Undergraduate-to-PhD Project: Examining the Path to Becoming and Remaining an African American Professor in Information Systems

Emergent Research Forum Papers

Shekesa McLaurin
Department of Information Systems
Kennesaw State University
shmclaurin@gmail.com

Dr. Traci Carte
Department of Information Systems
Kennesaw State University
tcarte@kennesw.edu

Dr. Adriane Randolph
Department of Information Systems
Kennesaw State University
arandol3@kennesaw.edu

Abstract
This research-in-progress examines the path to becoming and remaining an African-American professor in the information systems field from both a student and faculty perspective. This work builds upon the efforts of the PhD Project to increase the number of minority faculty members in business programs with specific focus on IS. It proposes a mixed-methods approach combining structured interview questions with a quantitative survey to better understand the factors affecting undergraduate students' aspirations to academia and what makes African Americans stay in academia once there.

Introduction

There has been increased focus on diversifying the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) pipelines into industry, but the related information systems (IS) professoriate can also benefit from such diversification. The KPMG-founded PhD Project (http://www.phdproject.org/) conducted a study that reported that the presence of minority faculty significantly impacts the school overall, by educating all students, regardless of race, to be better prepared for a diverse work environment (Briley and Grier 1997). To this end, researchers have examined the path of minorities from graduate work into tenure-track, academic positions (Ball State University 2008, Cleveland 2004, Payton et al. 2005). However, many studies have missed an earlier component of the pipeline into academia that starts with a seed planted into the thoughts of an undergraduate student regardless of major. Here we focus on the path of an African-American student to become and remain an IS professor.

African Americans represent about 12% of the United States population (REF), but only account for about 3% of the university's faculty positions (REF). The lack of representation of African Americans among the ranks of IS professors can have many repercussions. More minorities teaching in higher-education classrooms can enhance the production of students who are minorities; especially considering the findings of Briley and Grier (1997) that IS minority faculty bring insights and perspectives to business schools which would otherwise be overlooked. A lack of African-Americans in IS faculty leaves many undergraduate students without the opportunity to have mentors that relate to issues that students may face such as exclusion (Cleveland 2004). Mentorship is a vital aspect in attracting African-American students to not only academic careers but also to the major itself. According to a study conducted in 2003...
by The PhD Project that included business school deans, 80% of participants felt that faculty help to attract and mentor more minority students. Increasing the number of African-American students to IS not only increases the diversity of the school but also the workforce. Further, it creates a business atmosphere that thrives on a multitude of ideas from different perspectives thus engendering what is now called “cognitive diversity” (Forbes 2014). The PhD Project also proposes that by mentoring and guiding more minorities into faculty tenure positions will not only increase diversity in the classroom but also in the workforce. The United States population is going through a transitional shift of minorities and majorities, the atmosphere and representation is taking a catapulting shift but the number of minority faculty at universities is not a clear representation of the changes that are happening in the world today.

The reason for the lack of African-American representation among IS faculty is unclear: is it caused by the lack of retention of minorities in positions on campus or are we not sufficiently attracting minority students by educating them on the benefits of becoming professors? The AACSB Doctoral Faculty Commission (2003) shows that salaries, 1997-2001, for new IS doctorates increased 40% while the average increase for other business disciplines was 11.3%. So, there is opportunity to be had by all. This study will examine factors contributing to attracting and retaining African Americans in IS faculty positions. As technology advances the university’s desire for more IS faculty will grow. According to the AACSB Management Education at Risk Report (2003), “vacancy rates for information systems doctoral faculty at AACSB’s U.S. member schools exceeded 14 percent” (p. 14). Attracting more minorities to these roles would not only decrease the amount of vacancies but also add more diversity to the university as a whole.

**Literature Review**

**Attracting Students at the Undergraduate Level to Academic Careers**

Students from under-represented minority groups often face different challenges. Many are first-generation college students from lower income families (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). As such, they face more anxiety, dislocation, social and academic transition problems (Horn, Nunez, and Bobbitt, 2000). Particularly salient to this study, such students can feel socially or academically isolated with a lack of personal (Freeman, 1997) or professional role models (Payton and Jackson, 1999). Many programs such as The PhD Project offer mentorship and guidance to those who desire to become business faculty members. They start by attracting those who are in the workforce and try to interest them in a career in academia. Garcia (2000) asserts that "classroom instruction and activities can and should be used as vehicles for data collection, data analysis, and as means of supporting a line of inquiry as well as introducing future academics and practitioners into the professional field of higher education" (p 60). Garcia’s rationale involves students that may be at the undergraduate level as opposed to the approach of the PhD Project who seeks professional in the workforce. By obtaining interest of students in the undergraduate level it could diminish the dropout rate of minorities by grasping their attention before they leave the collegiate arena.

