and the Association of Theological Schools (2008–2009 Annual Data Tables [http://www.americanacademyofreligion.org]).


