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# The National Congress of Black Faculty

by  
Ronald W. Walters

On October 23, 1987, at Howard University, 175 black faculty members from all over the nation convened to address the decreasing presence of black faculty members in U.S. institutions of higher education and to create the National Congress of Black Faculty (NCBF). The Congress is intended to provide advocacy and service for black faculty members of all disciplines. The Congress heard from a variety of speakers. In the keynote address Congressman Major Owens (12th-NY), Chair of the Select Committee on Education of the U.S. House of Representatives, challenged the group to address the crisis of black higher education by creating an aggressive organization of black faculty. A second keynote address was given by Congressman Walter Fauntroy (Del-DC), President of the National Black Leadership Roundtable, who welcomed NCBF into the black leadership family and urged that its membership abide by the Black Leadership Family Plan.

Insights on "The Status of Black Faculty" were given by Dr. Reginald Wilson, Director of the Office of Black Concerns of the American Council on Education; Dr. Margaret Simms, Senior Research Associate of the Joint Center for Political Studies and Editor of the *Review of Black Political Economy*; John Smith, Special Assistant to Congressman Augustus Hawkins, Chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee; and Dr. Robert Hill, Research Consultant and sociologist.

Representatives of other state-wide organizations of black faculty also participated: Dr. J. Owens Smith, President of the California Association of Black Faculty and Staff, and Dr. Charles Morris, Chairman of the Illinois Committee on Black Concerns in Higher Education (ICBCHE).

Also present were representatives of black scholarly organizations: Dr. Aldon Morris, Associate Professor, University of Michigan, President of the Association of Black Sociologists; Dr. Ofuately Kodjoe, Associate Professor, CUNY Queens College,

President of the African Heritage Studies Association; Dr. Diane Pinderhughes, Associate Professor, University of Illinois, President-Elect of the National Conference of Black Political Scientists; and Dr. Samuel Meyers, Jr., Associate Professor and Chair, Afro-American Studies Department, University of Maryland, President of the National Economic Association.

## The Problem: The Muted Voice and Abilities of the Black Scholar

In recent years serious problems have arisen in the field of black higher education that have not been subject to systematic examination and corrective programming. These problems have magnified the necessity for a vehicle through which black faculty might be mobilized to contribute to the enhancement of their own professional opportunities and thus make a significant impact upon black higher education in general. Some of these problems are discussed below (without any inference of priority).

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### Hiring, Promotion, and Tenure

Now that the pressure for affirmative action has subsided, there has been a concomitant decrease in the recruitment and promotion of junior black faculty. Serious tenure problems involving black faculty have come to public attention; black candidates have been denied tenure despite their strong qualifications. Intervention in such cases has generally been limited to the ad hoc organization of letter-writing campaigns.

The problem of black faculty career instability is intensified by the fact that there exists a generation of scholars at the tenure level who, earlier in their careers, were saddled with administrative positions and extra-university duties that have not counted as positive considerations in decisions on tenure. As a result of this and other competitive problems, black faculty are often not receiving promotions or tenure. Their "special contributions" to the university are not being aggressively explained and promoted. The base of supportive and sensitive white university officials appears to be dwindling. This problem will only be exacerbated by the fact that fewer black students are entering college as a whole and fewer are preparing to become college professors. According to the 1985 report on "Minorities In Higher Education," "The higher education community must continue to address the issues of *losses in participation at all levels for blacks*; the segregation of Hispanics; the retention and graduation of minority students,

both undergraduate and graduate; and the lack of growth for minorities in faculty and staff ranks.”<sup>1</sup> One net effect of this comprehensive problem will be the lack of black college faculty and the continued instability of those black faculty members who survive.

### *The Status of Black Students*

The evidence is accumulating that black students are deciding to forego college, especially four-year institutions.<sup>2</sup> This trend is alarming because of the well-established relationship between black social mobility and higher education. Black faculty at all colleges have roots in various communities around the country and constitute a formidable resource that, *if mobilized*, could make a positive national impact upon this problem. Black faculty constitute important role models for leadership in many communities and could give much-needed perspective to the often unrealistic wage expectations of young people who are considering entry into the profession.

In addition, black students on many white college campuses are currently having to endure a re-emergence of racism. In the Spring of 1987 some 20 major universities experienced episodes of racism. In some cases, outside committees were used to review complaints. At Brown University, for example, in the Fall of 1985 a “visiting committee” went to review the complaints of black students. In March of 1986 a similar committee helped to negotiate better conditions for the black campus community at the University of Michigan. These are appropriate exercises of responsibility on the part of those scholars and administrators who served on such committees. However, these are *ad hoc* efforts. A *permanent committee* of black faculty and administrators is needed, not only to help in the initial resolution of problems on many campuses, but also to perform vital post-crisis monitoring.

