

**Life for Minority Professors of Special Education**

**Ain't Been No Crystal Stair**

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## **Life for Minority Professors of Special Education**

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#### **Abstract**

To expect an “easy life” as a professor of special education is to expect what never was nor never will be. But when the playing field is uneven for minorities, or even worse, when it is not even recognized that the playing field is uneven, there is cause for action. For example, Bonner (2004) stated that minority faculty face tremendous challenges (including racism) in achieving tenure and promotion; Lovell (2004) countered that several of the experiences lamented by Bonner commonly happen to white faculty as well. It seemed not to be recognized that racism can negatively impact all of the necessary activities and accomplishments to earn tenure and promotion. The journey to becoming a professor of special education is long and tedious. It is making good grades in college for admission to a reputable graduate program, obtaining suitable employment in a promising university, becoming a successful teacher, being of service to students, and most certainly, launching a record of scholarship. Monumental effort is required of anyone to prevail at these focal points, but for minorities, additional hurdles creep into the picture. In addition to racism, they face major economic situations, personal and family issues, and lack of information that interfere with their pursuit of professional training; there is a matter of focusing on the “right” things (e.g., balancing teaching, research, and service) in employment; and then there is the struggle to obtain the wherewithal to do the things to become a success. Ways and means must be accorded to make life more palatable for minority professors of special education. America needs well prepared and qualified teachers to educate exceptional children in its schools and

minority professors play a significant role in the process. Meanwhile, the challenge to minority professors is - Though the path may be laden with tacks, splinters, boards torn up, and no carpet on the floor, keep climbing, reaching, turning, and sometimes going in the dark, for life will not necessarily be a “crystal stair” (Hughes, n.d.); keep reaching until every child with a disability is provided an appropriate education. This presentation reflects on the challenges and issues that minority professors face and yet their desire and determination to succeed in higher education.

### **Introduction**

Minority faculty are underrepresented in the area of special education and across disciplines in institutions of higher learning. In addition to this fact is the matter that minorities are faced with “unjustifiable” challenges inherent in the system or environment that interfere with their ability to succeed in the profession. But it should be realized that minority professors have a great beneficial effect on the career decisions of minority and nonminority students. Students will be better prepared to work in various environments as a result of having been taught by minority professors (The benefits of minority professors, 2005). Therefore, for students to come away with the best education they can get, it requires a diverse faculty (Gose, 2008).

An early rationale for diversifying the faculty was to accommodate a growing diverse student body. The thought was that professors from diverse backgrounds were needed to teach and serve as mentors and role models for these diverse students. Diversity is now viewed as a matter of equity in hiring and retention, as well as a means for higher education to develop more relevant and varied forms of knowledge. Faculty diversity also helps in building relationships with different communities outside the

campus and in creating a work environment that is attractive to people from different backgrounds. Ultimately, if the faculty is not diverse, the leadership of the institution is likely not to be diverse, as academic administrators often come from faculty ranks (Smith & Moreno, 2006).

This presentation delineates challenges that minorities face as they prepare for higher education teaching and as they enter into and negotiate the discipline. Attention also focuses on specific response strategies and efforts that minority faculty employ toward achieving success. The presentation further informs the profession by providing a “crystal stair” perspective as a means for viewing how advantaged candidates may fair versus how minority or disadvantaged candidates may fair on the path to professorship. Finally, issues are raised regarding the future for minorities and recommendations are made for making the future as amicable as possible.

### **Demands of Higher Education/Special Education**

Special education faculty, as well as other education faculty in institutions of higher learning, are increasingly called upon to hold the highest degree of preparation available in the discipline, and in their performance, bridge the research to practice gap and solve the challenges faced by today’s schools. To do so requires faculty to have exceptional expertise, contemporary professional experiences in school settings, and be meaningfully engaged in related scholarship (LaRocco & Bruns, 2006).

In their work faculty face increased pressures for transparency and accountability. The bar has been raised for effective teaching, research, and service; the aim for excellence in all areas is now higher than ever. It borders on a 24/7 expectation for faculty work and accessibility to students (Trower, 2010).

