The perils of notional membership during a pandemic

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Abstract

Purpose – In this essay, the authors will describe several facets of their experience as women faculty of color in the academy during the pandemic, in order to explore how institutions might think of equity and diversity initiatives during the pandemic time.

Design/methodology/approach – This essay discusses structural, leadership and individual considerations in supporting faculty from diverse backgrounds during the pandemic and beyond, by considering the typical strategies used by faculty of color to maintain active organizational memberships and how the pandemic has shifted those strategies.

Findings – Ultimately, this essay grapples with diversity as an institutional priority during the unique and shifting circumstances of remote work and teaching and research during the pandemic.

Originality/value – This essay provides insight into how institutions who want to maintain diversity progress during and postpandemic must be more thoughtful about the hiring structures, decision-making spaces and overarching missions.

Keywords Diversity, Community, Human capital, Decision-making

Efforts to diversify faculty composition in higher education are in danger of being lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and we imagine that other workplaces including corporate and nonprofit institutions that have worked to become more diverse might also be facing this challenge. The academy has seemingly worked hard to diversify faculty in recent years, with a focus on recruiting and retaining faculty of color, hiring diverse faculty into cohorts of faculty from historically marginalized groups and devoting institutional space and energy to diversity initiatives including programming and mentoring (Ryu, 2008).

Despite these seemingly optimistic efforts, it remains the case that overall numbers of faculty of color remain small (McFarland et al., 2019). Further, faculty of color are often concentrated into non-tenure track positions such as clinical and lecturer lines where faculty must undergo a periodic reappointment process. The pandemic has magnified these issues, made the positions faculty of color are placed in all-the-more tenuous and endangered the progress that has been made toward compositional diversity in the academy. Without careful attention to these issues during and following the pandemic, we’ll be taking a few steps backward from the little progress that has been made toward diversity in general as well as specific efforts related to faculty composition. In this essay, we describe several facets of our experiences as women faculty of color in the academy during the pandemic to explore how institutions might think of diversity initiatives, which are often coupled with initiatives for equity and inclusion, during this frightening time.

Our own experience

We begin with a bit of background to our experience in higher education. We identify as Brown women from rural and relatively geographically isolated towns. Growing up in our...
respective towns meant limited exposure to urban spaces and cities, let alone opportunities to interact with university faculty. We have the shared experiences of meeting a professor for the first time in our first college class. We are both also the first in our families to earn graduate degrees. Currently, one of us is in a tenure-line position, and the other is in a clinical non-tenure line position. As junior faculty (prepromotion) at a predominantly White institution in New England, we have spent the last several years researching our own experiences in the academy, using reflective journaling and duoethnographic research practices (Norris and Sawyer, 2013; Sawyer and Norris, 2013), in order to process our experiences and make meaning of a membership we have come to view as notional (Authors, in review).

We have elected to use the term notional to describe the way we perceive our membership in the academy as faculty members because of its broad definition: pertaining to an idea but still abstract or theoretical. While this term has been used previously to describe various forms of incomplete membership, we use it here to describe our particular experiences of incomplete membership related to diversity and inclusion. We have often felt as though our membership was sanctioned by our institution purely as a result of our demographic identifiers (race in particular), in service of a broad notion that diversity is ultimately good. But, this membership is complex as we have often felt that our institution wished for us to be present as Brown faces in many rooms but that they expected that our behavior does not deviate from that of our many, many White male colleagues. In this way, we sometimes feel as though our membership is notional, as in related to a broad idea of racial diversity but disconnected to the reality of how this diversity would necessitate a broader range of ways of being in academic spaces, given our lived experiences, which are quite different from that of some of our colleagues.

Diversity, in its broadest sense, is a notion many institutions of higher education explicitly aspire toward as an end goal. At our own institution, and in our time here, we have seen our institution working toward more diversity in terms of composition of faculty, staff and students as well as working to be more versed in terms of skills and competencies related to diversity. Our institution has worked hard to achieve this sort of representation and skill, and we do not want to say otherwise. But, even so, we have had experiences that cause us to question the reality of our institutional membership and whether that membership is actually true. We wonder whether we have the same power as others to act in our institution or whether we are only here to be seen as evidence of diversity but not heard.

We have come to view our ongoing membership and sense of belonging as notional, because it is related to espoused and explicit ideals around diversity. At the same time our institutional membership can feel disingenuous, due to what feels like tokenization in outward facing diversity situations such as student and faculty recruiting. Alongside feelings tokenized, we also sometimes feel invisible in institutional developmental work such as mission and vision conversations. We’ve come to view these situations and feelings in our duoethnographic work as alternating between hypervisibility and invisibility (Brighenti, 2007; Simpson and Lewis, 2005; Settles et al., 2019). Through our duoethnographic research process, we have developed strategies over time to address these moments. Or at least, we thought we had. When COVID-19 sent us to working, teaching and researching from home, suddenly, our strategies for being present and participating as members who often feel like outsiders did not continue to function.

