



## Improving Diversity and Climate at UD: Experiences of Women of Color Faculty

**Executive Summary:** Prior UD ADVANCE research shows that rates of turnover for women of color faculty at UD outpace that of their white colleagues<sup>1</sup> and that faculty of color perceive their departmental climate as less positive than white faculty<sup>2</sup>. UD ADVANCE conducted in-depth interviews with 27 women of color faculty at UD to better understand their experiences. Drawing from themes that occurred across the interviews, we report specific recommendations our respondents made as to steps UD can take to improve recruitment, retention, and advancement for faculty of color, improve campus DEI efforts, and promote an inclusive campus climate. A summary of these recommendations from interviewees can be found below. In the subsequent paper, we discuss interview findings that align with each of these recommendations, providing additional context for understanding the experiences and perspectives of women of color faculty at UD.

### ***Recommendations:***

1. Invest in faculty recruitment in support of faculty diversity. For this to be successful, faculty of color need to be members of search committees and need to have their perspectives listened to.
2. Hire in cohorts so people are not isolated. Knowing that you have a few colleagues with whom you can speak freely makes a difference in reducing isolation.
3. Create an inclusive environment, where people are valued and feel as though they belong. A hostile environment takes a mental toll on people. They leave.
4. Be intentional about listening to the voices of everyone, not just those who shout the loudest. And then follow up with some meaningful action.
5. Chairs should ensure that faculty of color are not overloaded with service, and that ad-hoc service is taken into account in setting workload and in the appraisal process.
6. Broaden the areas of scholarship which are valued by the institution and provide resources to support faculty research. This work includes examining P&T policies. Do they have an inclusive definition of scholarship? Are there things that should be changed?
7. Provide more opportunities, spaces, and support for faculty to connect. Make intentional efforts to foster community among faculty members.
8. Support expansion of the work of faculty of color through fellowships, etc. Provide leadership training for faculty of color and other people who have historically been excluded from positions of leadership.
9. Provide mentors – not only academic, but also more general mentors to help understand the hidden curriculum or navigate the rules of the game in the academy. Support the whole person.
10. Focus on student diversity. This brings a kind of richness into the classroom – diverse views, etc.
11. Have sensitive senior leaders who embrace diversity and are empowered to make change.

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<sup>1</sup> Andreasen, Robin, Shawna Vican, and Yvette Jackson. “[Points of Departure: Understanding Gender Differences in Faculty Turnover at University of X.](#)” Proceedings of the 2020 American Society for Engineering Education (ASEE) Annual Meeting, June 2020.

<sup>2</sup> [2018 UD ADVANCE Faculty Climate Survey Report](#)

## **Data & Methods**

This research builds upon a broader project seeking to understand the factors shaping faculty retention at UD. Institutional Research provided the ADVANCE research team with a list of recent faculty departures and a list of current faculty. Women who identified as Black or Latina were contacted and asked to participate, with 27 women of color agreeing to be interviewed (66 percent response rate). Roughly a quarter of these respondents had previously exited the university and three quarters were current faculty at UD at the time of the interview. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded in NVivo.

While this research brief focuses on experiences and viewpoints specific to women of color faculty, these women also shared commonalities with the broader sample of UD faculty when it came to the specific factors influencing turnover intentions. Results from the full research project on faculty retention are available on the [UD ADVANCE website](#).

## **Findings**

The women we spoke with had varied experiences at UD, particularly as it relates to relationships with colleagues, feelings of fit, and overall satisfaction with their professional lives. Some feel supported, respected and listened to as professionals within their departments. Others do not. Many feel isolated within their departments and more broadly at UD. Even given this heterogeneity, nearly all our respondents pointed to the importance of their department chair in setting the tone for departmental climate and collegiality, as well as ensuring faculty of color are integrated into the department.

## **Recruitment, Retention, & Reputation**

The exodus of multiple women of color faculty over the last several years has had a significant impact on the women of color who remain at the institution, as well as a broader reputational impact on UD. Several respondents pointed to the negative experiences of colleagues that left as evidence that they should not trust administrators to value their contributions and make robust retention efforts in the future. Respondents also noted the relatively small number of women of color in academia and their close network ties in highlighting the reputational damage UD has faced in recent years. Colleagues who depart the university candidly share their experiences with prospective candidates, which makes it imperative administrators do what they can to have faculty depart the institution on good terms.