What do faculty have on their side to meet the demands of higher education?

Trower (2010) says that time is their most valuable commodity and time management is their greatest challenge. But for minority faculty, success also requires tunneling through many mountains.

### **Problems Faced by Minority Professors**

An essential qualification for ultimate success in the field of education is to earn a doctoral degree. With such credential, the recipient is a very good prospect for employment in leadership positions in schools, with educational agencies, and on the faculty or staff in institutions of higher learning. Minorities face particular challenges in earning the degree and in procuring appropriate or satisfying employment. For those who obtain employment in higher education as faculty, challenges continue when they embark upon success as a college professor. Further attention is given to some of these challenges in subsequent sections of this presentation.

#### **Earning the doctoral degree**

Fine (2002) reported that the number of persons receiving special education doctorates annually dropped 30 percent in the past two decades and only about half those who receive the doctorate choose to work in higher education. Despite efforts to diversify doctoral programs by race and gender, the rate of progress is not sufficient (Smith & Moreno, 2006). To ethnically diversify the professorate in a serious way, there is a need to improve the academic performance of minorities at every level of the school system. The pool of minority doctoral candidates is shockingly small (Why aren't minority students becoming professors?, 2003).

Doctoral students work for many years to earn the necessary academic credentials to complete their program of study (Trower, 2010). A national institute identified competencies described for doctoral students in the area of mental retardation (intellectual disabilities) upon graduation from their program (Ingram & Blackhurst, 1995) to include:

- knowledge of the global goals of education
- an ability to state a rationale for providing services to exceptional children
- an ability to communicate a philosophy concerning the education of the mentally retarded (intellectually disabled)
- an ability to use a systematic approach to devise, apply, and evaluate curriculum
- an ability to observe and record behaviors of individual pupils and of the teacher, and
- an ability to provide consultant services to other teachers concerning retardation (intellectual disabilities) related problems.

In essence, earning a doctorate is no easy feat for minorities. Aside from the above competencies, universities may have admission requirements that are not minority friendly, tuition and fees are high and may be burdensome for minorities to bear, academic standards may have a disconnect with their earlier schooling, and the campus environment may not be supportive. These factors can take their toll on the number of minorities both entering and completing doctoral studies.

### **Making the decision and obtaining a position in higher education**

Minority students who complete doctoral programs must answer the question – Do I seek and accept or not seek and accept a position in higher education? High-

achieving minority students now have many more opportunities for professional employment in careers that have salaries far higher than those typically available in academe. This combines with the fact that some parents, particularly of African-Americans and Asians, have negative attitudes toward their children going into academe. They tend to see academe as a low-paying, low-prestige occupation and prefer their children going into medicine, law, or business. There is a need for both parents and students to be made more familiar with the advantages of an academic career (Why aren't minority students becoming professors?, 2003). For example, professors prepare and mold those who become physicians, lawyers, and businesspersons.

Minority faculty represent only 8 percent of the full-time faculty nationwide. And while 5 percent of professors are African-American, about half of them work at historically black institutions. The proportion of black faculty members at predominantly white universities – 2.3 percent – is virtually the same as it was 20 years ago. One provost who wanted to improve the statistics was accused of being more interested in color than quality in hiring. Her response was not every white professor is a rocket scientist; they have been privileged by their maleness and their whiteness, while others were being discriminated against and excluded (Wilson, 2002).

To seek and accept a position in higher education is no easy decision for minorities. Even the decision between an HBCU and an HWI is not easy. The heart might suggest the former one, but the possibilities for ultimate success in the profession may suggest the latter one. Then considerations might be given to salary and the probability of promotion and tenure.

## **Performing the duties and responsibilities of a professor**

Faculty play a crucial role in the life of the university. They design and teach the curriculum, conduct research that advances the existing knowledge base, and set guidelines that determine many of the standards for their campuses (Park & Denson, 2009). These qualified experts also conduct lectures and seminars in their field of study, provide community service, train young or new academics, and carry out administrative or managerial functions (Wikipedia, n.d.).