True membership in the academy is a complex and elusive feeling for faculty of color and women in “normal” times. Prior to the pandemic, our duoethnographic work led us to think a great deal together about the ways that we were or were not included in our academic communities. While we had developed individual strategies to be visible institutional members, these same strategies have not transferred successfully into remote and virtual spaces. “We have been working on…” is a common phrase these days, in many Zoom
meetings (the streaming conferencing platform that we use) to maintain some semblance of normalcy through committees and bureaucracy during a pandemic, though the “we” in these situations rarely includes us.

Further, progress toward diversity requires institutional action and while our institution had established (and continues to develop) efforts and actions in the name of diversity, we argue that especially in this pandemic time, institutions need to carefully consider how their actions may intentionally and unintentionally impact their efforts toward diversity. Here we highlight three issues that we feel institutions might pay attention to if diversity remains a goal moving through and past this pandemic and into a new era of work conditions.

As a caveat, we want to say that perhaps diversity does not remain a key goal when so many institutions are struggling to survive this sudden shift to remote spaces and difficult decisions about moving forward with budgetary constraints. However, we argue it is key for higher education institutions (and potentially other institutions as well) to remain committed to diversity in this era in an ongoing way by continuing to pursue their missions of increasing the demographic diversity and number of students and faculty of color in their communities. Additionally, their commitment needs to move beyond focusing only on visible and demographic forms of diversity. In order to serve their communities more effectively, higher education institutions must also come to respect and appreciate the benefits of the diverse perspectives and experiences that faculty and students of color (and from other historically marginalized groups) bring to the richness and depth of learning, democratic validity of decision-making and vibrance of community culture. We begin with considerations that are structural in nature and move to leadership and then more individual considerations.

Structural considerations: on tenure lines and diversity
The composition of higher education faculty has a historical – and present-day – trend of homogeneity. Faculty of color have historically been minorities in higher education (Evans, 2007), comprising just 24% of all full-time faculty positions (McFarland et al., 2019). In terms of gender diversity, though the majority of doctorate degrees are earned by women, women are less than half of full-time faculty members at higher education institutions and make up 38% of associate and full (promoted) professorships (McFarland et al., 2019). Further, women of color (and professors of color generally) are concentrated in non-tenure line positions, such as lecturers and other clinical faculty roles. Thus, at surface level an institution can appear diverse in composition; however, the concentration of women of color, and faculty of color in general, in non-tenure line positions systemically limits true diversification of faculty. Even at a promoted rank, non-tenure line faculty experience perpetual feelings of notional membership: permanent employment is never guaranteed, leadership positions are often reserved for tenured faculty and undergoing the reappointment process every 3–5 years makes one question the institution’s commitment to diversity (See AAUP, 2018; Murray, 2019 for more about the contingent faculty workforce).

In a time when positions are seemingly being cut as budgets are slashed during the COVID-19 pandemic era, institutions stand to lose much of their carefully constructed work to build diversity if they do not intentionally make a plan for not just retaining faculty they have hired, but also ensuring that people who contribute to an institution’s compositional diversity are represented across various lines (i.e. tenure and non-tenure) and ranks in higher education institutions. Intentional planning around compositional diversity issues across lines and ranks is necessary if institutions want to retain diversity through and beyond the pandemic. Institutions are likely to try and rebuild some of what was necessarily cut during the push to stay afloat. In a time where it seems budget cuts will be a logistical certainty, it will be important to ask questions about where cuts are being made and where they are not, in order to ensure that cuts do not only take place in non-tenure track positions where faculty of color
are concentrated. Because diversification efforts are relatively new, in many spaces faculty of color are some of the more recently hired personnel, which might mean their positions are first eliminated during this time; institutions will need to be intentional to prevent this or face rebuilding compositional diversity postpandemic.

Institutional leaders should also make space to check in with their non-tenure line faculty. Prepromoted clinical faculty and lecturers feel especially vulnerable during this pandemic era of budget cuts. Checking in, communicating clearly and expressing value for teaching-oriented work will also allow faculty to have more headspace to support the institution and its students during this pressing time. Similar to tenure track faculty, non-tenure track junior faculty in some institutions undergo a promotion process that, while different from the tenure process, still requires a robust review of the faculty member’s productivity in teaching, research and service. We suggest that institutions ask for feedback from non-tenure line faculty about how the heavier weight of teaching and service during these pandemic times may impact their progress to promotion.

