

you can connect with another. I'll close with a short poem I composed for the end of the final book that Ben and I wrote together (McKeen & Wong, p. 401):

If we can be positive in a crazy world,
And respond with heart, maybe
We can make a small difference
That ripples...

References

- Hillman, J. (1996). *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling* (1st ed.). Random House.
- McKeen, J., & Wong, B. (2012). *The Illuminated Heart: Perspectives on East-West Psychology and Thought*. The Haven Institute Press.
- Polster, M., & Polster, M. (1974). *Gestalt Therapy Integrated*. Brunner/Mazel Publishers.
- Wong, B., & McKeen, J. (2013). *Being: A Manual for Life*. Haven Institute Press.

Footnotes

ⁱ The Haven is a seaside retreat center, the home of *The Haven Institute for Personal and Professional Development*, which was established by Bennet Wong and Jock McKeen in 1982. In the early years, we focused on personal development. In response to the numerous people who wanted training in our group methods, we became registered as a training institution. The Haven's webpage: <https://haven.ca/>

ⁱⁱ J. McKeen and B. Wong, *A Book About Health and Happiness*. Gabriola Island, BC: The Haven Institute Press, 2005.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, A. Lowen, *Pleasure*. New York, NY: Coward-McCann Inc., 1970.

^{iv} J. McKeen and B. Wong, *Joining: The Relationship Garden*. Gabriola Island, Canada: The Haven Institute Press, 2013.

Culturally informed strengths-based coaching: a novel approach to support the success of underrepresented minority faculty

Philip A. Vieira
Department of Psychology
California State University Dominguez Hills

Ashley Membere
Department of Psychology
California State University Dominguez Hills

Daniel J. Almeida
School of Education
California Polytechnic State University,
San Luis Obispo

Underrepresented Minority (URM) faculty play a crucial role in higher education and yet they face numerous barriers to success. This paper describes a project that seeks to address these barriers by supporting URM faculty through Strengths-based coaching while also examining how social and cultural identities intersect with individual faculty. Strengths that are determined by the Clifton Strengths online assessment administered by Gallup, Inc. throughout this yearlong intervention, URM junior faculty were paired with senior faculty coaches to provide one-on-one support. Additionally, all faculty participated in a series of workshops aimed at supporting faculty teaching, research, and service by applying individual Strengths through a lens of social/cultural identity. This project serves as a model for how coaching can be used to address an important facet of dispute resolution that involves URM faculty in higher education.

Keywords: strengths coaching, underrepresented minorities, mentorship, faculty careers, higher education, diversity.

Following the release of the Netflix show *The Chair*, which depicts a conflict-ridden English department caught between administrative demands, student protests and interpersonal faculty challenges, much of higher education took notice. Discussions centered around authenticity to the actual experiences of faculty in the academy. One particular conflict, in which the chair of the department struggled to promote a junior Black female faculty member surrounded by senior white male faculty, highlights the documented burdens of Underrepresented Minority (URM) faculty in higher education. Indeed, URM faculty reported a greater sense of isolation, overt/covert racism, and discrimination (Zambrana et al., 2017; Fries-Britt et al., 2011; Alex-Assensoh, 2003).

Faculty of color navigated numerous conflicts both in the classroom with students and amongst their faculty colleagues and administration, facing “racial battle fatigue” from repeated exposure to macro- and micro-aggressions (Smith et al., 2011) and “cultural taxation” in the form of increased expectations to represent diversity in service duties and through their teaching (Padilla, 1994). These experiences directly impact the recruitment and retention of URM faculty in higher education. Even though rates of URM faculty are slowly increasing across academic institutions, they still lag far behind their white counterparts and do not reflect the demographic makeup of the US. Several higher education institutions have attempted to address this discrepancy by providing URM faculty with mentorship opportunities. In one review of 13 separate programs, researchers found that these programs were beneficial for URM faculty, but faced significant challenges related to time-restricted funding, lack of time for mentors, and inability to address institutional barriers (Beech et al., 2013). This paper discusses a project that utilizes culturally-informed Strengths coaching to support the success and retention of URM junior faculty across the California State University (CSU) system.