### *Research Funding*

Black scholars have difficulty attracting research funds for a variety of reasons. Since a chief source of funding is the Federal government, it strikes one that traditionally there has been scant attention paid to this problem from a public policy standpoint. Considerable funding is provided nonblack faculty for the study of problems in the black community, while black researchers are grossly underfunded. Members of the Congressional Black Caucus and some Federal agency administrators have been sensitive to this problem, but one does not recall black scholars ever being called to testify before Congressional committees on their research needs, nor does one recall black scholars demanding that right. Neither have black college presidents been successful in expanding the amount of funds available for research

at their own institutions; research funding accounts for an average of only 3% of their general budgets.

Thus, despite the publicity with which Presidents Carter and Reagan signed executive orders assisting black colleges, there has been scant progress and little additional assistance to black faculty who are not at black colleges. Given what Blinda Tucker calls a “discouraging state of affairs,” it is conceivable that a black faculty organization, properly staffed and focused, might make some inroads into this problem.<sup>3</sup>

### *Publication*

Black faculty find that the journals representing the various disciplines to which they belong do not accept articles written from the black perspective. Since the professional advancement of blacks and other faculty are predicated upon the frequency of their appearance in such publications, perhaps members of a black faculty organization could initiate an intensive investigation and dialogue on this issue with the mainline journals (especially in the social and behavioral sciences), many of which have not published the work of black scholars in decades.

Perhaps even more important is the organization of financial, intellectual, and technical support for the few black scholarly journals that do publish the work of black scholars. It is also critical for representation to be made to faculties and administrators, who are often not familiar with black scholarly journals, as to the indispensability of these publications in the advancement of black scholarship.

In summary, the simple fact is that the voice of the black scholar is largely silent because there has been no significant institutionalized base from which to make a collective response to any of the problems addressed above.

### **Time for Action: The Necessity for NCBF**

At the moment, the black faculty community is organized along disciplinary lines. Most faculty retain active membership in major professional associations; some are also active in black scholarly organizations or caucuses. They have retained membership in the major (predominantly white) organizations not only to have access to the legitimacy and resources that provide them mobility within the respective disciplines, but also on the underlying assumption that these organizations will care for their professional needs. There is much evidence that this has not, in fact, been the case, and this neglect constitutes a strong incentive for the development of a black organization to meet professional nondisciplinary needs. This neglect is felt more critically by the black scholar because in many circumstances he or she is isolated by the nonunion status of faculty and by the lack of a supportive department or university administration. Therefore, we have created an orga-

nization to represent black faculty in the United States—the National Congress of Black Faculty (NCBF).

The national meeting last fall was organizational. Activities included the election of officers, the passage of an interim Charter, the formation of a Board of Directors, the formation of a nine-member Charter Review Commission, and the formation of a 17-member Special Committee on the '88 Congress. Councils were formed in such areas as Hiring, Promotion and Tenure; Research and Education; Publication; and Institutional Relations. Each council presented a series of recommendations to the Congress for action.

*... a highly mobilized black professoriate could make a significant impact upon many black faculty problems.*

I have been asked by many people what such an organization could accomplish. I answer that a highly mobilized black professoriate could make a significant impact upon many black faculty problems.

- We need to challenge the standards of promotion and tenure that suggest that scholarship involving the black experience, especially written from the black perspective or appearing in black publications, is automatically inferior.
- We need to call attention to the “lock-out” of black faculty from evaluation boards and panels that decide the allocation of research funds and fellowships. “We can’t find a black who is qualified” must be exposed as serving a prejudicial and disempowering standard of qualification.
- We need to mobilize 20,000 black faculty members to go into the community, to reconnect with its life, to motivate black students to become professors.
- We need to become the central clearinghouse for information about black faculty recruitment, for media contacts, and for the introduction of black social issues into the public policy process. We need a national newsletter with in-

formation especially tailored to black faculty interests.

- We need to work with the Congressional Black Caucus, members of the Congress, representatives of the federal education establishment, and foundations working to improve conditions for black faculty.
- We need to sit down with journal editors to discuss why they have not published a black scholar in decades, to sit down with book publishers to destroy the myth that black people do not read. We need to open up opportunities for black scholars to publish their work.
- We need to challenge the sham of affirmative action hiring by many universities where “hire and fire” is the goal rather than stability. We need to establish our own censure list of universities where we find “hire-fire” or “no-hire” patterns exist.
- We need to establish our own version of the standards necessary for advancement, including service on committees, student counseling, etc.
- We need to have black academic excellence recognized by establishing prizes for the best work and by honoring our elders who pioneered the profession.

Because many of us believe that we should organize in our own interest and address the issues raised above, we have organized the National Congress of Black Faculty. A decision was made to have a one-year interim set of officers, to refine the organization of NCBF, to expand its membership, and to point towards establishing a staff operation in Washington, D.C.

We invite you to join us.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>American Council on Education. (1985). *Minorities In Higher Education*. Washington, D.C.: Author.

<sup>2</sup>Blacks in College Decline in Jersey. (1984, December 16). *The New York Times*. Decline Found in Proportion of Blacks in Medical School. (1985, October 10). *The New York Times*. Minority Enrollment in Colleges Shows a Decline. (1985, October 27). *The New York Times*.

<sup>3</sup>Tucker, B. (1984). *Is Afro-American Studies Research in Jeopardy?* Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Afro-American Studies.

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