Just as some institutions have done for tenure-line faculty, institutions may also consider promotion and reappointment timeline demands for non-tenure line faculty. This would ease anxiety on non-tenure line faculty, especially those who are scheduled to undergo reappointment this upcoming academic year. Too often, initiatives to support faculty, while well-meaning, have mostly focused on tenure-line faculty (such as extension of tenure clocks), leaving clinical faculty feeling anxious and invisible, even as they bear the brunt of much of the teaching work that will need to be done with fewer faculty.

Leadership considerations: diversity in decision-making spaces
As we move through and beyond the pandemic and difficult choices around resources must be made, institutional leadership might also consider inclusion. Conversations centering inclusion can lack nuance and consideration of varied experiences if diverse participants are not consistently and continually included in decision-making. Given the dearth of people of color, especially in leadership roles in higher education (King and Gomez, 2008), the work of inclusion must be intentional, as it is often not addressed when relying only on those with structural leadership positions whose experiences often do not align with experiences of community members from underrepresented minority backgrounds.

Before the pandemic, when meetings were mostly held in person, we used several strategies to ensure that we could participate in important conversations. We would volunteer to attend meetings that we were not required to attend and we would strategically choose moments when we could make a point that would be supported in decision-making meetings. We would also share perspectives with each other and allies before meetings took place, so that if we were not heard making a particular point, another of our colleagues could reiterate it (and often also receive the credit for it, but that is another issue). We would use collegial relationships with coworkers to make sure we knew what was happening and who had a voice in making those decisions, to consistently advocate for ourselves, our fellow women faculty of color and our students from historically marginalized communities. Of course, at times others also brought these issues to light, but too often, it fell to us to keep diversity and equity at the forefront of our work as an institution.

Since the pandemic began, this sort of work has become much more difficult to complete or even attempt. We find ourselves hearing about decisions after they are made, at times, with groups of faculty providing input. We also find ourselves having to lobby and advocate for students, especially because decisions are made that might be revised to better support them and their experiences. We hear about edicts that seem to come from on high, with no information about how they were determined and whose voices were included in those
processes. At times, these decisions can be helpful and ease stress, such as when our institution announced informational communities to help move teaching online. But hearing about decisions made to support us is not quite the same as being asked what might support us, especially given the dearth of people from minority groups in leadership roles who make these sorts of decisions.

It is not clear to us, at all, that our institution is merely trying to make sure we are unheard at this moment in our work; in fact, we did not think our institution was trying not to hear us before the pandemic either, just that we were sometimes unheard, whether intentionally silenced or unintentionally so. But because discourses so often focus on default experiences that are not ours, silencing happens, and our strategies have helped us break those silences. During the pandemic, with all of its incumbent stress and anxiety, our institutional leadership may even be working to minimize additional stress on us by attempting to make quick and efficient decisions.

However, it is important to consider how to ensure that there are always diverse voices at the table when discussing how to move forward, and this means creating consistent and open channels of communication to ensure varied voices are always heard. For example, when we consider whether to resume in person classes or carry on remotely, including voices of faculty from a variety of backgrounds and age groups would have potentially brought up issues a smaller, more homogeneous group may have overlooked. For example, while not limited to people of color, it is more common for people of color to live in multigenerational homes (Cohn and Passel, 2018). Additionally, faculty from rural backgrounds, like ourselves, bring a unique perspective on how these decisions might differentially impact students who are from outside urban areas and are also first-generation college students. Though it can be difficult as a faculty member of color to consistently feel as though these issues are our responsibility, it is better to have them mentioned and addressed than not even mentioned, especially in a time of crisis, when inequities among various stakeholders only become more pronounced.

Institutional leaders can take simple steps to include marginalized community members during these drastic times. We suggest that they might institute simple feedback loops wherein questions are posted to the community and feedback sought, and anonymous pathways to leave feedback are welcome for individuals who fear negative action if they speak assertively about particular justice issues. Asking for feedback and ideas for potential pathways from a broad audience will result in a broader spectrum of suggestions and ultimately a more inclusive and equitable path forward. Institutions might also build simple structures, such as a shared calendar, so that those who want to participate in COVID-19-related discussions have spaces in which to do so, with full information about where and when these remote meetings might take place. Leadership can also add a question about diversity to their action planning steps, ensuring that it becomes a habit of practice to pose a question about whether the decisions being made will support diverse community members and whether diverse voices have been sought after as the discussion unfolds.

