Mentoring and African-American Political Scientists

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Report of the 2004 Committee on the Status of Blacksss

One of the main goals of the Committee on the Status of Blacks (CSB) is to assess how well African-American political scientists are faring in the discipline. Given the nature of the academy, we believe an important element for success is effective mentoring. Our position is supported by the American Political Science Association (APSA) which established a Task Force on Mentoring in 2002 to address issues facing underrepresented groups within the profession. One of the initiatives is a Mentor Database designed to connect interested minority graduate students and minority faculty with political scientists who are willing to share their experiences and knowledge and give their advice and council to participants. The Committee is supportive of this initiative whose goal is to help underrepresented groups have satisfying professional careers.

In this article, we contribute to this worthwhile endeavor by calling attention to some of the concerns that African Americans have about the mentoring process. As it stands, little is known about the attitudes of Black political scientists on this topic. Here we highlight some of their concerns based on solicited responses via the National Conference on Black Political Scientists (NCOBPS) listserv. The article closes with a few recommendations that are intended to complement and build on the efforts of the APSA Task Force.

Background

A growing number of colleges and universities recognize the importance of implementing a Faculty Mentoring Program.[1] In general, a mentoring program is intended to acclimate faculty members, most notably junior faculty, to their new environment. An effective program provides ongoing assistance to junior members so that they can balance and improve their research, teaching, and service responsibilities (Boice 1990, 1992; Menges 1999; Tierney and Bensimon 1996).

Although a mentoring program would likely enhance the professional development of all new faculty, the program would be of special value in helping to acculturate junior Black faculty to academic life. Numerous studies have documented the importance of mentoring for faculty of color, especially on predominantly white campuses where they are more likely to feel isolated, marginalized, and unwanted (see, for example, Alexander-Snow and Johnson 1999; Banks 1984; Blackwell 1989; Boice 2000; Fields 1996; Menges 1999).

Many factors may contribute to why people of color may need a special focus, some of which include combating negative stereotypes, overcoming feelings of isolation, relieving tension over affirmative action, understanding departmental expectations and norms, gaining greater access to research resources, engaging in collaborative research with departmental colleagues, and balancing demands over minority service.[2] A support system which includes a formal mentoring program would help to alleviate these concerns by providing a hospitable environment and "opportunity structure" for professional development and advancement.

Within the political science profession, African Americans continue to be underrepresented in the vast majority of predominantly white colleges and universities (Ards and Woodard 1992; Cross 1998; Geiger and Travis 1997). Rarely will one find more than one or two (if any) African Americans in political science departments on white campuses. We emphasize this point because the lack of faculty diversity is not only an issue of recruitment, but also of retention. Mentoring is a process that can increase the retention of Black faculty.

To be sure, the profession must continue its efforts to increase the number of minorities in the recruitment pool. Department chairs, however, must be aware and sensitive to the issue of retention since Black faculty members are less likely than their White colleagues to advance in rank (Ards, Brintnall, and Woodard 1997). They must take measures to ameliorate the organizational culture within their departments. This is especially true of departments that employ a token number of minority faculty. Mentoring supports professional growth and retention and has been shown to assist minority faculty in overcoming their sense of marginalization (Blackwell 1989; Boice 1992; Johnsrud 1993; Menges and Exum 1983).

In essence, mentoring is a proactive enterprise that calls for the involvement of both the profession and individual departments. As it stands, the Association is taking steps to address the retention problem, the first of which is the establishment of a Mentor Database. It is important to emphasize that the Association must be committed to this goal or we will continue to witness a shortage of Black faculty in the political science profession. Individual departments must address the retention issue as well. This is crucial because many African Americans learn about departmental expectations after the fact, during the promotion and tenure evaluation period that come too late to rectify. Moreover, previous studies have reported many instances of faculty of color leaving their departments before a tenure decision is reached because they expect to fail the tenure process (Alexander-Snow and Johnson 1999; Banks 1984; Blackwell 1988; Boice 1992, 2000). Clearly some intervention is required to address this problem. The Committee's position is that assistance in the form of mentoring will mitigate the retention problem and promote professional advancement for

African Americans and other people of color.

An Assessment of African Americans and Mentoring

In order the gauge the views of African Americans on the adequacy of the mentoring they receive, we solicited comments from a broad range of Black respondents from the listserve of NCOBPS in the fall of 2004. The Committee received comments from 14 respondents. We recognize that the responses do not necessarily reflect the experiences, opinions, and thoughts of all African Americans in the profession, and indeed the results are not representative. Nonetheless, we have taken the liberty of presenting this information with the hope of providing a nuanced, albeit preliminary, appreciation of the value and limitations of the mentoring process. Our hope is that future work in the area will develop more finely tuned qualitative assessments and more broad-based representative analyses.

In general, we asked the respondents to provide information on whether their departments offer a formal mentoring program. We also asked whether they ever received effective mentoring. In addition, they were asked to provide information on the perceived benefits of mentoring. Our respondents run the gamut of professional experiences. Two are graduate students, two are primarily full-time administrators, three are assistant professors, two are associate professors, and the remainder are full professors. Eleven of our respondents are at predominantly white institutions and three are from historically black colleges and universities. Our participants include six females and eight males.

