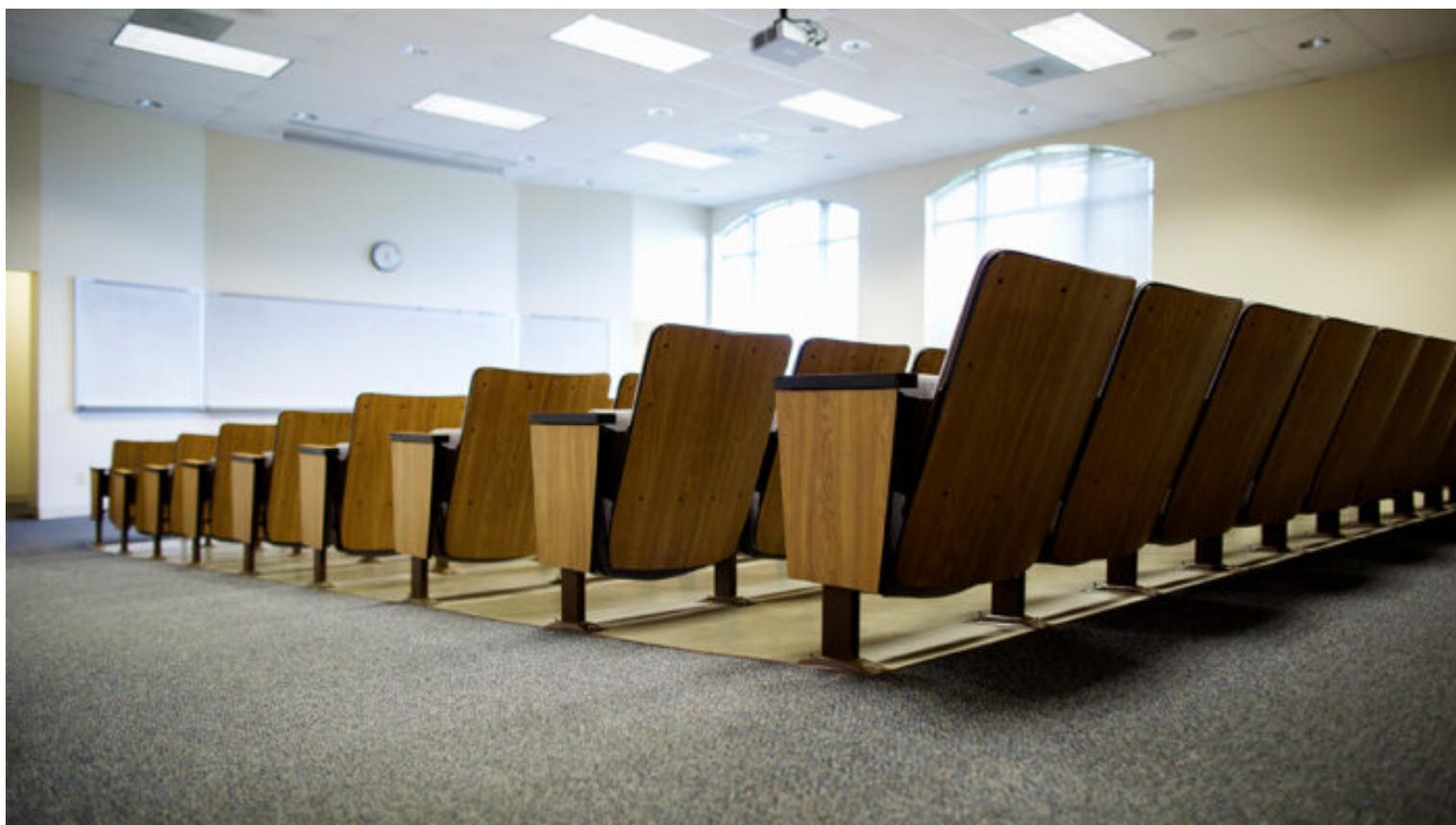


DIVERSITY

We Built a Diverse Academic Department in 5 Years. Here's How.

by [Adia Harvey Wingfield](#)

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I work in the sociology department at Washington University in St. Louis. Our department has several interesting distinctions — it was formed in 2015, making it one of the newest sociology departments in the country. It came into being after this region was rocked by protests following a grand jury's refusal to indict Officer Darren Wilson for killing Michael Brown in nearby Ferguson.

But perhaps most notably, we comprise one of the more racially diverse departments in academia today. This wasn't an accident. It was the result of intentional, consistent efforts from multiple stakeholders to create a department that would be both racially diverse and committed to excellence.

In just five years, our department has grown to 13 full-time faculty, nearly half of whom identify as people of color. Not only that, of the eight senior professors in my department, half of us are people of color. Three of these senior faculty are women, and three identify as Black. This is the kind of racial diversity that many departments in academia and other organizations say is impossible to create, claiming that there's too leaky a pipeline, or that it's too difficult to find strong candidates. Our experience building Washington University's sociology department shows that these results are certainly possible. Here's a glimpse at our playbook.