**Individual considerations: the tension between compliance and justice**
The moment it seemed that the pandemic would wear on, it became clear that institutions would struggle. And for us, suddenly, our notional sense of membership in the academy became frightening. Prior to the pandemic, we raised difficult questions and issues that have sometimes been uncomfortable or confrontational with our colleagues, and this work has put us on a path to an institutional community that is more welcoming of all sorts of people. But this work is hard, and the sudden feeling that we might be viewed as people who oppose our community, rather than members of it who push toward our collective equity mission has felt...
dangerous. It is a tension we feel sure other faculty of color, especially women, have also faced.

We, with a number of other colleagues, have often been representative voices (we hope) for/of our communities as we work toward equity and justice. This has on occasion, caused conflict with colleagues and with leadership, as change can be difficult. We have planned programming about teaching in more culturally sustaining ways, worked to help students organize around issues they care about and fought with a variety of bureaucratic offices about things such as inclusive bathroom signage. And at the end of the day, we hope these moves have moved our community forward on particular issues and into better alignment with our espoused values.

The moment the pandemic began, we reflected on these sorts of actions and whether we still felt relatively safe raising issues of visibility, voice, inclusion and equity in a time of austerity. The answer was no. Especially for the one of us in a clinical position, it feels as though being noisy around these issues during the pandemic era of economic uncertainty is a recipe for ultimately not being selected to stay, especially if times are difficult and institutions need to have fewer programs or faculty. While we have spent time discussing how we might continue equity types of work (and we have many ideas), we are simultaneously naming the fears associated with this sort of work. Even in an institution that aspires toward diversity, it suddenly felt unwise to make noise, especially as a notional member of the organization.

At the same time, it can feel suffocating to be silent in a time when equity differences feel magnified by the pandemic. We have considered how our institution might support this work more explicitly as we move through these challenging times. We suggest that institutional leadership, especially those leaders in diversity roles, keep equity and diversity at the forefront in discussing the pandemic and its impact on our institution, as well as on schools and children. They can also establish a routine to generate innovative ideas addressing pandemic-related issues – remote teaching or field work in schools – to ask, as a matter of routine rather than incidence, whether the ideas generated will be equitable for diverse people and how we might ensure that the existing inequities are not magnified by our solutions to pandemic-related changes.

Institutions might also consider reaffirming their commitments to equity and diversity, now more than ever, including ensuring that diverse faculty, staff and students are able to continue to participate in the community and reminding members that speaking out against injustices (which are always there even in institutions working to change) is a welcome and important way to participate in the community’s work. This is particularly important given that recent institution-wide messaging often focuses on plans for moving forward in the pandemic era with little attention, if any, to how equity and diversity are integral in the decisions moving the institution through the pandemic. These messages, if thoughtfully conveyed, could help community members feel more assured that they do not have to choose between keeping a job and fighting for equity.

It is also key to remember the weathering challenges of being a marginalized person in times like these – the news is full of racist violence and the move to K-12 remote schooling highlights long-standing and widening inequities while also raising new ones. The move to working from home has created gendered and complex work patterns for many. Many marginalized people, including us, relied heavily on our community of faculty of color and allies at work to process these issues and to consider how to support our students in the midst of an onslaught of frightening and painful news. And this network is also much harder to maintain from home. Working from home has removed many of the structured and unstructured opportunities to see and interact with fellow people of color in positive ways – as a means of individual support for processing systemic racism and in united efforts fighting for institutional change.
Conclusion
We have loved working at a university that is working to become more diverse and more skilled at being culturally competent and sustaining. But the pandemic has made participating in this type of work even more challenging. Because diversity work can often be seen as an “extra” on top of the general business of an institution, it is easy to lose when we focus on key priorities in an emergency, especially as these key priorities are often determined by those in power and those in power are often people from majority identity groups. And if the work is lost, it becomes harder as already notional academy members to feel confident in our positions and to advocate for more diverse people to join us. We know how challenging this time is, but shutting the door to diversity removes a key component to closing the gaps we profess to care so much about in the academy.

Despite these challenges, if institutions want to maintain diversity progress postpandemic, they must be more thoughtful about the hiring structures, decision-making spaces and overarching missions that support diverse community members better during this time. Universities should also explicitly communicate their commitment to equity and diversity, both in regard to the university specifically as well as in response to larger national and global events. As we write this essay, protests have ignited across the country in response to police violence against black communities, and it feels even more isolating to be away from our scholarly community and students, especially as only some university institutions have made solidarity statements. By explicitly reaffirming their commitment to diversity and committing to listen more fully to all community members, leadership might better support women faculty of color during this challenging time. If they do not, then the work they have done toward diversity and equity might be lost.

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