California State University Alliance for Graduate Education and the Professoriate Transformation Alliance (CSU AGEPT)

The CSU AGEPT Alliance is a collaboration between faculty and administrators from four CSU campuses that began in 2019 after receiving funding from the National Science Foundation. The major goals of this project are to support early career URM faculty from Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics (STEM) disciplines, including Social/Behavioral Sciences and STEM education, in their teaching, research, and professional networking by using a combination of workshops and Strengths coaching from senior faculty and faculty peers in the CSU system. Participants are encouraged to bring their authentic selves to their roles as faculty by leveraging their natural talents, and the strengths embedded in their social and cultural identities to successfully navigate their institutional contexts. Key outcomes for faculty include: 1) enhanced teaching experience and effectiveness; 2) increased research and grant activity; 3) strengthened professional networks. Workshops provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on their experiences with a variety of conflicts related to their roles as URM faculty and to discuss strategies to apply their strengths in unique ways to resolve future conflicts.

Senior faculty coaches were retrained by Gallup Inc. on Strengths-based coaching and simultaneously by the CSU AGEPT team on a culturally-informed approach to coaching through workshops on topics including implicit bias, anti-racism, equity-mindedness, and intersectionality, with a focus on the context of STEM disciplines. Senior faculty coaches met with URM faculty participants for one-on-one sessions to discuss their individual Strengths as viewed through the lens of their individual social and cultural identities, and how to best leverage their unique combination of Strengths to accomplish self-determined goals and overcome specific conflicts, especially those related to their identities.

Each coach worked with four participants at a time, meeting individually with them at least twice before rotating to coach another group of participants. Participants also served as peer coaches to one another throughout the program, and coaching

each other on conflicts they experienced as URM faculty. Similar to the rotation of coaches, peers changed throughout the year to provide more opportunities for networking and support.

Perspectives from a Senior Faculty Coach

As described above, URM faculty face many challenges when they join the academic ranks. This is especially true on my campus, CSU Dominguez Hills, which is unique amongst the other CSU campuses for having a large percentage gap between URM students (87%) and URM faculty (31%). There is a clear need for more URM faculty on our campus, especially in positions of leadership. Students naturally seek support from faculty that represent their sociocultural backgrounds, and this demand falls primarily on junior and adjunct faculty of color. Additionally, these faculty face a 'cultural taxation' (described above) in which they are expected to do extra work as representatives of diversity, e.g., serving on committees as a voice of diversity. Each of these circumstances combine to create exponential work for, and stress on URM faculty, thus increasing their encounters with conflict. Therefore, this group of faculty stand to benefit from additional support provided by the coaching offered in this project.

During the year that I participated in the CSU AGEF Alliance as a senior faculty coach, I worked individually with 12 URM faculty. This group of junior faculty had a lot in common, with most sharing the following: 1) recently hired into the CSU system, 2) from backgrounds that are underrepresented in higher education and their specific fields of study, 3) no experience with Strengths coaching, 4) experiencing their first full year of the COVID-19 pandemic, 5) experiencing the social justice discussions sparked by the murders of several minorities at the hands of law enforcement officers (most notably, George Floyd). This shared context is important to highlight as it informs the approach to the culturally-informed Strengths-based coaching sessions. Each one-on-one meeting would include some discussion around adapting to the sudden changes in higher education due to the pandemic, e.g., the disproportionate impact of those changes on our URM students who lacked access to quiet, remote workspaces and

broadband internet. The pandemic also impacted junior faculty directly, who had to quarantine and work remotely at the start of their careers, missing out on crucial community-building opportunities that would normally occur informally on campus.

In relation to the social justice movements in 2020, it is important to provide some context of the CSUDH community. CSUDH has a unique connection to social justice as the campus was originally planned as the "Ivy League of the West," to be located in the predominantly white, wealthy coastal area of Rancho Palos Verdes (known for the Trump National Golf Club Course). However, the campus was relocated to the city of Carson following the Watts Uprising of 1965, a five-day protest/riot against police mistreatment of communities of color and discriminatory housing, employment and schooling practices in South Central Los Angeles neighborhoods. CSUDH was meant to help address some of these issues by serving the needs of URM students in this community, and we are reminded of this mission (and how much work still needs to be done) in the wake of social justice movements like the 1992 Los Angeles riots following the beating of Rodney King and the recent protests following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. In light of this history, coaching new URM faculty joining CSUDH often involved discussions about the surrounding community where our students are from and the mission and values that we try to embody in the collective work that we do. Additionally, the inclusion of sociocultural identity as an integral factor in individual coaching made this history all the more salient.

Despite this shared context, however, it became clear after initial sessions that each individual required a tailored approach for conflict resolution and creating strategies for success in their work and balance in their lives. Below, I highlight these various strategies as applied to common conflicts that were discussed in the coaching sessions.

