Experiencing Michigan:
Accounts by Faculty from Underrepresented Minorities

Executive Summary

Twenty-six science and engineering faculty drawn from four racial-ethnic groups (African American, Latino, Native American and Asian/Asian American) were interviewed by a member of the ADVANCE Project staff during the summer of 2006. Most of the faculty interviewed regard the University of Michigan and their departments as offering many positive career opportunities. At the same time, a large proportion of them report serious interest in leaving the UM, in part because of their experiences both in the University and in the larger community. These include isolation, a sense of being marginal or unvalued, exclusion from decision-making and from networks, and disrespect and lack of deference from students. These difficulties are exacerbated by frequent experiences of heightened visibility and of being viewed as a representative of a group. Interviewees identified policies and practices that could reduce the difficulties experienced by faculty from underrepresented groups. These included more flexibility and attention to family issues in the career path; creation of a network of faculty of color; greater transparency about rules and procedures; and better mentoring. Implementing these changes would, in all likelihood, improve the climate for all faculty at the University of Michigan.

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Goal
The purpose of this report, as outlined in the original proposal for a conference jointly sponsored by ADVANCE and the National Center for Institutional Diversity on *Advancing Diversity and Excellence in Science and Engineering,* is to "provide rich and concrete information about the experiences of UM faculty of color in science and engineering. By collecting and disseminating …qualitative data, we hope to alleviate the pressure on faculty of color conference participants to describe and explain their experience, freeing them to discuss strategies for improving the situation." The interview data summarized in this report supplement other reports about the numbers and advancement of faculty drawn from four racial-ethnic groups in science and engineering.

Method
In an effort to document the experience of faculty scientists and engineers from four groups (African American, Latino/a, Native American and Asian/Asian American), an ADVANCE staff member[1] interviewed a stratified random sample of faculty during summer 2006. We drew roughly equal samples of faculty from each of the racial-ethnic groups except Native American faculty. This was a small enough group that we contacted the entire group. We contacted a total of 52 faculty scientists and engineers, 27 males and 25 females. Of these, 26 were successfully interviewed during the summer of 2006. Eight faculty refused to participate, while 15 simply didn't respond (no doubt in part because of the inconvenience of scheduling during the summer) and 3 were not successfully scheduled, but agreed to an interview in principle. Because our primary goal was to provide data for the conference in January, 2007, we stopped all interviewing in early September, to facilitate transcription and coding of the data. Interviews averaged about an hour, though some were considerably longer. All interviewees were asked all questions contained in the interview protocol included as Appendix A.

Of the 26 interviewees, 8 were African American (5 females and 3 males), 8 were Latinos/Latinas (5 females and 3 males), 7 were Asian or Asian American (5 females, 2 males), and 3 were Native American (1 female, 2 males). They were drawn from science and engineering disciplines in seven schools and colleges, including Engineering (6), Literature, Sciences, and the Arts (8), Medicine (6 from basic and clinical sciences), and four of the six smaller schools that have scientists on the faculty (6). Nine were assistant professors, 9 were associate professors and 8 were full professors.

In order to summarize the material provided in the interviews, spreadsheets were created with summaries of answers to 15 of the questions (#3-17). These summaries listed all

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[1] Desdamona Rios, a Latina graduate student in Psychology and Women's Studies, conducted all of the interviews. They were transcribed, all identifying information removed, and analyzed by Abigail Stewart and Danielle LaVaque-Manty for this report. Keith Rainwater and Janet Malley provided crucial support in drawing the sample and managing the transcription process. Kathy Wood and Suzanne Haberstroh provided rapid and professional transcriptions for the project.

unique themes mentioned in response to that question, along with notations of how frequently a theme appeared and any ethnic group and gender patterns in responses. Eleven of these sets of responses (to questions 3, 4, 6, 8, 11-17) were in turn organized into four major categories: positive experiences, negative experiences, experiences specific to being a faculty member from a racial-ethnic minority, and suggestions for changes in policies or practices at UM. The remaining questions did not produce material that seemed as immediately useful in documenting experiences for the conference; we will continue to analyze the data, however, after the conference.