A Guide to Recruiting and Retaining a More Diverse Faculty (December 2008) offers guidelines on ways to attract more students to academia by providing: degree program descriptions and requirements, descriptions of immersive learning opportunities, detailed information about graduate assistantships, information about core curriculum courses, and information about departmental scholarships. Giving undergraduate students an idea of what a career in academia entails could help increase attraction. At career fairs students could learn more about academia careers and be given an opportunity to see minorities who are in those positions. The representation of African-Americans in faculty positions in terms of their share of the population moved from only 0.39 in 1979 to 0.42 by 1991 (Rai and Critzer, 2000; p 39). This crippling rate at which African American progression is occurring suggests a need to get more vigilant in our efforts to reach out to not just the professional community but also to undergraduate and perhaps even high school populations (Oguntebi, et al., 2012).
Retaining Minorities in Academic Careers

Once African Americans matriculate into doctoral programs they continue to face obstacles. Early studies suggested minority students faced incongruent social norms stemming from differences in financial support, educational background, available mentors, culture and politics (Hammond 1995). More recent studies suggested that efforts such as the PhD Project have reduced the financial support strain; however, the scarcity of mentors remained a significant problem resulting in persistent concerns about properly understanding the academic culture (Payton and Jackson, 1999).

A major part of retaining and attracting more minorities involves understanding that the perspectives and research that they will venture into will be unlike the traditional research found because of the background of the researchers and the perspective of the minority. This may require a new understanding collegiality; often “a code word for favoring candidates with backgrounds, interests, and political and social perspectives similar to one's own” (Alger, 2000). The atmosphere of the university about diversity and its full inclusion may need to be evaluated and reassessed to ensure that there is fairness in what is being researched, the criteria applied during peer review, and perhaps even research topics.

Mentorship to African-American Faculty

Mentorship is important not only as a student but also as a faculty member. An excerpt from the A long Way to Go: Conversations about Race by African American Faculty and Graduate Students reads “[Faculty mentorship] involves professors acting as close, trusted and experienced colleagues and guides... It is recognized that part of what is learned in graduate school is not cognitive; it is socialization to the values, norms, practices, and attitudes of a discipline and university; it transforms the student into a colleague” (Clark & Garza, 1994, p. 308). Early research on mentoring suggested that mentoring relationships are significantly affected by the context in which they evolve and by the expectations, needs, and skills that individuals bring to them. Thus, career histories and current situations, as well as the surrounding organizational circumstances, jointly shaped the essential characteristics of such relationships (Kram, 1985). The context within which many African-American students seek mentoring is often primarily white. Mentorships that are formed in cross-race relationships involve many who are not of the same background, thus potentially making it harder for the mentee to gain the full experience of a mentor deemed relatable from a personal standpoint. The transition from a student to professor is not an easy task but is made easier when the sense of inclusion by a mentor or colleague makes the transition less challenging. Paying it Forward, suggests that by mentoring students at the graduate level they will in turn mentor students who will mentor students after them. The book, Paying if Forward, made by the Ph.D. Project suggests that that this would in turn increase the amount of students who apply for and major in these subjects.

Mentorship through funded programs or school groups is also one that is important for the retention and attraction of African Americans to collegiate positions. Some guidelines for mentoring include:

- a deliberate, conscious, voluntary relationship that may or may not have a specific time limit;
- that is sanctioned or supported by the corporation, organization, or association (by time, acknowledgement of supervisors or administrators, or is in alignment with the mission or vision of the organization);
- that occurs between an experienced, employed, or retired person (the mentor) and one or more other persons (the partners);
- where the outcome of the relationship is expected to benefit all parties in the relationship (albeit at different times) for personal growth, career development, lifestyle enhancement, spiritual fulfillment, goal achievement, and other areas mutually designated by the mentor and partner; and,
- typically focused on interpersonal support, guidance, mutual exchange, sharing of wisdom, coaching, and role modeling (Payton, White, and Mbarik, 2012).
The lack of role models for students to look up to is a reflection of the representation of African Americans in faculty positions. Gaston suggests that "Mentorship is of paramount importance, not only to the successful completion of the doctoral degree, but also to ensure adequate preparation for the professorate" (Gaston 36). Creating an environment that promotes and thrives on mentorship would increase the amount of minority students who are interested in faculty positions.