When university leadership decided to launch a sociology department, the administrators, advisory committees, and faculty leaders involved with this effort asserted early on that it would not be enough for the faculty to excel in research and teaching. These leaders were emphatic that this department needed to be racially diverse as well. They stressed that there doesn't have to be a contradiction between valuing diversity and hiring the best person for the job — indeed, those two imperatives are complementary more often than some might think.

Following a national search for faculty who could become founding members of the new sociology department, I was hired in 2015 with two other colleagues who are white men. Early on in our first few months on the job, my coworkers and I explicitly prioritized building a racially diverse department. During that first year, I vividly remember sitting in department meetings as the lone woman and person of color and thinking, “This is the last year that department meetings look like this.” Fortunately, my other departmental colleagues thought — and openly said — the same thing. This meant that there was collective, shared support for the importance of building a racially diverse faculty. It wasn't up to one person to raise and continue pressing this issue, a phenomenon that

often occurs when women or racial minority men are in the minority at work. We all agreed that this mattered and that we wanted our hiring decisions to reflect this commitment.

This early support for a racially diverse department was absolutely crucial. It set the tone for our department and created a ripple effect on future hiring cycles. But it also highlights that creating more racial diversity is much easier when multiple voices in leadership agree to make it a priority. I expect that in settings where departmental and managerial leadership does not prioritize or actively work to create racial diversity, it will be much harder to make changes.

When it came time to begin our hiring cycle for the first round of assistant professors to interview for jobs, we made sure to advertise our open position in a broad range of locations. Since we knew that relying on social networks often excludes candidates of color, we did not want to rely primarily on our alma maters or other networks where we would be likely to net a predominantly white applicant pool. Instead, we relied on professional associations that primarily included sociologists of color. We contacted colleagues to let them know that we were hiring and particularly wanted to consider applicants from underrepresented minority groups. We looked for promising candidates of color, contacted them, and encouraged them to apply. In short, we didn't just wait for applicants of color to come to us. We made it a point to be proactive in our efforts to create a diverse candidate pool. And we continued these efforts throughout the hiring process, checking ourselves at every step of the way to make sure that each time we further narrowed our list, we still had a diverse slate of candidates.

This is another stage where support from university leadership was critical. Higher level administrators reiterated that they welcomed and encouraged our efforts to build a racially diverse department. More importantly, they backed this up with action. They provided financial resources (available tenure track lines, funding, and competitive retention packages) that allowed us to attract, hire, and keep faculty of color. It matters knowing that the higher-ups value racial diversity.

These are important steps to take when it comes to hiring, but that's only part of the battle when it comes to racial diversity in the workplace. It's also very important for people of color to be included, visible, heard, and represented in the everyday life of the department. This is where organizational culture matters a lot. As sociologists who study race and the workplace have shown, if a company hires one or two workers of color who then have to navigate a consistently hostile and unwelcoming space, that company probably isn't going to keep those workers for long. Equally important to hiring is creating an organizational culture that is attuned to racial dynamics and actively encourages the participation, visibility, and authentic voices of people of color.

In our department, for example, we simply refuse to have a "colorblind" organizational culture where discussion of and attention to racial issues is taboo or discouraged. In our teaching and research, we include the voices and experiences of people of color. From classes on "Race, Ethnicity, and Migration" and "The Roots of Ferguson," to social theory seminars that assign the work of overlooked Black sociologists like W.E.B. DuBois and Anna Julia Cooper, to research on how factors such as incarceration and policing contribute to racial health disparities, acknowledging race is a critical part of our departmental mission. Importantly, this focus doesn't mean that everyone in the department focuses on these issues. Some of my colleagues do not make race a central focus of their research or teaching. But we see it as an imperative to nurture a department culture that makes room for all voices to be heard, rather than sidelining or downplaying racial issues in our teaching or scholarship.

Our "extracurricular" activities carry this theme of color-consciousness as well. One year, we hosted a screening and discussion of the sociological themes present in the film *Get Out*. The following year, we did the same for the film *BlacKkKlansman*. Before the coronavirus upended our spring semester, we'd discussed continuing this screening and discussion trend with the film *Sorry to Bother You*. These events allow us to engage in optional activities in ways that still fulfill our departmental mission while avoiding a colorblind culture where conversations around race are discouraged.

As the country is rocked by protests drawing attention to the ongoing exploitation, harassment, and abuse of Black Americans, many companies are signaling their support for the Black Lives Matter movement and siding with the protesters. Yet most of these same companies have for years failed to create more racial diversity among the top ranks of their own organizations. This has happened in America before. In the wake of civil rights era reforms, many companies established urban affairs or community relations departments which were headed by Black managers who then found few opportunities for upward mobility within their organizations and little leverage to make comprehensive change.

This strategy didn't reduce workplace inequities, and it should not be the model companies follow in 2020. It's past time for a commitment to creating more racially diverse workplaces through actions, and not just words. The takeaway from my experience at Wash U is that companies can do that with some core factors in place: firm, explicit support and resources from leadership; an intentional focus on racial diversity in hiring and advancement; and creating a culture that recognizes and responds to the realities Black workers face.

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