FOREWORD

Faculty as Change Agents—Reflections on My Academic Life

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For most people in the 1970s, the image of a college professor was a bearded gray-haired white man in a corduroy blazer with patches at the elbow. I did not look the part. When I joined the English department of Douglass College, I was twenty-three years old, with a short Afro and two years of graduate study at Harvard under my belt. Alienated by the ostentatious elitism of Harvard—not to mention the sexism—I was on a mission to find out whether I wanted an academic career. I answered an ad in the *New York Times*, was interviewed on campus that summer, and started teaching in September. Although there was no official mentoring program, another black woman, Adrienne Baytop, took me under her wing. A specialist in the Renaissance, Adrienne was tenured. She gave me tips on teaching, monitored my progress toward my PhD, and introduced me to the culture of the institution. At the time, I took her presence for granted. But I soon learned how rare my experience was and is: I have never been the only woman or the only African American in my department.

At Douglass, a women's college, I did not have to defend the legitimacy of scholarship that focused on gender and race. To the contrary, I worked with a community of scholars who were defining the new field of women's studies. The faculty was small enough that people moved easily across departments. Whether in English, history, sociology, or classics, we were asking similar questions. We were eager to share and test our findings both in person and on the page. While the leading journals were not yet welcoming—one famous editor warned junior faculty in my department not to submit anything on women because the topic was just trendy—a bevy of new journals appeared, many with “women” and “feminist” or “black” or “Afro-American” in their titles. We had places to publish and peers to review our work. We were also figuring out what a feminist pedagogy would be. Arranging desks in a circle, encouraging

students to start discussions, requiring them to keep journals, and commenting on each other's work reduced the hierarchy of the classroom. Of course, it was not difficult to cede authority that I did not yet possess. In addition to my youth, I was working in the young field of African American literary study. Everything was open for discussion.

Three decades later, fields such as Africana studies, Chicano studies, Ethnic studies, and Women's studies have transformed the curriculum in traditional disciplines. For example, not only are African American history and literature courses now regularly taught, but that teaching and research has raised theoretical questions and uncovered lost texts that compelled a reconceptualization of American history and literature. Some years ago I heard a lecture given by one of the leading scholars of American literature. He spoke about Ralph Waldo Emerson and the idea of "Representative Men." He mentioned that he had recently concluded that Frederick Douglass was the American who best met Emerson's definition. Graciously, he thanked the black graduate student who had helped him achieve this understanding. Those of us who had taught the graduate student in our black literature classes reacted ambivalently, but we were pleased for the student who received this public affirmation. Today, my younger colleagues who are Americanists take for granted the importance of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs to nineteenth-century American literature. In most cases, it was what they were taught. This example comes from my field, but it can be replicated across disciplines. The impact of new knowledge that begins on the margins, if you will, re-forms the center. Indeed, it reconfigures the relationship of margin to center.

Other things have also changed. The Douglass College faculty was disbanded in the 1980s. The twenty-member English department was incorporated into a New Brunswick-wide department that numbered over eighty. I became undergraduate director for the department; then in 1997 I was elected chair. By that time I taught graduate students regularly, served on scores of departmental and university committees, and had mentored several young colleagues, though none quite as young and "green" as I had been. In the process I had learned something about how students learn, how scholars develop, and how institutions work.

My experiences are not unusual. Consequently, I was disturbed by the absence of voices like mine in the conversations and debates around affirmative action. Especially during the months leading up to the 2003 University of Michigan case, many other voices spoke loud and clear: university presidents, university counsel, and students on all sides of the issue. Both supporters and opponents outside the university weighed in: from the amicus briefs filed by corporate and military leaders who spoke in favor of retaining race as a factor in admissions decisions and from representatives of groups with names,

misleading names, such as the Center for Equal Opportunity and the Center for Individual Rights, that spoke against it. What I did not hear—or at least not nearly loudly enough—were the voices of faculty who should be in the best position to evaluate the difference diversity makes in the classroom and across the curriculum. Who knew better, moreover, how to attract and prepare young people for academic careers than those of us who had pursued them?

Many colleagues on my home campus had spent years developing programs that broadened access to the university and provided academic support for students after they were admitted. I knew colleagues who had single-handedly or in small alliances mentored undergraduate and graduate students in numbers that enhanced the diversity demographic in their fields. Most of these efforts took place “under the radar,” as it were; they were invisible to the larger university community, not to mention to the larger world. Although I have come to understand and respect the reluctance of some truly noble individuals to have the spotlight turned on their programs, I believe that faculty across the nation, many of whom work in much more hostile environments than that at Rutgers, would learn much from examples that I know well and admire.

One of these illustrates for me both the great potential that we as individual faculty members have to become change agents and the high price that this work sometimes exacts. Diversity work is too often seen as “service” that is totally unrelated to the teaching and research that are at the core of the faculty role. This service is sometimes dismissed as “institutional housekeeping,” a phrase that further diminishes work that is more often than not performed by women and people of color. The truth is that diversity work is intellectual work. It requires imaginative thought, critical analysis, and careful study. It has the potential to transform not only the institutions of higher learning in which we work but the society that these institutions serve. Unfortunately, the current system of rewards does not recognize its value. For that reason, the story that follows inspires caution as well as celebration.

