"Academia was not created with me in mind."

Examining MFT Programs and Systemic Racism

Faculty of color are disproportionately underrepresented in higher education in that white faculty and students of color greatly outnumber faculty of color. While colleges and universities across America have seen increased growth in diverse students attending college, there appears to be an imbalance in representation of racially diverse faculty. The National Center for Education Statistics (2017) highlighted this disparity in their 2017 report where 76% of all college and university faculty members were white, compared to 55% of undergraduates. In contrast, faculty members who identified as Hispanic made up 5% compared to 20% of students and Black faculty made up 6% compared to 14% of their students. However, surprisingly, Asian faculty members made up 11% in relation to 7% of their students.

Denise Williams, PhD

Despite best attempts by institutions to increase diversity among faculty, often universities struggle with recruitment and retention of faculty and students of color. In fact, faculty of color often find themselves transitioning from school to school in an attempt to find a place where they belong.

In this article, I will address systemic challenges unique to institutions. Though many institutions venture to create an inclusive environment, there may be practices that are divisive and further perpetuate the narrative that "to belong means to shed away aspects of one's identity as a diverse person." However, the question remains, how do individuals, and in this case, faculty of color, thrive in systems that were not exactly built with them in mind? Furthermore, what implications does fostering faculty of color have for students of color, who desperately need to see representation and have an ally to assist them in navigating sectors of higher education? Additionally, how can MFT programs foster belonging and retain faculty of color within their institutions?

Diversity issues in institutions across the country
In light of the recent push for social justice reform, many institutions are reassessing their institutional policies that may have been complicit with issues of systemic racism. Furthermore, companies and institutions are now looking at structures and systems from a critical lens, assessing how truly committed they have been, or are, to diversity. And if so, do faculty and students of color affiliated with their institution truly feel a sense of belonging and pride as being part of their community? We propose that MFT programs across the country should also evaluate their commitment to diversity and if they are not already doing so, move for a more integrated model of diversity in

their representation, curriculum, and clinical practice. This may require a shift in how our programs foster and celebrate diversity.

Systemic barriers for faculty of color
Faculty of color may face challenges in addition to their role as faculty members. These challenges, while systemic in nature, may undercut experiences faculty of color have and leave them feeling a sense of hopelessness. Some examples of the disparities faculty of color often experience are (Tuitt, Hanna, Martínez, Salazar, & Griffin, 2009):

- Overt and/or covert racism including being stereotyped and pigeon-holed
- Marginalization related to their research agendas. This is especially so if it concerns racial-ethnic populations and issues
- Often bear a tremendous burden of tokenism
- Difficulty advancing professionally throughout the institution
- A sense of isolation and loneliness for being one of few faculty of color at the institution
- Feeling the need to serve as a racial or ethnic representative on committees whose overall objective aligns with diverse topics
- Increased workload in serving on multiple committees or community projects
- Imbalance in workload and faculty responsibility while having one's own high expectations to perform above average
- Increased efforts at mentorship relationships with students of color and white students

- More likely to receive harsher evaluations and student criticism

Each barrier on its own would be challenging enough to deal with, but many faculty of color experience most, if not all, of these forms of strain during their time in academia. So, how can institutions work to bring about a change that fosters unique differences and creates a culture of appreciation for our diverse faculty?

A sense of belonging
A sense of belonging has become an initiative at institutions to create an environment where all students, but primarily students of color, are valued as an integral part of the institution. This concept more recently has been examined in relation to faculty of color. Thus, creating a culture of belonging at an institution promotes identification with the institution, but also supports self-efficacy, learning and holistic development of the person (Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009; Strayhorn, 2018; Ward, Siegal, & Davenport, 2012).

To put it another way, a sense of belonging is not about simply fitting in to the dominant culture at institutions; it is about changing the entire landscape, whereby my voice is not only heard but influences policies and programs. Belonging means this is a place I call "home," not somewhere I am taking up residence for the time being. Belonging means I see myself in the fabric of the institution. The goals and initiatives are created with me in mind. More practically, what does creating a sense of belonging in our MFT programs mean? It starts with willingness to reassess, ask questions, and understand how we can better

serve our faculty and students of color. It starts with intentionality.

Ways to foster a sense of belonging for faculty of color

As institutions evaluate their commitment to social reform, there are some ways to assist in this process.

Providing opportunities for mentorship not only with other faculty of color, but those within the same discipline and those who have been with the institution for a number of years and have progressed through the rank promotion process.

Diversity in mentorship allows faculty of color to connect with other faculty like themselves and share experiences. Also, connecting with mentors who are familiar with institutional policies and the overall institutional culture assists faculty in a better understanding of the terrain of the institution.

Valuing and creating opportunities for faculty of color to have their ideas and experiences heard both departmentally and institutionally.