Formal Mentoring

Five of our participants indicated that their departments do not have graduate programs, and of the nine whose institutions do, only one indicated that his/her department had a formal mentoring program, a program designed to address the needs of graduate students. These findings are consistent with the general literature on faculty of color and the mentoring process. Blackwell (1988), for example, in his study of the mentoring experiences of African-American academics, found only one in eight persons had a mentor. A graduate student in our survey remarked that "I have read about the impact of mentoring in the 'literature' but I have never received the opportunity to work side-by-side with someone acting as my mentor." Another respondent, an associate professor, notes, "there was no formalized mentoring in the first two tenure-track jobs that I held. Over time, however, I developed relationships with senior colleagues on whom I called for advice related to scholarship, research, and professional development."

This is revealing to the extent that these data reflect the circumstances of most Black political scientists. Some intervention is clearly required to ameliorate this situation. By most accounts, a formal mentoring program would help African Americans face the many challenges of academic life (Blackwell 1988; Boice 2000; Menges 1999).

Effective Mentoring

We asked our respondents if they had received effective mentoring at any stage of their career. Eleven of our 14 respondents answered in the affirmative. With no formal structure, mentoring occurs mainly through informal channels. A common thread running through the responses is that our participants initiated their own mentoring relationships, usually outside of their departments. As one of the respondent states, "most of my success has been achieved via an informal network of peers and hard work." Another one of our participants notes, "I received mentoring from individuals, but I would consider them my peers."

In this study, a common trait shared in the mentor-mentee relationship is race. Of the respondents who received mentoring, African Americans were their mentors. Whether this is a subconscious or deliberate decision by African Americans to seek out Black mentors is unclear, but such a decision can be understood. Their actions may stem from the belief that mentors who share their racial identity will have a greater appreciation for their particular concerns. Indeed, one of our respondents indicated that: "Yes, I am pleased to say that such advice has come from more than one senior, African-American political scientist." Finding a Black mentor, however, is a daunting task, a search and find mission because of the disproportionately low number of African Americans at both the departmental and professional levels.

Within the confines of this discussion is the significance of mentoring for African-American women. The literature is virtually silent on the faculty experiences of Black females. Much of what we know comes from the general literature on females in academia (see, for example, Boice 2000, 260–271; Trautvetter 1999, Chapter 4). The paucity of research that does exist suggests that Black females are less likely than males to have a mentor.

In their examination of mentoring for faculty of color, Alexander-Snow and Johnson (1999) cite the experiences of an African-American female: "I would see some of my white junior colleagues being mentored by older white professors, senior white professors. I would see them take action with those people and would actually initiate it—like recruit them to work on a project with them or write a grant proposal with them—whereas nobody did that with me" (1999, 106–107). In our study, several respondents expressed their concerns over mentoring for Black females. One respondent, an associate professor acting as a full-time administrator, states the following: "The problem of consistent professional mentoring is an especially acute problem for African American women. Anecdotally speaking, many African American women do not receive professional mentoring. This lack of guidance and support from senior scholars has caused many African American women to consider leaving academia altogether." Hence, while most of our respondents see the value in having a mentor, there are some who are frustrated with the lack of commitment to mentoring women of color.

Mentoring should be an inclusive program that addresses the needs of specific demographic groups. Furthermore, effective mentoring requires the involvement of many actors. The Committee sees many benefits in Black faculty establishing mentor relationships with senior White colleagues, especially within their departments where salary, promotion, and tenure decisions are made. Many of these benefits are described above. The relationship, however, must be built on mutual respect and trust, and not based on paternalistic condescension.

Perceived Benefits

In the general literature, overwhelming evidence suggests that a formal mentoring program is an effective strategy for recruiting and retaining Black faculty. Our modest study supports this conclusion. Respondents in this study see many benefits, some of which include the following: building collegiality, providing scholarly advice, developing professional opportunities, and understanding the norms of the profession.

According to our respondents, scholarly advice is one of the most important contributions that mentoring can provide. The following comment comes from one of our respondents: "In retrospect, I might have been a more productive scholar, at an earlier stage of my career if I had a good mentor." Another one of the respondent notes, "I think I have missed out on a number of opportunities, which includes everything from co-authoring and publishing with senior professors to understanding the norms of the profession." One of the respondents succinctly summarizes the scholarly benefits of mentoring in the following way, [I] "would have a better publication record."

Recommendations for Effective Mentoring

The Committee strongly recommends to readers that they peruse the APSA web site on mentoring. The web site provides tips and strategies for the creation of successful mentoring programs for faculty of color. In addition, it also provides links to sites on many diverse themes on mentoring. The Committee makes the following three specific recommendations:

1. Department chairs should play a key role in the professional development and advancement of Black faculty. Implementation of a formal mentoring program is highly recommended; it will help to promote professional achievements.
2. Senior non-black faculty members should make sincere efforts to involve faculty of color, including in research collaborations. This will help promote collegiality and provide opportunities for increasing publication.
3. At the professional level, political science associations (e.g., APSA and NCOBPS) should work collectively as well as individually to address the issue of mentoring for faculty of color. This includes informing people of color how to get on APSA committees.

Conclusion

The responses from our survey suggest that a linkage exists between the retention of African Americans in the political science profession and effective mentoring. The Committee holds that mentoring programs should be viewed as stepping stones to collegiality, professional development, and advancement. If our position has merit, then more needs to be done to ensure that African Americans and other people of color have access to appropriate mentors and those who are already providing mentoring are not overwhelmed. Future reports of the Committee will provide examples for successful mentoring initiatives.

Notes

1. For excellent reference sources on faculty mentoring, see the University of Michigan's Center For Research On Learning And Teaching web site, www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/ facment_biblio.html. Also see, the web site of the American Political Science Task Force on Mentoring, www.apsanet.org/about/mentoring/ focus.cfm.

2. For a brief overview of the literature on problems confronting faculty of color, see Boice (2000, 260–271).

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