Instruction-related strategies

Teaching makes up the majority of the work that most faculty do within the CSU system. This is especially true for junior faculty, who are assessed every year to determine con-

tract renewal and eventual promotion and tenure. Unfortunately, much of this assessment relies on student evaluations, which have been shown to be unreliable and subject to bias (Marsh, 2007; Huston, 2005), and could affect URM faculty more negatively than their majority counterparts. Additionally, students question the authority of URM faculty compared to White faculty (Stanley, 2006), which may require extra work on behalf of these faculty in order to appear credible to their students (Harlow, 2003). At the same time, these faculty are expected to meet the needs of their URM students who often face their own unique barriers to success in higher education, thereby increasing the burden of work for URM faculty.

Coaching sessions often centered on strategies to work against this bias to receive fair and constructive feedback from students. The sudden shift from face-to-face to online instruction added another layer of complexity as it became difficult to establish rapport with students remotely. Some faculty shared stories of students perceiving them as unapproachable or unfriendly. Other faculty described situations where students complained of their accent and made negative assumptions about their identity. While each individual situation required a tailored strategy to address these student-centered conflicts, coaching sessions started with the faculty's unique combination of Strengths and identities.

Research-related strategies

Research, scholarship, and creative activities form the second pillar of work done by most faculty in the CSU system. Although we are considered to be teaching-centered universities (especially in comparison to the research-centered University of California system), faculty are still expected to make scholarly contributions to their field of study. Historically, URM faculty receive less grant support than their white counterparts (Ginther et al., 2011; National Science Foundation, 2012), some of which has been attributed to the fact that these faculty propose research on more competitive topics, e.g., community/population level research (Hoppe et al., 2019). Grant funding is one of the most common ways that faculty "buy out" their heavy teaching load in order to pur-

sue their independent research. Without access to this funding, faculty struggle to make progress in their research while balancing other responsibilities (e.g., teaching, service).

As part of this project, URM faculty participants had access to workshops and one-on-one support from grant consultants as well as from their senior faculty coaches. As I had some early success with securing external funding for my independent research, I found my coaching sessions often centered around the faculty participant's strategy to make progress on their research program and compete for research grants. Rather than spend time on the nuts and bolts of grantsmanship (which they received in various workshops), I focused on their individual projects and how they could leverage their Strengths to support their research goals. For some participants, that involved a plan to build relationships with various individuals that would be critical to the success of their grant submissions, including their department chair, college dean, administrators/staff in their campus office of research, potential collaborators, successful grantees, and the director of the specific grant program that interested them. Other participants needed a step-by-step strategic plan for organizing their ideas and making incremental progress on the grant application. Several faculty were discouraged by prior unsuccessful grant submissions, especially given the amount of time spent preparing applications and the lack of institutional support for junior faculty that are preparing grants and starting their research programs. In these instances, it was important to focus setting realistic goals and expectations regarding the process and limitations of their specific work environment.

I also emphasized the importance of building a team of collaborators not only within their campus, but across institutions as well. Many funding agencies highlight the power of "team science", and for junior faculty in the CSU this is especially true. Not only can collaborators help address gaps in a research environment (e.g., access to specialized equipment), but they also could provide a key support group to help new faculty refine their research ideas and persevere through the exhausting work of submitting a grant. However, URM faculty in particular can struggle with these

collaborations for several reasons, including 1) work distribution disproportionately falls on them; 2) they are the target of micro-aggressions; 3) balancing the demands of research with the extra work they have related to “cultural taxation” in their teaching and services responsibilities. Navigating these conflicts requires special care, and many of my coaching sessions with faculty centered on how they can use the combination of their Strengths with their social and cultural identities to resolve issues. A majority of the time, the faculty was able to address these conflicts in an open and productive manner that led to a stronger collaborative team. However, in some instances, the best option was to seek out other collaborators that better support the faculty’s research goals.

Service-related strategies

The final tier of faculty workload involves service, including to the university (typically by participating on committees), as well as to a faculty’s specific academic area (e.g., reviewing for academic journals, organizing conferences, representing the university in their professional societies). Most junior faculty are supposed to be protected from over-committing in service duties as they adjust to new teaching loads and establish their independent research program. As mentioned above, URM faculty experience “cultural taxation” in their service to the university (Padilla, 1994), an identity-specific workload placed on them that includes serving as minority representatives on committees and mentoring students of color beyond the classroom. Sadly, this extra service often goes unrecognized in the tenure and promotion process, leading many URM faculty to abandon their professional aspirations.

