NARRTOR: RIT is diversifying its faculty in many ways, and the Future Faculty Career Exploration Program is one of the most important avenues for doing so. In this episode of Intersections: The RIT Podcast, Katrina Overby assistant professor in RIT’s School of Communication and a past participant in the program, talks with Donathan Brown, assistant provost and assistant vice president for faculty diversity and recruitment, about why the program is seen as a model nationally in launching the careers of underrepresented scholars.

DONATHAN: So, let me ask you, the Future Faculty Career Exploration Program, your experience through the program. How is this program, given your perspective, different from other universities’?

KATRINA: I mean, I learned a lot during each of the programs that I participated in. But they are vastly different. RIT’s is different because it actually feels like what it would be like to be on the job market and to have a campus visit as a prospective faculty member. So, you’re meeting with many of the faculty, they have read your CV, things about your research, things about your teaching, and they were asking direct questions about those things on my CV. I had the opportunity to do a teaching demonstration. Here at RIT, it really, really felt like the process that gets you to becoming a faculty member, so I really appreciated that. It opened my eyes to what that looks like, to be able to experience that, and to be able to teach a class of students that I had never met before. And so, doing that and being able to still connect with other members of my cohort. During that time, we had a chance to visit several important areas in the Rochester community. We met with campus leaders as well as community leaders. They didn’t leave out the community. And so, we really felt thankful for that, to be able to ask questions honestly and be able to receive honest answers.

DONATHAN: Yeah. So, I think, one of the great things that I really enjoy about the future faculty program is that it does two things extremely well. I think the first category I would seek to talk about would be an introduction to RIT, looking at our various people, looking at our various departments and colleges, and how we all interact with one another as one university campus. I think we’re doing a tremendous job in exposing individuals to the vast array of diversity by programs, people, and players, quite frankly, throughout the university. So, that’s one thing I really enjoy. But the second thing – and here is one area that I think we do better than anyone else in the country – is that we go further than the university itself. We introduce people to the grander community. Because we know that, at the end of the day, RIT is an excellent place to work, no question about that, and we show that well. But you also need a place to live, a community, a place to call home. Having the opportunity for you to ask direct questions to community leaders and community groups, to engage in a tour of the greater Rochester area, to have the ability to ask questions to a realtor or a tour guide about cost of living, for example. I think it’s one of those variables that many people oftentimes forget to discuss. Because, as we know, not all money is created equal. So, that one salary you may make in one city may not be the same in another city. And so, for me, those two different layers, the RIT community itself, the campus community, and the
KATRINA: Awesome. What are some of the other unique ways RIT engages underrepresented prospective scholars.

DONATHAN: We do a lot of things in the Office of Faculty Diversity and Recruitment that other universities simply do not. I’m very proud about that. There’s so many; I’ll just name a few. One, our campus visits. So, we follow the science, we follow the data. We look at the top producing universities according to National Science Foundation data and ask ourselves this – who’s producing the highest number of women and scholars of color in the areas that we serve at RIT? Let’s form relationships with those institutions. The same question goes for our minority-serving institutions, and we form relationships there. And I think part of the grander difference here is engaging those institutions, having those conversations, visiting their campuses, speaking with their Ph.D., postdoc, MFA and MBA students about the RIT experience and the grander Rochester community. And I think it’s made a tremendous difference in the outreach and raising the national brand of the institution for individuals who may not have thought that, one, a faculty career was in their future, but, two, individuals who may not have thought upstate New York was in their future as well. And so, I think as we reflect on this and I think about the many people we’ve met across the country on different college campuses, and to see them within this year’s cohort of the future faculty program, last year’s cohort of the future faculty program, it just makes that work all worth it at the end.

KATRINA: Me being here is evidence that the recruitment process can and does work, that you can recruit scholars, and they will be interested in coming to your campus. And I believe when you show them that you are genuinely interested in the work that they do – so I do Black Twitter research, I do Black social media engagement. I also work in areas around activist scholarship, so talking about how Black academics, especially Black women are mentored through the higher education process, I do some research in that area. I sort of have my hat in many buckets in terms of research, and they were interested in me and the work that I was working on. And so, it made me even more interested to come back after visiting RIT and consider it as a place to work, as a place to grow. I’ve participated in so many teaching workshops that are offered at RIT, so my development is continuing. I’m being enhanced here at RIT. I’m always able to participate in some sort of workshop. So, the development doesn’t stop. When you get here there are other opportunities for you to engage in development teaching-wise and research-wise, and I really believe it’s a place where they want you to succeed. And so, when I think about whether or not this process works, whether or not FFCEP is important, I will always be a champion of the FFCEP program and still offer myself as a way to connect with future cohorts and future possible faculty members at RIT and say, “It does work. I’m here and I’m enjoying it.” But it also takes – there’s responsibility on the departments when they have faculty coming to visit them to take them seriously, to really consider how their work can fit into what they have going on, what their mission is, what their goal is in terms of faculty research and teaching.
DONATHAN: As I listen to this conversation and think about it, I do want to get your advice, your input on a question or two. Given your thoughts and experiences, how do you think that RIT is doing to recruit a more diverse faculty? What are your thoughts on that, being part of that process?