Current women of color faculty believe that administrators do not recognize the loss of women of color as the emergency that it is. They report replacement of these faculty lines is not being done expeditiously, or at the level of faculty lost. Respondents cited examples from other universities, where the loss of successful, high-profile faculty of color scholars led to immediate action to recruit a similar caliber scholar. In addition, there are some departments and colleges where women of color do not trust their colleagues to carry through and finalize hires of diverse candidates. In some cases, respondents felt they served on an inordinate number of search committees as the token diverse member, but experienced colleagues who were dismissive of their viewpoints or limited their influence on committee decisions.

The women of color we spoke with pointed to other universities as being much more proactive in recruiting efforts related to faculty diversity. Many universities are using targeted recruiting in efforts to diversify faculty. Others have taken a cohort hiring approach, hiring more than one person in a particular area, as a means to provide social and academic support for newly hired faculty of color. From the

perspective of our respondents, UD is not actively engaged in this process and lags peer institutions when it comes to recruiting diverse faculty.

*See Recommendations 1 & 2*

### **Tokenism & Microaggressions**

Many respondents pointed out that being a woman already places you in the under-represented category in many academic fields and can lead to gender-based microaggressions. Being a woman of color puts you in an even smaller group, where members face certain unique situations which majority persons might not readily understand. A woman of color who has an accent is even more “categorized”. Women of color report they are often “not heard” when they speak in meetings, and face difficulties dealing with sometimes disrespectful staff members. The classroom can sometimes be a hostile environment for people of color. They have to deal with students who question their qualifications and their right to be leading a class, thus making life and work more difficult.

*See Recommendations 3 & 4*

### **Faculty Workload and Service**

Women of color report they often carry a large service load, including being the minority person on various committees, mentoring graduate students of color, and providing ad-hoc advising to undergraduates who seek them out as faculty who look like them. This work is often not recognized by the institution. Some respondents felt tokenized in their service roles, perceiving that they were asked to serve on committees in order to lend “diversity” to the group, but that their contributions were not valued and their recommendations not acted on.

*See Recommendation 5*

### **Inclusive P&T Policies**

Respondents reported feeling that faculty of color have a harder time getting tenure than their white colleagues and that the bar is set somewhat higher. When asked to reflect on why this might be the case, the women of color pointed to a broader concern around the type of scholarship that the university values. In their experience, colleagues at UD think diversity is a distraction from excellence because excellence is viewed through a very narrow lens. As an example, several respondents expressed that UD does not do enough in terms of understanding the experiences of underserved communities and making efforts to engage with these communities in serving their needs. This type of community engagement work, while important, is not valued across all departments and colleges. More generally, many faculty engage with topics related to diversity and equity in their scholarship. Faculty of color are even more likely to work on research in this area, but feel their work is undervalued as compared to more dominant or standard research paradigms in their fields. Respondents suggested departments, and UD more generally, should reevaluate P&T policies with an eye to inclusive definitions of scholarship. This change may also contribute to recruitment efforts, as the kind of research that is valued impacts the racial and ethnic diversity of the faculty that an institution attracts. In the words of one respondent, “as long as people have not grappled with the way that gender and race influence their perception of excellence, we will not move forward.”

*See Recommendation 6*

### **Building Faculty Community**

A common theme among the women of color we spoke with is that UD hires faculty of color but then leaves them isolated and minoritized. As one respondent explained, when people are isolated, having lunch at one's desk every day, it takes them longer to show up as and for themselves. Faculty who are solos or tokens within their department face challenges such as having to self-advocate and learn to negotiate the terrain alone. This process can take valuable time away from successfully navigating the tenure track. In addition to increased social pressures around performance, tokens can feel less attachment to their institution, leading to higher rates of turnover. Respondents suggested that this situation could be improved if chairs and deans were more aware and proactive in addressing the isolation faculty of color face.

*See Recommendation 7*

### **Faculty Development**

A frequent concern voiced by respondents was inadequate opportunities for faculty development, which was particularly acute among faculty of color. As one respondent explained, we need to have top leadership committed to not just bringing people in, but helping people thrive and get to the next level. Faculty of color may have come from institutions with fewer resources devoted to grant writing or other professional development opportunities. UD should provide training in these areas, which can be accessed by all faculty.

Experiences of mentoring among the women of color we spoke with were mixed. Some indicated having a formal mentor was helpful, while others lacked a mentor. Several women shared that their mentor was uninvolved, slow to respond to questions, or a poor interpersonal fit, which led to mentoring being less impactful. Respondents suggested faculty need multiple mentors including mentors to support their research, as well as mentors to help navigate the culture of academia and understand the rules of engagement of the academy. This idea of supporting the whole person begins with new hires, including talking with them about what they need to succeed, research guidance, helping them get settled into the local community, providing advice on things like schools and childcare options, etc.