In special education, to offer a creditable teacher-training program, faculty must have the ability to manipulate a number of complex variables. These include selecting materials and information to impart knowledge and skills to the learner, planning and developing procedures to present the material to the learner, and establishing evaluation criteria to determine if the learner acquired new knowledge or possesses new skills. A study showed that the perception of the effective teacher resulted in discrepancies between two groups: college faculty members stressed scholarly attainment while students emphasized personal qualities. However, both students and professors identified the same college teachers as being representative of the effective classroom teacher (Ingram & Blackhurst, 1995).

Advice to minority professors when hired at a university is to become as established as possible and earn tenure in one university before moving. It was stated that one university tried to lure a young faculty away with the offer of department head, but this could have been career suicide. The faculty was not tenured and did not have the years experience or the credibility needed (Advice for minority professors on tenure track, 2006).

## **Response Strategies/Efforts to Achieve Success**

In spite of the numerous challenges faced by minorities, many have, and continue to experience success in the profession. The query is - What particular or special skills and strategies do minority faculty apply to achieve success in higher education? It appears that categorically, they are doing the following:

### **Taking the heat, staying in the kitchen**

It was reported that many black professors, disciplines and fields notwithstanding, go through similar triumphs and struggles, victories and defeats, especially in predominantly white universities. Bonner II (2004) identified five themes or circumstances that black faculty are almost certain to face:

- proving oneself over and over – their competence as an intellectual, students questioning their credentials, and working twice as hard to get half as far;
- providing the entertainment – not only having to convey academic content, but also having to entertain students while teaching;
- being kept out of the loop – having difficulty establishing professional networks. Professors choose nonminorities with which to write papers or make presentations;
- playing two roles – having to “code switching” between identities to succeed in two different worlds, the home-based environment and higher education; and
- feeling unwelcome – having sometimes to cope with an inhospitable university environment. Many minorities stop hoping for anything more than toleration.

But Lovell (2004) responded to Bonner II’s article stating that it is unfortunately true that minority faculty members often face tremendous challenges, including racism, in achieving tenure and success in academe; however, several of the experiences

lamented commonly happen to white faculty members as well. Lovell goes on to express that it is difficult to make it unless one is lucky and very well connected; and because there are not enough positions to go around, deeper changes are necessary for academe to develop a more equitable and supportive environment for all faculty members. Well, for African Americans, luck does not often come their way, they are left out of the loop, and the limited number of positions does not work in their favor; however, many minority faculty are hanging in there, making the best of a bad situation.

### **Keeping their eyes on the prize**

It is important for a professor in higher education to be successful in teaching, providing service to students and the university community, making scholarly contributions to the profession, and on a more personal level, earning promotion and tenure. Focus should constantly be on these things.

**Successful teaching.** Teaching is essential to the work of a professor. To identify the effective or ideal college teacher, graduate students indicated that the personal qualities of fairness, enthusiasm, and humor were the most desirable. Other characteristics include having a thorough knowledge of the subject taught and being able to clearly and logically present that knowledge (Ingram & Blackhurst, 1995). A common expression is that to be a good teacher one has to love either the students or the subject; to be a great teacher one has to love both.

**University service.** Depending on the personnel and resources available at the university, a professor may have to spend considerable time at advising and directing students toward completion of their degree requirements. Related to the quest for better teaching is greater attention to advising students. Advisors are expected to be informed

on programs, procedures, and requirements for completing the degree and to arrange time to be accessible to students (Ingram & Blackhurst, 1995). Service to the university also includes working on various committees, preparing accreditation reports, and doing many other things to aid the institution in accomplishing its mission and goals.

**Scholarly activities.** Faculty with the terminal degree are often initially assigned rank at the assistant professor level. Hard work and reasonable accomplishments lead to the rank of associate professor. Many minority professors get stalled at the associate-professor level, perhaps in part, because they don't have minority full professors as role models. Making full professor often requires making a national and international reputation. One cannot follow the urge or desire to spend a lot of time advising students and doing local things and become a full professor. It is necessary to associate with other scholars, conduct research, edit journals, have contacts within major peer institutions, be involved in professional societies and organizations, and become a leader (Advice for minority professors on tenure track, 2006). A case was shared of a person who had been on two sabbatical leaves to develop a crown jewel book and get promoted to full professor. The book was never written. The person was sidetracked serving on the Faculty Senate, search committees, the Graduate Council – things that did not count for promotion to full professor. Such things may give one a good feeling, but are not going to help very much in getting promoted to full professor (Advice for minority professors on tenure track, 2006).

