

# Troubling Success: Interviews with Black Female Faculty

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*This study explores the complexity of success for Black female faculty members based on six Black women at a public research oriented university in the Southeast. All women shared the challenges they experience as Black female faculty members. Findings indicate that while these women seemingly have attained professional success, they are leery of labeling themselves as successful. Participants defined success in three major themes: success was publishing, success was giving back, and success was a journey. Of these women, only one considered herself successful. Participants stated that being successful was defined externally and comparatively, they had some successes, and they could never become complacent or satisfied. The conclusions of this study demonstrate that further analysis of the Black female faculty experience in research-oriented institutions is required to more accurately determine the contributors or obstacles to success. This information may be helpful in supporting and promoting Black females on their professional path.*

Key words: academy success, faculty of color

In 1862, Mary Jane Patterson became the first Black female to be awarded the Bachelor of Arts degree as a graduate of Oberlin College (Davis, 1998). Since then, Black females have earned not only bachelor's, but also master's and doctoral degrees in the social, physical and biological sciences, in addition to business, humanities, and education. Though Black females have "come a long way" since 1862, the statistics about this group and their presence in academia are bleak. Dowdy (2008b) reported that there are "overwhelmingly negative research reports on the status of Black women in the academy" (p. 24).

According to *The Almanac of Higher Education* (2009), in Fall 2007, there were 20,148 Black female faculty in the United States; moreover, Black females accounted for only 6.8% of all female faculty and 2.9% of all faculty (see Table 1). Most Black female faculty members (8,175) were instructors, lecturers, or "other" ranks. In addition, there were more Black female assistant professors (6,035) than Black male assistant professors (4,607); however, Black males outnumbered Black females for the associate rank (4,110 to 3,745) and full rank (3,646 to 2,193).

Between the years 1995 and 2005, Black females represented the largest number (8,409) and percentage (23%) of earned doctorates of any people of color (male and female combined) and they have continued to show increased numbers within the academy (American Council of Education, 2006). When compared to their colleagues of color at assistant, associate, and full professor ranks, however, Black female faculty did not reflect the same gains in their promotion and tenure. In 2005, among faculty of color at the assistant rank, Black females represented 17.3% (5,438) and were second to Asian males at 28.49% (8,903) and Asian females at 19.3% (6,019) (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2007). In 2007, Black female faculty again represented 17.3% (6,035) of all assistant professors of color, showing an increase in numbers but not proportion (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009). (See Table 1).

Additionally, when compared to other faculty of color, Black females lost gains between seven and nine percentage points, reflecting a decided decrease in the numbers of Black female faculty being promoted (NCES, 2005). It is clear that as a group, Black females have shown much success in doctoral attainment and overall representation in the professoriate relative to other faculty of color. What is not clear, however, are the reasons Black female faculty who earn more doctorates than any other faculty of color, are not achieving the same success in climbing the ranks of the professoriate.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study was conducted by three Black female researchers. At the time of this study, the first author was a doctoral candidate and the second and third authors were assistant professors. The first author was inspired to investigate this line of research to obtain a glimpse of the profession for which she was being prepared. The specific focus on Black female faculty was necessary to give a clear representation of her future profession. This journey began with feelings of excitement and naivety. There were high expectations of the professoriate and strong beliefs in a personal definition of "Black female faculty success."

The researchers asked questions about the participants' journeys to the academy, their professional/personal background, and their view of success. This article will focus specifically on the participants' discussion of success; moreover, the article will focus on the participants' answers to two poignant questions: 1) How do you define success? and 2) Do you believe you are a successful Black female professor?

### **Issues and Challenges facing Black Female Faculty**

The challenges and issues experienced by faculty of color reflect professional and personal interactions that may create a chilly climate and work environment (Turner & Myers, 2000). Researchers report faculty of color experiencing questions about their place within the academy, cultural affronts to their personhoods, alienation, severe marginalization, and thus, pressure to prove continually that they deserve their positions (Aguirre, Hernandez, & Martinez, 1994; Blackwell, 1996; Boice, 1993; Bourguignon et al., 1987; Jackson, 2008; Menges & Exum, 1983; Nakanishi, 1993; Olivas, 1988; Reyes & Halcon, 1988; Stein, 1994; Turner, 2003; Turner & Myers, 2000). Stanley's (2006) collected essays on the experiences of faculty of color in predominately White colleges and universities revealed "lived experiences of racism" and the impact of marginality on faculty of color. As Bonilla (2006) stated in his contribution to the book, being a faculty member of color "means being on the fringe of a white academic culture that still sees the 'other' as guest at best and intruder at worst" (p. 69).