KATRINA: I believe that RIT is headed in the right direction. And I think that it’s going to take moving from recommendations on how to recruit diverse faculty and actually implementing those recommendations. And I believe that it is a department by department and college responsibility as well in terms of recruitment. You should look at your diversity within your faculty and say, “Are we doing the best that we can do to be representative of our student body and of the larger field?” There are students of color everywhere who are graduating every day in various fields. It is not that hard to actually find some of these Black and BIPOC scholars. So, we need to tap in further with programs like FFCEP who have connections and networks built with some of these scholars and be proactive in that process in saying, “Hey, do you know anyone who may be graduating in this area who would be a potential faculty member in our department or in our college?” It takes time, but I believe the work is being put in now to make it an environment where diverse scholars want to come. That’s important, too. It’s difficult to come and be the only one. So, when you’re recruiting, are you recruiting one or are you recruiting several? I think that minority communities and Black and BIPOC scholars work best in community as well with one another. So, it takes more than recruiting one, you have to recruit more than that.

DONATHAN: And so, let me ask you this question then. What is perhaps the most important piece of advice you would give to young BIPOC scholars who are navigating the process of applying for faculty positions?

KATRINA: The one that’s just at the forefront of my mind is to be yourself. And don’t sugarcoat what it is that you do and who you are because, at the end of the day, if a program or department or college wants you to be at their institution, then they will do what it takes to get you there. So, not only are you interviewing for the position, but you are interviewing them. You are asking them how they can support your research development, your teaching skills, what things you’ll be able to be involved in on campus as a scholar. And so, ask a lot of questions while you’re doing the process of being on the job market. Because it’s not just you wanting to impress, but they need to impress you as well. They need to show that they would take some interest in your work and be ready to support you as a scholar. And I say, “be yourself,” because I do see myself as a scholar who is sometimes outside of the conventional box of what it means to be a scholar. Some of the research that I do. The fact that I am an activist scholar and that I don’t back down from that. I let that be known in every piece of me, through teaching, through research, through service. And when I saw that they wanted me to come I was so excited and happy that I was able to be myself and be accepted here at RIT with everything that I have to offer and bring to the table. And my department never fails to remind me that they’re happy that I chose to be here at RIT. And so, I thank them for that, I really do. Because it can be rough as a BIPOC scholar. Often you feel like you’re not making the right moves or you’re not saying the right things. So, that’s
sort of my advice, knowing who you are as a scholar and being able to articulate that, not just on paper but in conversations with other people. And so, that takes time. Think about who you are and where you’re going and what support you need to get there and whether the institution will be able to meet your needs.

DONATHAN: I think that’s phenomenal. I think if I had to answer that same question, I would approach it perhaps in this way. First is looking at the totality of the university and its surrounding community. It’s one thing to locate a university that you are in love with, but if you have struggles, if you haven’t taken the time to do the work to think about the community, is this a place that you can call home, then I think you may not have done your due diligence. Second, I would think about identifying and locating mentors. Because as we all talk about whether you’re putting together a competitive faculty application, whether you’re going up for tenure or promotion, these sorts of individuals can really assist you in crossing those barriers. Two other things I would simply say – during the interview process, please do not be afraid to ask questions. My questions may differ from yours, but at the end ask questions that are extremely pertinent to you as a person but also a scholar. One example that I always give is pertaining to tenure and promotion guidelines. And the reason is quite simple. You need to know whether or not the guidelines in which you will be evaluated align with who you are as a scholar. Do you wish to spend more time in the classroom? Do you wish to spend more time researching? Is there a balance in which you’d like to strike? The tenure and promotion guidelines will really tell you everything you need to know in how that department, how that college, how that university will evaluate you. If there is a misalignment, it’s best you know in the very beginning before signing on the dotted lines that may surprise after the fact. In addition, continue to ask more questions. What’s the average teaching load? Am I allowed to create my own courses? What is that process looking like? Or are graduate assistants or teaching assistants really part of the fabric or the climate or the culture of this department? Ask those types of questions. Think about what you need to be successful and ask. The worst thing that can happen is that you don’t ask and therefore you do not receive. And so, for me, it’s always asking those questions up front. But ask, ask, ask.

KATRINA: No, that’s really important. And I think I learned to ask questions that I didn’t know that I knew I needed to ask. And so, I think doing the FFCEP program we learned a lot of that as well. The questions we should be asking. It continued to be a great way to develop who I am as a scholar.

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