Coaching faculty in their service-related conflicts was uniquely challenging. Junior faculty quickly recognized the extra burden they carried in their service duties, but they also felt a sense of responsibility to perform this work. This can lead to a chronic occupational stress that has lasting effects on professional morale and personal mental health. Therefore, we focused on the importance of self-care, well-being, and work-life balance. Many of our meetings began with mindfulness exercises, taking time to

clear our thoughts and center ourselves prior to engaging with the topic of that day. As a group, we created a safe and supportive atmosphere for faculty to be heard.

I helped faculty develop strategies that utilize their Strengths to better manage service-related conflicts. In some cases, strategic thinking was employed to secure essential committees while leaving the bulk of committee work for more senior faculty. Relationship building was key to communicating workload expectations and creating a supportive coalition to protect the faculty from taking on too much. Oftentimes, simply being recognized for the extra workload was an important starting point to alleviating the stress associated with it.

Perspectives from a Coachee

As a “coachee” (i.e., junior faculty participant), I experienced two forms of coaching: 1) meetings with at least three senior faculty members of the CSU AGEF program and 2) meetings with three coachees who were also part of the program. Rotating between different coaches and peer coachees allowed for a variety of different discussions about our challenges we faced as underrepresented junior faculty in terms of our teaching, research, and service. Through the program, I learned to make development plans and goals using my strengths as a framework, recognize what strengths I tended to heavily rely on and leverage lower order strengths and combine multiple strengths together when necessary.

Being part of the AGEF program during the COVID-19 pandemic made the transition and adjustment to the necessary switch to remote learning easier. Although I had participated in various professional opportunities during this time, receiving coaching about leveraging my strengths was integral beyond just learning about how to re-format my face-to-face classes for online distribution. While my strategic thinking and executing strengths were always in use for developing and refining course material, my coaches and peers made me think about implementing my relationship building strengths more to keep students engaged and as a source of support during a very difficult and frightening time.

Through the AGEP sessions and coaching, I created more opportunities for students to share how their identities have shaped their experiences and related it to course content and shared my own. Having students relate to our experiences and those of their fellow classmates can be beneficial for minority faculty as they can assist students with being less reliant on stereotypes and remove these biases from evaluations.

Coaching regarding research came in the form of how to build and sustain relationships with collaborators and moving forward with research projects. Strategic thinking strengths were seen as vital to the development of research studies and executing strengths were also necessary for initiating projects. The senior coaches gave me direction regarding collaboration with my peers at more research-intensive institutions and bridging our different needs and resources for our research. Their more experienced guidance led me to consider using my relationship building strengths for assembling collaboration teams and recognizing the unique skills and areas of expertise each person brings to the table. They also advised that my relationship building strengths could be combined with one of my influencing strengths to play more of a delegation role as I expressed unease with taking a full leadership role. Peer and senior coaches were also beneficial in encouraging integrating my racial and cultural background with my strengths in my program of research and also research opportunities that would benefit both myself and our students at CSUDH.

Finally, both peer and senior coaches were helpful with challenges I faced with service opportunities. In our larger AGEP meetings, some of us had expressed experiences with attempts to participate in college and university level committees as newer junior faculty. Other junior faculty shared how they gained higher order committee roles using their various strengths and advice from other underrepresented faculty mentors at their institutions. Senior coaches reframed these 'failed attempts' as positives and ways to make ourselves known to a larger section of the university via influencing and relationship building strengths. Their advice was very reassuring when it came to service outside of the

university and elevating our work as reviewers for conferences and journals. This assisted us with thinking about how we can extend our reach beyond our academic department.

Discussion

We have summarized above an ongoing project to support URM junior faculty through culturally informed Strengths-based coaching by including the perspectives of a senior faculty coach and a junior faculty 'coachee.' It is clear that URM faculty play a critical role in the academy, not only to the growing population of URM students who seek them out as mentors, but also to their faculty and administrator colleagues. However, URM faculty representation continues to lag compared to the increasingly diverse student population (Griffin, 2019) and efforts to increase hiring of URM faculty are challenged by a decrease in retention of those same faculty, largely due to the challenging campus climate for faculty of color and the process of tenure/promotion (Kayes, 2006; Tuitt et al., 2007; Turner et al., 2008; Jayakumar, 2009). Mentorship of junior URM faculty has been shown to be effective in supporting their retention and success (Beech, 2013; Zambrana et al., 2015).

The CSU AGEP Alliance provides a model for supporting URM faculty success through a unique mentorship experience described above. While this work is ongoing, early successes have already been noted in terms of URM faculty retention and successful grant competitions. The question of how best to support URM junior faculty in higher education will continue to be studied as the proportion of underrepresented minorities in the U.S. population and college students grows. While a one-size fits all solution is likely to be elusive, the model described here offers a tailored approach that can adapt to the specific needs of the individuals, thus warranting further testing and discussion.