According to Gregory (2001), faculty members of color are often excluded from collaborative research projects with their peers and lack sponsorship for research. They rarely have access to resources for research that could lead to greater prestige, higher future economic gains, and enhanced job mobility (Gregory, 1995; Jackson, 2008). Moreover, the experiences of Black female faculty, particularly those working at predominantly White colleges and universities, have been fraught by alienation, isolation, and social marginalization (Ballam, 2006; Stanley, 2006; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). And yet, many have been able to thrive; moreover, "they daily challenge the academic power structure while making a difference in the success and longevity of their own careers as well as those of others" (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001, p. 167).

As faculty of color, Black women are placed in a unique position because they are constantly challenged with tackling sexism and racism (Bryant et al., 2005). A faculty member who is Black and female has limited accessibility to certain privileges in institutions of higher education in addition to the challenge of invisibility and marginality (Stanley, 2006). The intersection of the two factors can combine in subtle and unsubtle ways to create multiple obstacles in terms of the climate for Black female faculty in predominately White institutions, who as a result, likely experience the academy differently than their male counterparts.

Studies about life in the academy for female faculty reported women feeling stretched by the demands of family and the academy (Bourguignon et al., 1987; Gregory, 2001; Trautvetter, 1999). Trautvetter (1999) found that women at a comprehensive university experience great stress around career and family. They also feel the strain of the current organizational structures (too many and too long committee meetings, bureaucracy, tenure, and anxiety about job performance) (Bourguignon et al., 1987). According to Ballam (2006), female faculty of color reported professional isolation, insufficient resources, too little recognition, salary discrimination, and difficulty in arranging the intellectual collaboration needed to succeed in their academic endeavors as serious obstacles to professional success.

Black female faculty members also have the stress of feeling "psychologically divided between home and career" (Trautvetter, 1999, p. 65) or between community and career. Many feel that they only have two choices: sacrifice family and community commitments for several years, or honor non-work commitments as an essential part of their identity at the risk of earning tenure (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). Moreover, Gregory (2001) reported that few successful faculty women were married with children. However, other researchers reported that being

married with children might actually be beneficial to the tenure process, providing stability and another support system outside the university/college community.

Studies indicate that research by faculty of color generally focus on race and diversity, which may not be considered relevant within their fields or deemed as significant contributions to the academy (Epps, 1989; Stanley, 2006; Wilson, 1987). For Black female faculty, this can create a complex challenge because many tend to focus their research on community service (Gregory, 2001). Success often means defining and redefining their roles within the academy, often “finding fit” by infusing cultural interests, social justice and community action into their scholarship activities (Stanley, 2006; Turner, 2003). White colleagues often see research by faculty of color on people of color as unimportant and not valid. Moreover, Black female faculty often experience criticism by peers over the journals in which they have published, with scholarship merit challenged when it is published on diversity issues in ethnic-specific journals (Blackwell 1996; Jackson, 2008; Turner, 2003). Consequently, Black female faculty members have felt pressure to produce scholarship deemed acceptable by their White colleagues. This has inadvertently stifled progress for many in their areas of expertise. For many Black female faculty, this means refocusing their research interests, and for those who do not conform, it has meant divestment (Alexander-Snow & Johnson 1999; Frierson, 1990).

### **Success in the Academy**

Traditionally, success in the professoriate has been defined in terms of attaining tenure, garnering prestige, increased earnings, and enhancing self-satisfaction (Gregory, 1995; Tippeconnix-Fox, 2009). However, it has not been clearly defined how each of the aforementioned is relative to individuals, time, and place. In Tillman’s (2001) research, some faculty replied that success was equated with promotion and tenure; while others responded that success resulted from a good, collegial relationship between a mentor and a protégé. This article attempts to more clearly define the definition of success in the professoriate, particularly from the Black female faculty perspective, since they continue to experience severe marginalization, and yet make strides in the successful attainment of promotion and tenure.