This may mean those in spaces of leadership and our white colleagues need to be intentional about the creation of these opportunities.

Providing full transparency of institutions' policies and the professional development process.

Too often, faculty of color are not made aware of policies and procedures that are critical for their professional growth.

Encouraging faculty of color to decide which committees and initiatives they feel they would best serve on in relation to their talents, scholarship, and passion, beyond the diversity committee.

Faculty of color shine in atmospheres where there is a sense of appreciation for their unique qualities beyond their race and ethnicity.

Serving as a continuous source of support for faculty of color. Whether
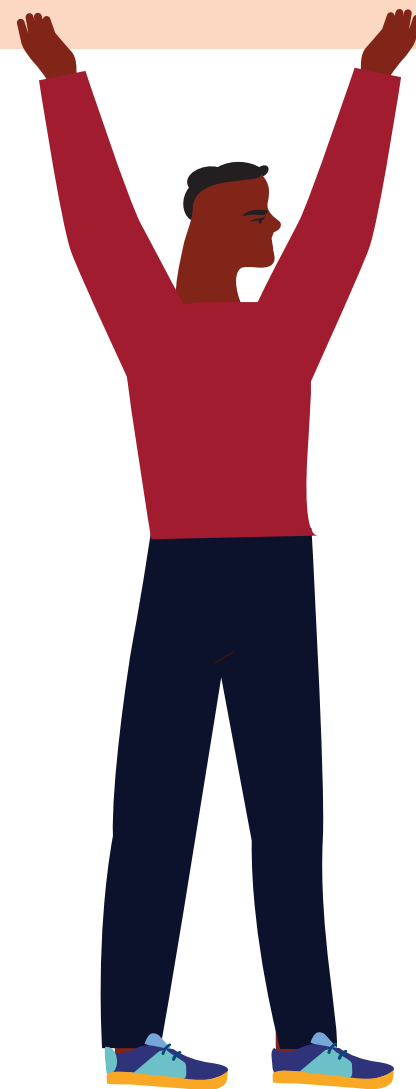
this may mean creating an open door policy between department leaders, or simply connecting with other faculty in the department to process one's experience at the institution.

Implications for AAMFT

So, the question to ask is, how do governing agencies like AAMFT work to change the narrative of "belonging as a result of losing one's sense of self"? Furthermore, how do institutions commit to systemic change for our profession? What is the role we all play in the midst of movements such as Black Lives Matter and social justice? Some examples may start with a push for more integration of diversity both in hiring practices and the MFT curriculum. An additional need is evaluating how faculty of color are progressing in our MFT programs and creating opportunities in leadership positions with AAMFT. Lastly, we need to form mentorship groups for faculty of color.

These initiatives would not only impact the experiences of faculty of color in COAMFTE programs, but also highlight the importance of diversity for students of color. It is not surprising that there is a correlation between students of color and their overall sense of belonging at an institution where there is more representation in the faculty. Research from the Pew Research Center (2019) highlighted that when students of color have educators of the same race or ethnicity as themselves, these educators are viewed as role models for students. Additionally, students were found to be more committed to their studies and set higher scholastic and professional goals. I would go so far as to say, when students have a faculty of color that looks like and have shared experiences as themselves, they are more likely to see that faculty as an ally. Thus, as institutions become more intentional about practices of diversity and inclusion, a systemic change happens.

Belonging means I see myself in the fabric of the institution. The goals and initiatives are created with me in mind.

Institutions reflect more inclusive environments, MFT programs are noted for their intentional aims at diversity, and faculty and students of color feel a greater sense of belonging.

Despite the challenges faculty of color do experience, they do thrive in academic institutions that were not built with them in mind. Faculty of color are resilient as they have to learn through doing, lean on support from family and friends and those who have paved the way, but mostly they understand that this is not their first time overcoming obstacles. While challenging at times and even isolating, faculty of color are reminded of the fact that they have always had to navigate through other forms of systemic racism. They have had to turn to creative sources to help them. They have had to rely on their broader support networks to thrive within academia.

Furthermore, we have had to remind ourselves why we do it. It's not for us, but for those who will come after us—the next generation of MFTs who want to believe that change is possible, and they will be able to make an impact in the lives of clients if only given the opportunity.

So, yes, higher education may not have been built with us in mind, but somehow we rise above the adversity and injustice in order to make a difference.

Denise Williams, PhD, is an assistant professor of Counseling at Indiana Wesleyan University. She earned her doctorate in Marriage and Family Therapy from Texas Tech University. She teaches graduate courses on couple therapy and family systems. Her research is focused on marital issues, couple conflict, and underrepresented groups, such as undocumented and international students. She has a passion for working with new clinicians as they develop their skills in the field of marriage and family therapy. Williams is a Clinical Fellow of AAMFT.

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