It should be noted at the outset that some of the faculty we interviewed did not identify as "faculty of color," though virtually all did identify as members of a racial-ethnic minority group within the context of the University of Michigan. Faculty with African American and Native American backgrounds reported identification with a racial-ethnic group most readily (though there was one exception to this pattern). Faculty with Latino/a and Asian/Asian American backgrounds were most typically born in other countries in which they were not minorities, and frequently identified as members of cultural rather than "racial-ethnic" minorities within the US. Many noted language/accent differences as important aspects of their experience. These differences among the four groups were important in responses to many questions, but not to all of them. Throughout the report we will identify group differences, as well as similarities across groups. We will also note where gender seemed particularly important.

Positive Aspects of Experience at the University of Michigan
There was considerable consistency across the different groups about the best aspects of being a faculty member at the University of Michigan. Many faculty mentioned intellectual stimulation, the excitement associated with working with really talented people, the excellence of the research environment and its infrastructure, the rich and abundant resources, and the freedom and institutional flexibility in the service of scholarship as noteworthy aspects of the environment. For example, one African American man indicated that he valued the "excellent research environment overall." An Asian/Asian American woman commented that "every day professors have intellectual challenges, and for me that is what brings me to work; across the country there are few places of this caliber." A Latina said that it is "a great opportunity for me to be here. I'm increasing my knowledge every single day."

A little less often, but still quite frequently, faculty mentioned that the environment was friendly, open and supportive, that there were many opportunities for collaboration and that interdisciplinarity was encouraged. One Latina commented, in this regard, that "there are a lot of good resources, it's easy to work with people across areas, and easy to develop research projects that are collaborative." One Native American man noted that "I do really like the environment, I like my colleagues, I like the openness…how friendly people are…and I like the students."

When asked what factors led them to choose Michigan over other institutions, or what made them stay here, faculty mentioned Michigan's commitment to family-friendly policies and diversity, as well as research and collaboration opportunities as key factors

keeping them here. These same factors, along with excellence, a general climate of collegiality and open, fair, democratic processes were named as critical features of the environment to retain.

Negative Features of the Environment at the University of Michigan
Despite this impressive set of positive features, quite a few of the faculty indicated that they had seriously considered leaving and were still open to leaving. Of the 26 interviewed, a total of 17 (65%) said that there were serious reasons to consider leaving in the past, now, or in the future. For example, one African American faculty member indicated that "I considered going to a university that was more diverse…[the] department [there] had made dramatic steps in improving…the life for underrepresented minority graduate students and had a tremendous success rate in that. And their faculty all had committed to this idea of diversity. So that was really attractive to me."

The reasons for staying offered by those who had not considered leaving mainly focused on their view that the environment was not likely to be better anywhere else, and that there are things they value at Michigan, despite difficulties. For example, one Latino faculty member said, "Because the job is fantastic. There is no way I would choose living in Michigan….The moment the career either takes a nose dive or flattens out in some way that is boring or whatever, or I get a job somewhere else, I'm gone."

Those who seriously considered leaving reported three primary reasons. First, some described an overall sense that the environment was frustrating. An African American faculty member reported that "I was just kind of fed up. Fed up with being here," while an Asian/Asian American faculty member was motivated by the fact that "I thought the university was acting very conservatively and going in the wrong direction." Second, some faculty members were motivated by the fact that they could make more money at another institution. Third, some faculty were moved by their sense of isolation and feeling undervalued. One African American faculty member mentioned that her research interests are outside of the main focus of department and therefore the kind of work she does is not particularly supported. A Latina indicated that she had not been mentored at all, and had as a result made some unwise career investments she would not have made if she'd been better advised.