To obtain tenure at most doctorate-granting, four-year colleges and universities in the United States, particularly at research institutions, faculty members are required to consistently conduct quality research and publish in refereed scholarly journals. Jackson (2008) asserted that the criteria for promotion and tenure are biased against non-white males, and that of the 44 variables for success only five variables were statistically significant for African American males. Jackson (2008) concluded, “it seems reasonable to suggest that another set of variables is a better predictor for African American males” (p. 1023). Subsequently, it is reasonable to expect the same holds for Black female faculty.

One way to ensure success for Black female faculty members is the establishment of mentoring systems (Tillman, 2001). Personal relationships and support systems are important factors for a successful career. Additionally, researchers identified participation in informal and formal networks and mentoring relationships as critical in the persistence of Black female faculty in the academy (Aleman, 2000; Cuadraz & Pierce, 1994; Johnson & Harvey, 2002). Alexander-Snow and Johnson (1999) reported that successful faculty of color had “a special place outside their college or university community that reaffirmed them” (p. 90). Therefore, many successful Black female faculty members are involved in professional networks and associations. They also have extended support networks, such as church and community organizations. In an academic

setting, supportive networks and hospitable academic environments are particularly important for Black female faculty, who often seek meaningful inclusion in various types of professional, social, and religious networks (Sotello & Turner, 2002). Mentoring experiences may be extensions of their personal relationships and support systems reflecting a collectivist, peer approach as opposed to the one-on-one mentor approach paradigm (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001).

### **Barriers to Success**

Researchers have reported that the lack of substantial advancement among faculty of color is attributed to department politics, discrimination and racism, non-appreciation and disrespect for their research interests (Turner, 2003). In addition, perspectives of their White colleagues and little to no department, college, and institutional support greatly impact success (Blackwell, 1996; Exum, Menges, Watkins, & Berglund, 1984; Frierson, 1990; Turner, 2003). Some have argued that the promotion and tenure process is meritocratic and that non-success in promotion and tenure is the result of a faculty member's inability to meet the standards of scholarship set by their respective departments and colleges. Others have theorized that the marginalization experienced by faculty of color impedes their ability to become integrated and acclimated to the cultural norms and values essential for success (Sotello & Turner, 2002).

Faculty of color experience severe marginalization influenced by poor institutional fit, cross-cultural and social differences, as well as self-imposed perceptions of racial and ethnic discrimination (Alexander-Snow & Johnson, 1999; Finklestein, 1984; Gainen & Boice, 1993; Jonsrud & Sadao, 1998). As bell hooks (1990) has posited "marginality [is] much more than a site of deprivation; in fact... it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance... It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" (as cited in Turner, 2003, p. 120). It is our belief that a further look at the experiences and reflections of Black female faculty on success may inform the research literature; moreover, this exposure may benefit not only Black female faculty, but those in the academy. All may gain equal insight into the lives of these women.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative research was designed to find meaning in the successful qualities of Black female faculty. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) inform that "meaning" is essential to any qualitative research approach. This study was conducted at a research oriented university in the southeast. During the 2008-2009 school year, the total student population of the institution was 50,000 graduate and undergraduate students. Approximately, 4,400 (9%) of the graduate and undergraduate students were Black; moreover, approximately 2,800 were Black females and 1,600 were Black males. The total tenured and tenure-earning faculty included 231 women and 522 men. Black faculty accounted for 16 (7%) female and 43 (8%) male tenured and tenure-earning professors.

### **Participants**

Using snowball sampling, this research study included six participants. Each participant was a Black female faculty member of the institution. They were all tenure-earning and/or tenured professors. Two participants were assistant professors, three were associate professors and one was a full professor. The first author had a relationship with two of the participants prior to the

study and was familiar with two other participants. The final two participants of the study were recommended by another faculty member because they were assessed to meet the study criteria.

