

# THREATS TO ACADEMIC IDENTITY AND COMMITMENT FOR FACULTY OF COLOR

Robert K. Leik and Alexandra R. Goulding

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## ABSTRACT

Scholars are trained to be experts in their discipline and to develop disciplinary identities and commitments. Faculties and administrators expect evidence of those identities and commitments in the form of publications and professional service for promotion and tenure. Yet faculty of color are typically disproportionately loaded down with special committee assignments, task force requests, student demand, and so on. The intent is certainly not malevolent. It is in the nature of "Oh, we need a Black/Hispanic/Indian/Asian...representative. Can you help us out?" or "Finally there is someone who can advise our Black/Hispanic/Indian/Asian...students." Such demands serve the university's interests but have little to do with scholarly identities and commitments. They consume time needed to establish scholarly credentials, and they undermine disciplinary identities and compete with disciplinary commitments. In effect, the faculty member has her/his racial identity thrust upon her/him as THE primary identity. Yet when promotion and tenure roll around, colleagues who were so welcoming wonder why she/he wasn't more academically

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productive. There must be mechanisms for supporting the disciplinary identities and commitments of all faculty and reducing conflicting demands on their time and resources, or we will systematically destroy, for faculty of color, just that which we presume to value most.<sup>1</sup>

The problem of “keeping our faculties” is, in social psychological terms, one of creating a workplace which fosters identities and commitments that are in agreement with the formal and informal criteria by which faculty earn academic respect, tenure, and promotion. Our position here is that typical expectations for new faculty of color do not foster such identities and commitments. On the contrary, they undermine them. This is not to imply that academe is in the business of intentionally derailing careers via white-only schemes.<sup>2</sup> We believe, however, that regardless of myriad good intentions, current academic practices toward new faculty of color systematically erode the very basis on which successful academic careers must be founded. In fact, the process begins during graduate training of students of color. In the interest of focus, however, we will concentrate on the faculty problem. Our approach to defending our assertion of systematic erosion requires examining what we mean by the terms *identity* and *commitment* and their existence within ongoing *social networks*.

## IDENTITY

Informally, each of us has many identities. Each identity is a collection of things about oneself having to do with how we think and feel about who we are, what we do, how well we do it, and so on. Also, each identity depends on the situation we happen to be in at any given time. Someone may feel confident and at ease among friends, hesitant but hopeful in a new academic setting, or unappreciated and resentful among critics. The collection of these situationally specific identities does not constitute a jumbled pile, but typically forms an integrated, hierarchical structure; a social self (Rosenberg 1979; Stryker 1980, 1987). The self has great influence on what we choose to do, where we do it and who we do it with. In short, a social self consists of an organized set of identities, or self references, that are interdependent, differentially salient and link the actor with properties or roles that provide social placement. The self is hierarchical in that some identities are broadly linked, hence constitute core aspects of self. Other identities are more peripheral. The more central an identity is, the more costly it is to change or lose that identity. To lose the most basic aspects of self is to lose who and what one is as a human being.

Identities are social constructions that develop in interaction with others. Furthermore, as a friend and noted social psychologist commented many years ago, “socialization goes on and on.”<sup>3</sup> That is, as we move through life, we continually

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