References

- Alex-Assensoh, Y. (2003). Race in the academy: Moving beyond diversity and toward the incorporation of faculty of color in predominantly white colleges and universities. *Journal of Black Studies*, 34(1), 5-11.
- Beech, B. M., Calles-Escandon, J., Hairston, K. G., Langdon, M. S. E., Latham-Sadler, B. A., & Bell, R. A. (2013). Mentoring programs for underrepresented minority faculty in academic medical centers: a systematic review of the literature. *Academic medicine: journal of the Association of American Medical Colleges*, 88(4)
- Fries-Britt, S. L., Rowan-Kenyon, H. T., Perna, L. W., Milem, J. F., & Howard, D. G. (2011). Underrepresentation in the academy and the institutional climate for faculty diversity. *Journal of the Professoriate*, 5(1).
- Ginther, D. K., Schaffer, W. T., Schnell, J., Masimore, B., Liu, F., Haak, L. L., & Kington, R. (2011). Race, ethnicity, and NIH research awards. *Science*, 333(6045), 1015-1019
- Griffin, K. A. (2019). Redoubling our efforts: How institutions can affect faculty diversity. *Race and ethnicity in higher education: A status report*, 273-279
- Harlow, R. (2003). "Race doesn't matter, but...": The effect of race on professors' experiences and emotion management in the undergraduate college classroom. *Social psychology quarterly*, 348-363.
- Hoppe, T. A., Litovitz, A., Willis, K. A., Meseroll, R. A., Perkins, M. J., Hutchins, B. L., ... & Santangelo, G. M. (2019). Topic choice contributes to the lower rate of NIH awards to African-American/black scientists. *Science advances*, 5(10), eaaw7238
- Huston, T. A. (2005). Race and gender bias in higher education: Could faculty course evaluations impede further progress toward parity. *Seattle J. Soc. Just.*, 4, 591.
- Jayakumar, U. M., Howard, T. C., Allen, W. R., & Han, J. C. (2009). Racial privilege in the professoriate: An exploration of campus climate, retention, and satisfaction. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 80(5), 538-563.
- Kayes, P. E. (2006). New Paradigms for Diversifying Faculty and Staff in Higher Education: Uncovering Cultural Biases in the Search and Hiring Process. *Multicultural Education*, 14(2), 65-69.
- Marsh, H. W. (2007). Students' evaluations of university teaching: Dimensionality, reliability, validity, potential biases and usefulness. In *The scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education: An evidence-based perspective* (pp. 319-383). Springer, Dordrecht.
- National Science Foundation (2012) Women, minorities, and persons with disabilities in science and engineering: data tables, www.nsf.gov/statistics/wmpd/tables.cfm
- Padilla, A. M. (1994). Research news and comment: Ethnic minority scholars; research, and mentoring: Current and future issues. *Educational Researcher*, 23(4), 24-27
- Smith, W. A., Hung, M., & Franklin, J. D. (2011). Racial battle fatigue and the miseducation of Black men: Racial microaggressions, societal problems, and environmental stress. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 63-82
- Stanley, C. A. (2006). Coloring the academic landscape: Faculty of color breaking the silence in predominantly White colleges and universities. *American educational research journal*, 43(4), 701-736.
- Tuitt, F. A., Sagaria, M. A. D., & Turner, C. S. V. (2007). Signals and strategies in hiring faculty of color. In *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (497-535). Springer, Dordrecht.
- Turner, Caroline Sotello Viernes, Juan Carlos González, and Luke Wood. (2008). "Faculty of Color in Academe: What 20 Years of Literature Tells Us." *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 1 (3): 139-168.
- Turner, C. S. V., González, J. C., & Wood, J. L. (2008). Faculty of color in academe: What 20 years of literature tells us. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 1(3), 139.
- Zambrana, R. E., Ray, R., Espino, M. M., Castro, C., Douthirt Cohen, B., & Eliason, J. (2015). "Don't leave us behind" The importance of mentoring for underrepresented minority faculty. *American Educational Research Journal*, 52(1), 40-72.
- Zambrana, R. E., Harvey Wingfield, A., Lapeyrouse, L. M., Dávila, B. A., Hoagland, T. L., & Valdez, R. B. (2017). Blatant, subtle, and insidious: URM faculty perceptions of discriminatory practices in predominantly White institutions. *Sociological Inquiry*, 87(2), 207-232