Participants were sent an e-mail inviting them to join the study. The e-mail also included an introduction to the researchers, the purpose of the study, who recommended them to participate in the study (if applicable) and a request for an available interview time. The interviews were conducted at various locations on the university's campus. Permission was granted to interview each faculty member after reading and signing the Informed Consent approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

An ethical consideration was brought to the authors' attention during the application for the IRB. The reviewer asked about the authors' intentions to protect the participants of the study because of the sample size, gender and ethnicity identifiers. Therefore, in order to protect the identity of the participants and maintain confidentiality, the authors have chosen to omit personal details that may identify any of the participants.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were collected via face-to-face interviews lasting 90-120 minutes in length. Prior to the actual interview, the questions formulated by the researcher underwent reconstruction through peer debriefing with all authors (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Each interview was audio recorded and fieldnotes were taken. The interviewer intentionally built rapport with each participant at the point of initial contact. This "relation characterized by harmony, conformity, accord, or affinity" (Glesne, 1999, p. 109) was deepened at the time of the actual interview, which resulted in greater depth of sharing by each participant.

Data analysis is described as moving away from the organization of material to meaning (Wolcott, 1994). Data analysis initially took place as the researchers transcribed the interviews from the audio tapes. Transcription of each participant's questions led to the observation of theme(s) per question and conclusive themes for the interviews. This was followed by returning to fieldnotes taken during the interviews and comparing that information to the data revealed through transcription. Further analysis of the data was conducted by peer debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000), which encouraged a return to the transcription for further exploration. This led to further inductive data analyses and formation of additional themes.

The authors also "sat with the data" to reflect upon personal ideologies going into the study, in addition to possible biases as a result of the first author's doctoral journey during data collection and intention to embrace the professoriate as a Black female faculty member. Additionally, the authors processed the definition of success and its impact on the study. These strategies led to richness in the findings that otherwise would not have been present without this process.

### **Findings**

As stated, the objective of this study was to understand the perceptions of success for Black female faculty members. Participants provided their own definition of success and shared their beliefs about whether or not they considered themselves successful Black female professors. The findings of the study are presented in two general headings:

- (1) How do participants define success; and
- (2) Do participants believe they are successful Black female professors?

### How do participants define success?

Three themes emerged as participants discussed their definition of success:

- (1) Success was publishing; (2) Success was giving back; and (3) Success was a journey. Of the six participants, only one immediately responded with an affirmation of her definition of success and provided specific examples. This participant defined success as publishing. Her definition of success was the following:

*[Having] tenure at a PWI [Predominately White Institution] or mostly white school; that's success. Being able to publish in a top journal...Success for me is also being able to do research in areas that involve Africans; People of [the] African Diaspora.*

While the other participants did not provide concrete definitions of success, there was a conglomeration of ideas expressed to communicate the idea of their definition of success. For two participants success was giving back. As one participant explained:

*My ability to give back! Success is hard for me to define other than that. Because when you reach one plateau there is always a different plateau you can go to. So it's not about rising to various plateaus for me. It's about learning to give back. Once I was able to see [my children] give back to someone else. It's like a continuous chain in my mind. That's true success. There is nothing like parents having children. How are you able to define success in what you've done? If [your children] are able to go out and be independent and contribute back to society. That [is the] same way for me professionally. It's not all about getting but what you're able to give back to.*

This participant simultaneously discussed success in giving back both professionally and in her personal life. She discussed the importance of family and the need to teach life lessons to her children. Though the participant did not discuss if honoring her non-work commitments negatively affected her professional success, she suggested that family is an essential part of being successful.

As the second participant recounted, success is giving back to students and addressing issues concerning diversity. She explained,

*Success is not necessarily attaining all satisfactory or outstanding but it's just feeling that you make the difference in at least one student's life. Of course it's in diversity and multicultural [issues]. It's also mentoring junior faculty to ensure that we are honoring our promise to the next generation of learners.*

For professors who discussed giving back, they indicated concern for family and researching issues of diversity and/or people of the African Diaspora.

For four participants, success was circuitous, or even indefinable. Success was a journey in its various stages. As one participant explained,

*It depends. I'm still working on that. It's evolving. It is transformative and it's transient. I think the bar in higher education continues to be raised. When you reach one plateau,*

*there is always a different plateau you can go to. It's nebulous. It's ever changing. It's being revealed. It's a journey for me.*

Another participant described success as a never ending journey. She agreed with the previous participant that there are continual plateaus.