These issues were clearly echoed in responses to the question about the worst things about working at UM. One common theme was that it is difficult to be a member of a minority group here. A strong sense of isolation stands out in faculty members' reports. One said, "the worst aspects of working within a [science field] department as [a member of my racial/ethnic group] I think are the feelings of isolation. There's no one else like me. And I saw some data yesterday, which was completely surprising, that there's no one else like me in [my entire school]." Another commented that, "I think for minority people, we often spend time working in silos…people don't necessarily understand our research and they don't understand why we're doing this research. And so you work by yourself." In addition to the sense of isolation, some faculty reported feeling they are "outside the inner circle" and "excluded from key decisions," and others focused on the intense pressures ("feeling overwhelmed; that there's not enough time and too many

students"). Some faculty reported that students question their authority because of their race or ethnicity; these problems were reported by members of all groups, but here the presence of an accent was often specifically noted as a barrier to student respect: "There's always a period of time at the beginning of the semester where I sense that the students are trying to understand who I am and my background, are trying to adjust to the fact that … I'm not White American male....like is this guy really going to teach me anything? Or does he really know anything?"

Faculty also reported that their faculty colleagues "typically come from privileged backgrounds and don't understand people who do not share that background." As one faculty member put it, "most people do not realize what you had to go through to get where you are. They just feel that because their life has been fairly straightforward, yours will have been too." Some commented that "there's no real help for minorities and women," and that there is too little diversity among the faculty. Finally, a couple of individuals mentioned frictions within the ethnic community as frustrating and distracting.

Experiences of University Life for Faculty of Color
Faculty were asked a series of questions about their experience in terms of their race/ethnicity, and their gender. Early questions focused on the importance other people in the environment attached to these faculty members' race or ethnicity:

> What role do you think your race/ethnicity has played in your life at the University of Michigan?
> Do you think other people here find your race or ethnicity to be important? How?

Responses to these two questions revealed both some of the differences that arose among the different groups we interviewed, and some of the ambiguities and complexities faculty members experience in their colleagues' and students' reactions to them.

Some faculty members in all groups indicated that they either thought their race-ethnicity was a minor issue in their life at UM, or that they could not really know what others thought about it. Asian/Asian American faculty were particularly likely to respond in this way, and several women noted that they experienced their gender as a more important issue in their career than their racial-ethnic background.

African Americans were most likely to affirm the importance of their racial-ethnic identity to others, with a range of responses. For example, one woman commented that it's "not a subject that comes up in conversation, but it is a subject that sort of is in the air, so to speak, quite often." Some felt that their racial identity was exploited by some administrators and other faculty. One pointed out that it plays a role "when it's convenient for them" and others noted that "diversity is important to the university" and "I'm a statistic they can check off." Still another noted that "I'm a rare commodity, so I'm valued."

Both Latino/a faculty and Native American faculty frequently noted that their racial-ethnic identity was both a positive and negative factor in their relations with others. They

were aware that others were curious about them and their cultural background and they felt "recognized as special." However, they also noted that others were often ignorant about their backgrounds, and (for example) assumed people from different countries in South America were all alike.

Faculty from all four groups mentioned that they felt there was a tendency to "pigeonhole" or categorize them that they disliked, and also that they were expected to meet unusual demands for service on committees and mentoring of minority students. Most were willing to meet these demands, but were frustrated by the ways in which those demands limited their time for research in ways that are wholly unrecognized and uncompensated by the institution. One senior faculty member commented that "the standard issue that people of color have that departments oftentimes don't even understand [is] that in some sense they're discriminating by requiring too much committee service….In a certain way, it's true the department gave me plenty of opportunities to do committee service, as the college has too. But it does detract from your ability to do other things. And that can then end up having an impact on your performance. And occasionally it made me uncomfortable, the fact that I had to do all this extra work."