**Tenure and promotion.** Requirements for tenure and promotion are so strenuous that not every faculty person is going to earn them (Gose, 2008). For a minority faculty member who probably isn't going to make tenure, the advice is to leave

before getting a “no,” so it will not be on the record. An alternative may be to move to a less-rigorous research institution. To stay and hope is not very prudent, for if they do not make it, they may end up being very bitter (Advice for minority professors on tenure track, 2006). However, a reasonable portion of minority faculty put together a package of effective teaching, service, and scholarship that leads to tenure and promotion. Having minority role models and a supportive university system are extremely helpful in the process.

### **Standing out among the crowd**

It is possible for minority faculty to do more than earn tenure and promotion; they can become outstanding in the profession. For example, at least one president of TED-CEC, James Walker (1980-81), was African American (TED Conference, 2010). Others have served on task forces, committees, and presented at annual TED conferences. One initiative to increase minority professors in higher education was The PhD Project created in 1993. It was successful with less than a 5% dropout rate in contrast to over 25% for all PhD business students. It reportedly works because of selectivity in enrollment, an annual information conference, and a strong mentorship program (Park & Denson, 2009).

Long-term special education professor Thomas C. Lovitt (1998) offered points to help young professionals navigate the ever complex, often changing, and frequently obscure terrain of higher education. Extrapolated points to consider from his writing are:

- See the excitement in college work. Present yourself as an inspiring person;
- Know that good colleagues are essential. They can be very supportive;
- Be sensitive to shifting priorities. Blend teaching with research and service;
- Don't spend much time on committees, but pull your weight when you do;

- Write grants for the amenities of life (equipment, travel money, etc.);
- Know that schools are terrific sites at which to study education. Learn about teaching, be involved with research, and engaged in service;
- Present at conferences and conduct workshops. Pull together your ideas;
- Write all the time (publish or perish). It helps one to think, clarify arguments, detect flaws in his/her logic, and communicate forcefully and succinctly; and
- Don't waste your tenure. Don't leap at every issue but take on a few carefully studied missions and accept the consequences for doing so.

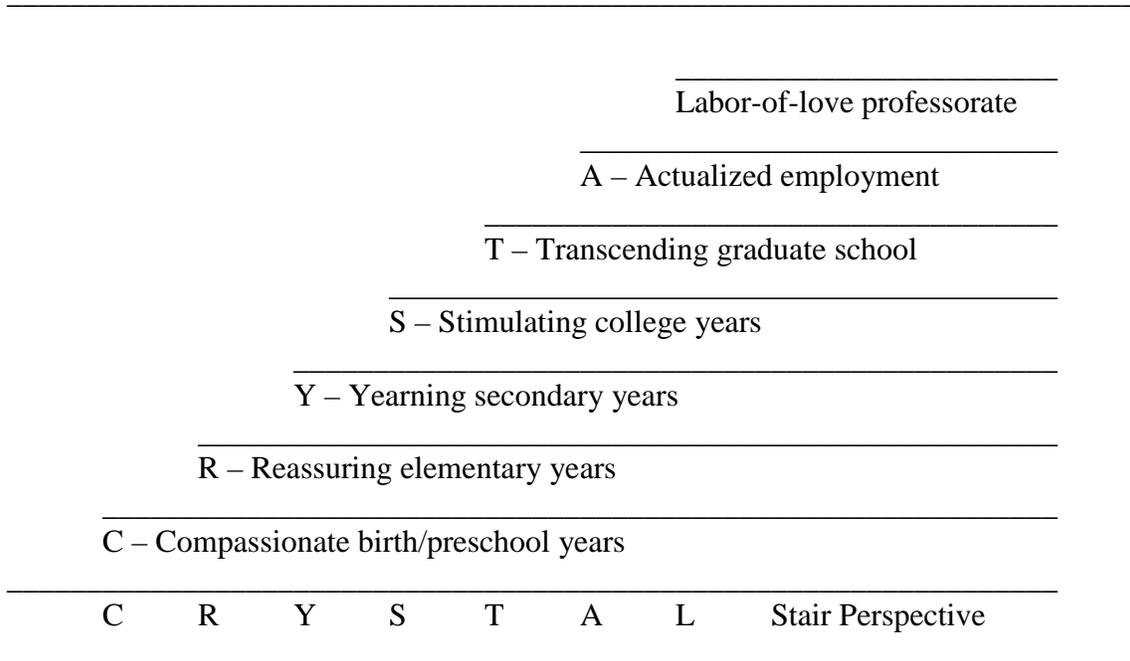
One teacher lamented that he was not a diversity hire and didn't want anyone giving him crap or thinking he got the job because he's black. He said that if he were hired because of his color and found out, he would be out of there tomorrow; period. After being employed for three months, everyone said that they did the right thing, they hired the right guy (Wilson, 2002). Minority faculty can stand out among the crowd.