*Success is being able to advance in this career. It is hard to define it because there are continual markers. First, I had to do well as a graduate student – passing comps, defending my dissertation; then I had to find a job that is suitable to my area and that would be supportive of my getting tenure. The next marker of success is getting promotion and tenure. And, then as a colleague told me today, it ramps up even more after tenure if you want to stay active or get to be a full professor. So, success is a continual journey.*

As one participant shared, the journey makes you question how you will find a way to measure choices made along the way. She described success as finding contentment with the journey.

*I honestly had to redefine and take cognizance of where I am in my place today and recognize that I made choices and to find contentment in those choices. I then asked myself the question: 'If I could do it differently what [would I] have done differently?'*

It could be interpreted that these women hesitated to define success as one would find in a dictionary: *The achievement of something desired, planned, or attempted*. This notion presents success as stagnant and clearly marked, but participants revealed that success was evolving and continual. These women spoke from their own journeys when defining success. They were not bound by the societal definitions of what it means to be successful or how success *should* be defined. They spoke their truths unreservedly.

### **Do you believe you are a successful Black female professor?**

This question, similar to the first, received resistance to direct response from the participants. One participant immediately replied however, *"I think so. Yes!"* Another, after verbally reciting the statistics of Black female faculty members in existence and in her specific department, conceded by saying, *"Yes, I've survived. I've been able to get through."*

Three themes emerged about whether or not they believed they were successful: 1) Being successful was defined externally and comparatively, 2) they believed they have had some successes; and 3) never becoming complacent or satisfied. Most participants provided external views of success as a Black female professor, measured by colleagues, family, or society. As one participant explained:

*I am out of touch with things. My world is about people who have doctorates every day. So you don't even think that it's so rare. Every day I am working; I am just trying to keep my head above water here. What you may see as success someone may have been hurt in the process of you getting it so how much of a success was it really? With success you are often asked to measure yourself against another person. That's just this western world and how we see things... It's often comparative.*

Another participant agreed that success was comparative. She was hesitant to say she was successful, but instead had incremental success through reaching goals. She explained:

*I believe I have had some successes. No matter what you do, you can always do a little bit better, success is like a moving target. I prefer to think of it as a means of accomplishing goals I set for myself and I can check them off as done or not done. Success is relative. One person may see your success as not successful. It's like measuring yourself against someone else. As opposed to a goal, you're not measuring yourself against others. It's your different goals being achieved and you feel good about it.*

Success for many of the participants was external and dependent upon their careers, but one participant balked at the idea of success being defined as a position, but had a more holistic approach. Though she begins her discussion with an internal definition of success, she ultimately admits that her success is defined by the people she interacts with. She recounted:

*I don't see myself like that. And it's not that I am not successful. It's not that I'm not Black. It's not that I'm not a female professor. What it is that I am more than that. I am not defined by this position. And about where I am and how people see me. In fact, that makes me feel uncomfortable. I would rather people just know me as [my first name]. I mean obviously here they need to know me as Dr. [last name]. But people who really know me need to know me as [my first name]. And my impact or my definition of success would need to be who I am as a human being and as a person and if I've enhanced lives of the individuals of whom I've interacted not just here, 'cause this is not even real.' But it's out there where people meet me.*

Additionally, these women talked about seeing themselves very simply and doing what is required in their fields. As one participant recounted, “*I just live my life and I do what I think is right and needs to be done out there.*” Along with the definition of success being fleeting and elusive, participants agreed that viewing themselves as successful Black female professors sometimes “*simply depends upon the day. Most people see me as successful...but...I will never become complacent. I have achieved but I have miles to go.*”

### **Conclusions and Implications**

At the beginning of this study, there were perceived ideas about the definition of success and the meaning of a successful Black female faculty member. The first author viewed success as earning a doctorate and becoming a Black female professor. The second and third authors viewed success as earning tenure and having an active research agenda. At the end of this study, however, we have been enlightened by the varied definitions of success and individual views thereof. These participants define and view success differently than the lenses with which the authors entered the study. Only one participant described success as publishing. Others defined success as giving back, especially teaching those lessons to family, researching issues of diversity, and giving back to younger Black female faculty members through mentorship. In addition, participants defined success as a journey in various stages and plateaus. This journey was circuitous and many tried to find contentment along the way.

