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A Drive to Diversify the Faculty Yields Results in Rochester

Innovative recruiting has helped the Rochester Institute of Technology hire more minority professors



Sarah Weeden for The Chronicle

M. Renee Baker (left) and Douglas Merrill (center), of the Rochester Institute of Technology, kept in touch with Robert Osgood for years before he accepted a job there.

By Audrey Williams June

Seven and a half years ago, when Robert Osgood ambled toward a Rochester Institute of Technology booth at a conference for minority doctoral students, he was not yet ready to go on the job market. But M. Renee Baker, the booth's lone occupant, was ready for him.

Mr. Osgood was still two years away from getting his Ph.D. To Ms. Baker, though, it was the perfect time to sell him on an academic career at Rochester. She whipped out her cellphone and called the chairman of the biological-sciences department to talk with Mr. Osgood on the spot. To his surprise—"I thought there was no way she would reach them," he says—Ms. Baker handed him the phone so he could chat. That phone call was the start of a long-running relationship between Mr. Osgood and Rochester that led to his accepting a job there in 2008 as an assistant professor of medical sciences.

"You have to act like a talent scout all the time," says Ms. Baker, executive director of the office of faculty recruitment and retention at Rochester. "If we stay in touch with them the longest, hopefully we'll be the ones to win out in the end."

For Ms. Baker, that kind of aggressive outreach is key to faculty recruiting—particularly when it comes to diversifying the ranks. On-the-road recruiting is just one part of a multipronged effort to attract African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans to a campus that specializes in fields, like science and engineering, from which those groups are largely missing. And with its recent efforts, Rochester has had measurable success. In 2002, the year Ms. Baker was hired, 35 tenured or tenure-track professors were members of these underrepresented minorities. Today that number has more than doubled, to 78.

To be sure, other institutions are actively recruiting minority professors and women, including Rochester's better-known competitors. A recently released report from one of them, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, underscores how difficult the path can be. It concluded that progress was "uneven" and that, among other goals, the university must do more to recruit and retain such faculty members.

"We're competing against the big boys," says Lynn Wild, Rochester's associate provost for faculty success. "We want to get the best people out there that we can."

A Focused Effort

By all accounts, Rochester's first champion of minority recruiting was Albert J. Simone, the college's previous president. In 2001, almost a decade after his arrival, it became clear that the institution's diversity efforts had fallen flat. In a speech the following year, in which Mr. Simone challenged the university to do better, he said that the institution's earlier efforts to recruit African-American, Latino, and Native American professors, were "unacceptable." The president decided that Rochester needed someone whose job was to diversify the faculty.

When Ms. Baker was hired, few institutions employed someone whose sole job was to "beat the bushes for faculty members" with a focus on recruiting minority candidates, she says. Her post is more common now, but what she and her staff do to unearth promising young scholars is exceptional.

They contact diversity offices, multicultural associations, and department chairs at historically black and Hispanic-serving institutions that grant Ph.D.'s and ask for their help in promoting Rochester to would-be professors. Ms. Baker and her staff mine the Internet year-round for lists of Ph.D. students or postdoctoral scholars and then collect contact information to alert promising minority and female scholars of positions at Rochester in their fields. They also sift through scholarly journals and conference programs in search of papers presented by minority academics.

Every name they cull and every in-person contact they make goes into a database of about 2,800 entries. Most notably, every fall Rochester brings two dozen or so graduate

students and postdocs to the campus for its Future Faculty Career Exploration Program, which gives them an in-depth look at what life as a faculty member at the university and in the city of Rochester would be like. That longtime staple of academic recruiting—posting an ad in a scholarly journal—falls short of the mark in the worst way, Ms. Baker says. Some established scholars won't apply for advertised positions, she says, unless they're personally contacted about doing so.

"You have to make a phone call and say, We want you here, and this is what you can add to our institution," Ms. Baker says. And although recruiting at academic conferences can be fruitful, many promising scholars may not make it to every meeting. "You can't wait until you get to the conference and see who's there," Ms. Baker says. "You've got to be networking with people who have expertise in the areas that the institution needs."

Daryl G. Smith, a professor of psychology at Claremont Graduate University and an expert on diversity issues in academe, agrees. What more colleges must do, Ms. Smith says, is think seriously about what they want their faculty ranks to look like and the skills and expertise those professors should possess, and then go out and find the people who fit the bill. Says Ms. Smith: "My urgency about faculty diversity is that we're pretty far along in hiring the next generation of faculty, and we're not where we need to be."

A 'Culture Shift'

Before moving to RIT, Ms. Baker worked for more than 20 years in human resources for two city governments, and some of her methods have a decidedly nonacademic feel. "I've had people tell me that we were misleading people because we didn't have anything open at the time when we were talking to them," Ms. Baker says. "They don't always understand exploratory interviewing for what is to come."

Part of Ms. Baker's job is to educate deans, department chairs, and faculty members on the importance of building relationships for the long haul. "This was a definite culture shift," says her colleague, Ms. Wild.

Some professors were especially dubious about the future-faculty program that Ms. Baker created and that is now the college's signature recruiting tool for the underrepresented minorities it wants to attract: an all-expenses-paid trip to Rochester for graduate students who are within one or two years of completing their doctoral work (postdocs are welcome as well). Participants in the program, which accepted its first class in 2003, must apply to attend the four-day event, and they have come from institutions including Stanford University, the Georgia Institute of Technology, and the University of Maryland-Baltimore County.

On the program's jam-packed agenda: a chance to sit in on classes, deliver a research talk, and meet with deans, professors, and RIT students to learn more about the institution and its current and future job openings. The visitors also rub shoulders with community leaders at a dinner held at the president's house and take a bus tour of the city.

"Getting people here on campus to learn more about us was key," says Ms. Baker, "Sometimes they haven't thought about what the opportunities are here. This gives us a chance to show them."

Douglas Merrill, a professor and director of the Center for Bioscience Education and Technology at Rochester, was among those who were skeptical of the program at first.

"I thought it was doomed to failure when I first heard about it," he says. He couldn't figure out how RIT would stay on the minds of people who weren't job hunting at the time and for whom jobs might not have been available anyway.

But for Mr. Osgood and nine other alumni of the future-faculty program who are now his colleagues, memories of Rochester and the institution's meticulous follow-up efforts did the trick. Mr. Osgood, an alumnus of the program's first class, took a job at Rochester after completing a three-year postdoctoral appointment. In the interim, he was invited to the campus periodically to do presentations on his research. He and Mr. Merrill, who was on the other end of the phone at the conference seven and a half years ago, kept in touch as well.

"The whole time RIT was saying, We want you here, we really need you here," says Mr. Osgood, comparing Rochester's approach with those of two other institutions where he thought he might work. "That message never changed."

Mr. Merrill, meanwhile, is no longer a skeptic. "This has just succeeded beyond anyone's imagination," he says.



Alison Ellis, Rochester Institute of Technology
M. Renee Baker, head of faculty recruitment and retention at the Rochester Institute of Technology, meets with Cliff Edington, a staff member.