### **A “Crystal-Stair” Perspective for Viewing the Professorate**

There are both predisposing and concurrent conditions that influence the success of any college professor. The crystal-stair perspective delineated in Figure 1 presents what might be considered an ideal base for becoming a successful professor. The influence actually begins with maternity care, continues through grade school, college, graduate school, obtaining college employment, and functioning in the profession. For emphasis and simplicity, the crystal stair perspective is arranged in an “acrostic” exhibit.

**Figure 1**

**A Crystal-Stair Perspective on Becoming a Successful College Professor**



There are seven risers to the crystal stair. An explanation for each follows:

- **Compassionate birth and preschool years** - being born to welcoming parents who desire and act to make life a happy, healthy, and productive journey;
- **Reassuring elementary years** - having parents, teachers, and other significant persons instill confidence to pursue worthy dreams and ambitions;
- **Yearning secondary years** - when students long to explore and experience the better things of life;
- **Stimulating college years** - when students are excited about college life and are fulfilling the requirements to become a competent professional and quality person;
- **Transcending graduate school** - students take formal education to a new and higher dimension to enhance functionality;

- **Actualized employment** - accepting a position where preparation, practice, and learning are made reality; and
- **Labor-of-love professorate** - giving 110% effort every day and enjoying constantly the fruits of the profession.

Many minority faculty will be “at risk” with most of the risers on the crystal stair. However, disadvantaged non-minority faculty may also be at risk among the risers. The crystal stair perspective might serve as a parameter for viewing major areas that may either positively or negatively influence the life of a professor. Of course interventions may be made to improve conditions and make for positive outcomes as necessary.

### **Challenges and Resolves for Minorities in Negotiating the Crystal-Stair**

Many factors are differentially associated with students from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. Turnbull, Turnbull, and Wehmeyer (2010) placed the factors into the areas of child/youth, family, and school. They show by race/ethnicity the percentages of students associated with various factors in each area. For example, blacks have the highest percentage with low birth weight, no husband present in the home, school suspension and expulsion, repeating a grade, school dropout, low achievement, and physical fights on school property; they have the lowest percentage with advanced academic coursework. Similar predicaments for minorities continue through college, graduate school, and employment as a college professor. Table 1 depicts some of the challenges that minorities face in negotiating the crystal stair and how they might best resolve them or succeed in spite of them.

It is unfortunate that the path to the professorate is not even for all individuals, regardless to their background. Until it happens, it will be a struggle for minorities.