When asked if participants believed they were successful, many described external factors of success and shared that success was comparative. Success was “a moving target” and one participant measured it by her accomplishment of goals. Also, they viewed success holistically, both inside and outside of the academy as reflecting critical agency, shaped by social justice. Their sense of marginality informed their definitions of success, providing the nourishment for them to define success on their own terms in spite of and despite the limitations academe placed on their personhoods. As Turner and Myers (2000) found in their study, for all participants, the love of teaching, sense of accomplishment, contribution to future scholarship, and opportunities to mentor and be mentored significantly impacted work satisfaction and defined personal and professional accomplishments of success within the academy.

It may be concluded that success is defined based on one’s principles, experiences, journeys, paths and a plethora of other contributing factors. It is also more apparent that success for Black female faculty is as unexpected for them as is their presence in the professoriate. It is possible that their minimal presence in the academy limits the ability to concretely define success. Conversely, it may be the case that their meager representation gives them the latitude to define success as they see fit; without boundaries. As one participant poignantly said, *“It’s not what they say; it’s what I know that I have done to get where I am that other people may never see.”*

Another influence of the findings may be the particular institution where each of these Black female faculty members works. There are several questions that need to be explored: How different or similar is the definition of success for Black female faculty at historically Black institutions or women’s college? What are institutions and departments doing well to promote Black female faculty success? Not having a sample from other institutions and nominal research focused on the experiences of Black female faculty limits insight to this awareness.

Historically, success is measured by excellence in scholarship, teaching and service. Each is realized through partnerships, collaborations and institutional commitment. Given that access to social networks within their departments and institutions have emerged as a significant issue for Black female faculty, it is important that Department chairs utilize their positions to influence the involvement of non-Black faculty and senior faculty to provide opportunities for Black female faculty to engage in research and teaching activities. Institutions must be diligent in its review and implementation of policies and practices that embrace the redefinition of success to include the scholarship of teaching and learning that extends beyond the traditional notions and definitions of success within the academy.

As Turner (2003) asserted, “Contributions of a diverse faculty enhance teaching and learning as well as contribute to the development of future scholarship. Academics [of color] bring perspectives to higher education that expand and enrich scholarship” (p. 117). This includes the promotion of new scholarship published in journals specific to diverse research agendas, without devaluation of journal merit. Therefore, scholarship in all fields can be expanded if institutions recruit and provide mentorship for scholars with different perspectives and racial/ethnic backgrounds. As Jackson (2008) concluded, “if institutions of higher education intend to have diversity as a strategic direction, major consideration should be given to changing merit criteria and human capital expectations” (p. 1025) for recruitment, hiring practices, and the promotion and tenure process.

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Table 1

*Full-Time Faculty Members at U.S. Colleges and Universities (Fall 2007)*

	Faculty Rank				Total
	Full	Associate	Assistant	Other <sup>a</sup>	
Black					
Female	2,193	3,745	6,035	8,175	20,148
Male	3,646	4,110	4,607	5,419	17,782
White					
Female	39,463	46,292	57,211	83,119	226,085
Male	108,404	68,982	60,407	76,582	314,375
Latino					
Female	1,254	1,946	3,064	5,243	11,507
Male	2,874	2,768	3,265	4,561	13,468
Asian					
Female	2,221	3,512	7,253	6,497	19,483
Male	10,018	7,570	10,037	6,553	34,178
American Indian					
Female	184	292	381	764	1,621
Male	344	312	298	765	1,719
Other <sup>b</sup>					
Female	592	1,245	5,823	7,844	15,504
Male	2,202	2,918	10,127	12,346	27,593
Total					
Female	45,907	57,032	79,767	111,642	294,348
Male	127,488	86,660	88,741	106,226	409,115

Note. Adapted from “Number of Full-Time Faculty Members by Sex, Rank, and Racial and Ethnic Group, Fall 2007”, by The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009, *Almanac of Higher Education: 2009*.

<sup>a</sup>Indicates Instructor, Lecturer and other faculty ranks

<sup>b</sup>Indicates American Indian, race unknown and nonresident foreign