**Research Design**

The research will follow a mixed-method approach. The information will be assessed in the form of a cross-examination of African Americans in IS faculty positions and African-American undergraduate students who are majoring in IS. Each participant will be provided an individual, structured interview of related questions (See Appendix A for sample questions) and asked to complete a survey to allow for quantitatively analyzing correlations with backgrounds and lifestyles.

The foundation of this study comes from the reading of the book *Paying it Forward*, to gain insight on the issues that are faced by graduate students and the methods that are used to attract new personnel to the study of IS. In reference to the book the research that will be depicted in this study will examine if there is any significance to mentorship in the undergraduate level to attract more students before they enter into the workforce and the steps it would take to make sure that their interest is being retained while they are in their doctoral programs and when they enter into their academic careers.

Professor participants will be identified from alumni of the PhD Project’s IS Doctoral Students Association with which one co-author is closely affiliated. Particular professors will be contacted via email and asked to participate in an interview via phone call. Student participants will be recruited from a pool of students on the campus of a large university in the Southeastern part of the United States who have self-identified with the African-American race. The student interviews will be conducted face-to-face.

The survey will be sent out to each participate via email and will be assessed to see if there are any similarities in the background of the subjects and their relations to becoming a professor. Each survey will have the same questions and will only require for the responders to fill out questions in regards to their background. All collected material will be stored on an external, protected hard drive of the researcher to ensure that the privacy of the participants is kept exclusive to only the research team. Interviews will be conducted in spring and preliminary findings available for presentation in August.

**Expected Findings**

The research will be conducted to conclude if there is any correlation between faculty professor ideals behind retaining African Americans in faculty positions and that of undergraduate students. The research is also expected to find ways from both the professors and students on how to attract more students to academia and if there is an importance to show the benefits to students who are about to graduate from the undergraduate level. Further, the study will assess if there is any reason why there is a decline in the amount of dropouts in graduate school or if there would be less of a dropout rate if students were contacted during their undergraduate education and had a support system of mentors throughout the process of receiving their graduate degrees.

The expectation to find if there is any correlation in the background of students and professors in their decisions on the questions that will be asked will also be taken into consideration during the process of this study. This study will assess mentorship, affirmative action, the importance of mentorship, and the overall steps to becoming a professor. The expectation for the students involved in the study is to make sure that they are aware of the benefits of academia and to assess if they were told about said benefits would it alter their decision on academia. The expectation of the professors in this study is to bring light to the need to reach students at undergraduate level to make sure they understand the benefits of becoming a professor before they enter into the workforce. There is also an expectation to find if there is
any significant relation to the workforce relations/recruiting and excitement of completing a bachelor’s degree that deters undergraduate students from pursuing careers in academia. Overall, this study will help determine if undergraduate students are afraid of the workload or understand what it entails to become a professor and the opportunities that they could achieve by entering into a career in academia.

References

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Payton, Fay Cobb; White, Sharon D.; and Mbarika, Victor W. A. (2005) "A Re-Examination of Racioethnic Imbalance of IS Doctorates: Changing the Face of the IS Classroom," Journal of the Association for Information Systems: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 1. Available at: http://aisel.aisnet.org/jais/vol6/iss1/1
Appendix A

Faculty:
1. What were the main reasons you chose a career in academia?
   a. Why IS?
2. What, if any, were the major forces that helped you along the way to getting your PhD?
   a. Any major hardships?
   b. Any people who played significant roles?
3. What do you think are the major deterrents for African-Americans to choose an academic career in IS?
4. What about your current institution enhances or detracts from your success/enjoyment of your job?
5. Do you think your role is/should be in terms of attracting the next generation of African-American scholars?
6. What are your future plans for your career?
   a. Teaching, research, administration?

Students:
1. What made you choose your major?
2. What career do you see for yourself after graduation?
3. Any people who’ve played a significant role in your decision making (in question 1 or 2)?
4. Have you considered becoming a professor?
   a. Why/Why not?
5. What do you think is the current representation of African Americans in higher Ed?
   a. Have you have many African American Professors?
   b. Did that have any significance for you?