**Table 1**

**Challenges and Resolves for Minorities in Negotiating the Crystal-Stair**

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- Birth/Preschool factors
    - C - Low birth wt; Parents -urban areas, less education, low income, high divorce rates, no father present
    - R – Obey parents; Discover heroes; Have hobbies; Fall in love with family, school, church, etc.
  - Elementary school issues
    - C – Repeat grades; More suspended/expelled; Too much TV; Few books/computers; Environmentally deprived
    - R – Demonstrate self-determination, appropriate behavior, resiliency, good study habits
  - Secondary school exposure
    - C – Violence; Weak curriculum; Low achievement levels; High dropout rate; Little advanced coursework
    - R – Develop attitude of commitment; Set limits; Believe in self; Look straight ahead
  - College experience
    - C – At PWIs: Attrition, Poor performance, Few role models, Alienation; HBCUs: Insufficient resources
    - R – Make career choice; Commit to excellence, Choose friends wisely; Make technology beneficial
  - Graduate school
    - C – Less likely to pursue; Limitations on choice and discipline; Financial/social challenges
    - R – Postpone goods/gratification; Establish social circles; Interact with dominant culture; Believe in self
  - College employment
    - C - Heavy teaching assignments; Personal vs. institutional values; Not enough time in day
    - R – Manage time; Perform essential duties and responsibilities; Seek mentors; Work steadfastly
  - Full professorship
    - C - Hindered by limited publications and grants; Limited network; Application preparation-easier not to try
    - R – Excel in teaching, research, and service; Network; Balance work and home life; Be encouraged
- 

Notes: C = Challenges; R = Resolves for the challenges

### **What's Needed to Level the Professorate Field for Minorities**

All faculty face the challenges of teaching, research and service as they work toward promotion and tenure. As delineated earlier, minority faculty face numerous additional hurdles. To make matters better, in some cases emphasis has been on improving school conditions and supporting and mentoring early career faculty (LaRocco & Bruns, 2006). Early career faculty often report stress during their first years. Some experience difficulty with balancing their work life with their home life; some feel prepared to teach but not adequately prepared to conduct research. Faculty may lack access to needed resources such as teaching assistants, and travel funds (LaRocco & Bruns, 2006).

Experienced faculty have assisted early career faculty in such ways as cautioning them of doing too much research and too little service in the first years or the need to publish more. Experienced faculty may also encourage early career faculty, share syllabi and course materials, and serve as mentors or coauthors (LaRocco & Bruns, 2006). With such exposure, minority professors on the tenure track may become more satisfied with their academic workplace (June, 2008).

Another need is for lawmakers to provide greater access to financial aid for students pursuing doctoral degrees in special education and create loan-forgiveness programs for those who choose to pursue special education jobs in colleges and universities. Data show that about one-third of openings for special education professors go unfilled each year; the median age of those completing special education doctorates was 43 (at that age many are hesitant to relocate for university jobs); and as professors,

they would earn about 18 percent less than candidates could typically make teaching in a district (Fine, 2002).

It is important for junior faculty to have travel funds to present papers or conduct research. Professional assistance with finding external grants would be helpful. Also, peer reviews of teaching and/or creative work aid junior faculty. Ultimately, there is a need for more flexibility in the approach to tenure, better work-family and dual-career policies, efforts to ensure that mentoring happens and is effective, increased focus on collaborative teaching and research, and rewards for interdisciplinary research (Trower, 2010).

Noticeable strides are being made to recruit, retain, and develop minority faculty. Some large institutions of higher learning pay dearly for talented minority faculty. Of course this action tends to simply move the pool of talent around the country rather than grow it. Some provosts will do what it takes, within reason, to persuade minority faculty to come to their campuses, including helping new hires with mortgage payments or offering housing allowances and funds to travel to conferences and for research (Sanoff, 2006).

### **Summary and Recommendations**

An astonishing realization in higher education is that on the one hand minority faculty are grossly underrepresented in the academy; but on the other hand they enhance the educational experience of all students. Historical conditions and current circumstances make life for minorities in school, college, graduate studies, employment, and work toward full professorship very difficult. Their life is fraught with challenges, injustices, and difficulties at every major focal point.

The recommendation to the institution is to help make level the professorate field for minority professors. The recommendation for minority faculty is – “Cause it’s kinder hard, don’t you set down on the steps. Keep a schooling, and a teaching, and a researching, and a serving, and a publishing, and a being uniquely you; cause life for minority professors ain’t been no crystal stair.”

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