Known by her admirers as the Indomitable Dr. E., Francine Essien, professor of biological sciences emerita, joined the faculty of Douglass College in 1971. As an assistant professor, she was assigned to teach general biology and other introductory courses. Almost immediately, Essien began setting up tutorial sessions for students who were having difficulty. She also began advising students who had done well on the curriculum they needed to follow in order to pursue medical careers. Trained in genetics at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine at Yeshiva University, Essien set up her first lab at Douglass, where she began the research that eventually identified genetic mutations in mice that she hoped would provide insight into human birth defects, spina bifida in particular. Soon after setting up her lab, she invited students to assist with her research. As she once explained to an interviewer, “I do my teaching with love, but it’s in relation to my research. I’m very proud of the fact that

students can come into my lab, take part in research, be independent, and express their ideas.” Her students were often named as coauthors on the many research papers and abstracts she published in academic and scientific journals.

Essien’s diversity work was first given institutional form in 1986, when the Office of Minority Science Programs was established; she was its director. Currently known as the Office for Diversity and Academic Success in the Sciences (ODASIS), its goals are to increase significantly the recruitment of students from underrepresented groups who are interested in pursuing careers in the sciences, technical, or allied health professions; to increase the retention rates for these students by providing a supportive learning environment; and to increase the rate of students entering graduate or professional schools.

Early on Essien struggled to identify supporters. Her program needed resources and respect. In several ways, the latter was more difficult to achieve. She had to persuade her colleagues that the program should exist. Why should special programs be created for minority students? Mainstream students had to be highly competitive in order to succeed. No special treatment should be accorded anyone. Again and again, Essien argued that unequal preparation disadvantaged minority students. What her program was doing was leveling the playing field. She secured funding from the administration, then partnered with various programs on campus in order to provide tutors for her students. Eventually, she garnered support from other universities, especially the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, local public schools, corporations, and foundations. But early on Dr. E. relied mainly on herself.

Essien worked six and sometimes seven days a week. She held office hours in the evening in order to be more available to her students. She called them over Christmas vacations to express her confidence in them and to renew their confidence in themselves. When money ran out for books and stipends, Francine Essien was often “the anonymous donor” whose contributions arrived in the nick of time. Her story highlights for me both the enormous potential that individual faculty members have to effect change and the high price these efforts exact. Her contributions did not go unacknowledged: the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching selected Francine Essien from a field of 192 national candidates to be the 1994–95 U.S. Professor of the Year for Research and Doctoral Universities. But hers is a story of self-sacrifice that goes beyond what any institution should expect of its faculty. Many of her colleagues believe that Dr. E. worked herself into ill health and premature retirement. To be sure, the program that she created was larger than any individual—let alone an individual who was still very much committed to a regular program of teaching and research—could have sustained.

But there is much about the way Francine Essien went about her work that we might try to emulate. With appropriate support, her approach is the

kind that produces significant and lasting change. For example, she recognized that to create the change she hoped for, she had to adopt a comprehensive approach. The core program is “Success in the Sciences,” which enrolls students in their first year. It provides structured and intense tutoring, advising, mentoring, motivation, and enrichment. At the end of their undergraduate careers, these students are poised to pursue professional and graduate study. Undergraduates were only one target population. She sought funding for graduate fellowships and stipends on the one hand, and for high school programs on the other. The high school program serves students from New Brunswick and Plainfield, two urban school districts in New Jersey with predominantly poor African American and Latino populations. The goal is to pique students’ interest in science. Initially, the focus was on eleventh- and twelfth-graders, but the intervention came too late for twelfth-graders, and the program was redesigned for tenth- and eleventh-graders. When it became clear that students who were encouraged by their parents succeeded at a higher rate, support sessions were scheduled for parents; in New Brunswick, these sessions are available in Spanish as well as English.

At the other end of the spectrum is ACCESS-MED, a program that ODASIS has administered since 1991. Offered by an institutional consortium that includes Rutgers University, Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, and Seton Hall University, ACCESS-MED serves underrepresented minority and economically disadvantaged undergraduate students. The program is organized into two phases. Juniors participating in Phase I may choose to apply to various medical schools or to Phase II of the program, in which they may gain early admission to Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in their senior year at Rutgers.

The program now serves one thousand students annually. In the decade from 1997 to 2007, 145 ODASIS graduates have earned their MDs, and 229 have gone on to become chiropractors, dentists, physician’s assistants, podiatrists, doctors of osteopathy, or are pursuing other health-allied professions. These numbers reflect the intellectual capacity and hard work of these students and their teachers; they reflect the commitment of administrators and the support of institutions and corporations. But they are an eloquent testimony to one woman’s vision.

The great value of this book is that it begins to document stories like that of Francine Essien. The book describes curriculum transformation projects, mentoring programs, K–12 outreach initiatives, partnerships between diverse institutions of higher learning, and efforts at institutional transformation. Some succeeded. Others did not. But all affirm the power of individuals to make a difference. They constitute a set of adaptable models and cautionary tales. Collectively, they raise a series of questions and challenges:

- How can we expand the definitions of intellectual work to include the initiatives undertaken by faculty to enhance diversity in their disciplines?

- How can we acknowledge and celebrate those faculty members who devote their time and talent to work that advances scholarship in their discipline and at the same time serves the citizenry at large?
- How can we encourage younger faculty members to consider diversity work as an extension of their teaching and scholarship rather than a distraction from them?
- What would it mean if individuals and the programs they initiate received institutional support proportional to the benefit they bring the institution?

If we believe that we are doing a good job of educating students to live and work in an increasingly diverse nation and in a world that grows smaller every day, it is time that we began saying so. *Doing Diversity in Higher Education* begins a conversation among faculty—as well as among administrators, students, and alumni—who are advocates and agents for change.