*See Recommendations 8 & 9*

### **Student Diversity**

Respondents report that there seems to be a complacency about diversification of the student body at UD. The university is surrounded by metropolitan areas, by people of color, and yet enrollment of students of color has lagged. Several women of color noted that the diversification of the student body must be paired with a serious look at the curriculum, to ensure that all our students are well served. It was suggested that UD should fund more summer institutes to increase student diversity in different fields, thus exposing prospective recruits to different areas of research, and varying avenues that they can pursue. Similar to faculty of color, students of color face microaggressions both in and out of the classroom. Resources to help students address these kinds of experiences are needed to ensure students of color can thrive at UD.

*See Recommendation 10*

## Leadership & Diversity Efforts at UD

“This is enough. We cannot continue like this. This is not who we are.”

Regardless of how respondents felt about being in their departments, it was clear that there were parallel thoughts about what was happening, or not happening, with respect to diversity at UD. Women of color report being disturbed by the lack of diversity among faculty and students. One respondent suggested that UD should not want to exist in its current “diversity” state, that of being predominantly white not only in numbers, but also in terms of policies, practices, culture, and values. Women of color acknowledge that there is racism and white supremacy in every institution in our country, but that navigating UD is a struggle for people of color, perhaps because of the institution’s history and how this history still influences current practices and climate. Our respondents think that change is possible at UD. It does, however, require a certain depth of commitment which needs to be obvious at all levels of leadership.

Our respondents acknowledged that UD seems to have recognized this lack of attention to diversity, which has led to an increase in discussions of diversity at the institution. However, the general perception was that UD leaders speak to diversity as a value at the institution, but do not follow through with resources to support diversity efforts. A theme across our interviews is that UD leaders have been talking the right talk with regards to improved diversity for some years now, but that there is not much of the accompanying “walk”, and that this disconnect is damaging to the institution. Women of color feel that UD is lagging peer institutions when it comes to attention to diversity issues. DEI ought to be a university-wide initiative with university-level commitment and a consolidation of the efforts of various committees.

As one respondent explained, improved diversity (and diversity in the broad sense) should be a priority for the institution. When asked if UD valued diversity, she responded:

*UD is very concerned with appearances and with politeness and with looking a certain way, but as an institution, you asked me do we value diversity? We don't act like we do. We don't act like it's enough of a value, like it's a priority...if it's a priority then that means money follows. And, if it's a priority that means that it's in every decision that you make. And UD is far from being there. We are putting Christmas ornaments on a tree, which is like this little decoration. That's not going to change the institution. [Diversity has] got to be part of the tree. It's got to be part of the trunk.*

The women of color we interviewed also expressed that the upper administration needs to look more representative of a diverse climate and not just with “box checkers” but with people in positions that effect change. Chairs and deans should be people who embrace diversity and are sensitive to diversity issues, can identify red flags and feel empowered to intervene on undesirable behaviors. UD should provide training for leaders in this area, as it is leaders who set the tone within a department, college, or university.

The importance of leadership also was evident in the way our respondents talked about the overall climate for diversity at the institution and how this influences faculty retention. Women of color have become rather skeptical about the sincerity of diversity efforts. As one respondent explained, if you look around and see what gets acted upon at UD, the institution will keep losing faculty of color unless appropriate

steps are taken. A number of women expressed disappointment at what they perceived was a lack of support for black studies, and shared experiences with difficult, patronizing and often obstructionist administrative leaders within departments and colleges. It was suggested that people who know very little about DEI can do a great deal of damage, and that UD needs people with training and education in this area who will be able to take the initiative and make a difference.

A final piece of ensuring diversity work is successful is the education required to get people to be accepting of differences. It is recognized that there are people who are rather privileged, and not aware of diversity matters. And this privilege and lack of sensitivity to these matters is demonstrated in conversation, in body language and in behaviors which often go unchecked. There seems to be a pervading view that white is smarter, and more, that too many students of color will cause donors and well-heeled parents to turn away. Administration needs to find a way to have productive conversations surrounding these entrenched and long-standing attitudes, and leaders at all levels need to be trained in this area, and willing to exercise their influence when required. In the present situation faculty of color must, in order to be effective academics, focus on what is required to be able to function even in a less than accommodating climate.

*See Recommendation 11*