Two questions focused on the kinds of actions that are more or less feasible for faculty of color than for white faculty; some participants responded in terms of race-ethnicity, and some also responded in terms of gender. The most common responses to these questions focused on faculty members' sense of their heightened responsibility as a highly visible representative of a group (in the eyes of others). For example, one Asian woman indicated that "you cannot have an excuse if you're a woman; you don't want anyone to cut you slack." An African American woman indicated that you "don't want to publicize any failures, because it's always 'well, you know, if she were a different color.'" Speaking for many, one faculty member said, "I'm mindful that everything I do is viewed not as an individual but as a representative. So that puts probably a bit more pressure on me than it would somebody else who hasn't thought that way…. It's just a little bit more scrutinizing my own behavior…" Another said, "It's like people assume sometimes that you are where you are because of affirmative action and maybe you didn't totally deserve it. So maybe I go overboard the other way to be, like, "I'm worthy, I'm worthy."

Many faculty pointed out that white male faculty are particularly free of some of the constraints they experience; a number of male faculty of color, and one woman noted that women are particularly unlikely to be permitted the same latitude that men are permitted. For example, one Latino said, "White men can get away with a lot more. Certainly more than women. Teaching less for example. Or counting some stuff as courses, even though they're not really courses. Doing a little seminar now and then." Another noted that "Men can get away with doing a lot less in terms of service and teaching if they're willing to be aggressive." An African American woman commented that "Men are proud of finagling the system; women wouldn't dare; it would be remembered."

Another woman commented,

> I think others can voice their opinion and have it heard and respected and listened to…Others have more leeway in their interactions with other faculty and other students. White males can get away with a lot more. Because they are almost ubiquitous, they are almost anonymous. So if my white male colleague doesn't show up at a meeting…they don't say generically, well, all white males have at this age this problem. But it if it's a woman or a minority, it's pinned on the whole group of you.

One other faculty member pointed out that,
> Men say "Well, I'm just not going to do this." And they just don't do it. If a woman/person of color did the same thing it is sometimes perceived differently…white men in most positions of authority propose other white men for similar positions.

This last point was also made by another faculty member too, who noted that informal networking depended on availability at early and late hours often difficult for faculty with child care responsibilities.

Finally, several faculty members (both male and female) commented on child care responsibilities. One woman indicated that "people recognize I need to be home." All of the rest noted that it was not acceptable to point explicitly to child care obligations in their departments, and that this posed special difficulties for women faculty.

Recommendations about Improving the Environment
Faculty were asked to identify particular things about their experience that were difficult for majority faculty members to understand. They spoke articulately about their sense that their colleagues "don't realize what you had to go through to get where you are" and "don't realize why you work so hard." They also felt that their colleagues could not know what it feels like to be so isolated or to feel "different." Fellow faculty often "benignly try to make you a representative of what they consider to be the ethnicity that they think you're from." Most of all, though, they commented that their colleagues were understandably unlikely to be aware of the many small stresses and slights they experienced every day, ranging from lack of deference from students, to difficulty in being understood, to isolation, misunderstanding and disrespect. In noting this, interviewees emphasized that their non-minority colleagues had no experiential basis for being aware of these unpleasant and time-consuming aspects of their work lives.

Some specific policies and practices that exacerbate the difficulties of faculty of color were noted. These included the stigma attached to "stopping the tenure clock," and the rigidity of that clock itself; the absence of multiple or adequate assessments of teaching quality; lack of recognition or reward for service; investment in a single indicator of value (research and publication); and a focus only on "numbers" in pursuit of diversity, rather than on the job satisfaction and flourishing of all faculty.

Faculty identified several alternative policies and practices that would be helpful to members of underrepresented groups. Those most often mentioned included:

> Better, more proactive recruiting
> Creation of a network of faculty of color
> Flexible tenure clock
> Formal mentoring programs, better mentoring
> Better assessment of teaching
> Recognition of family issues in career paths
> More transparency about rules and procedures; more consistent information

Finally, faculty were invited to offer advice to new colleagues of their own racial-ethnic background. Their responses were strongly suggestive of areas for policy and practice changes, and echoed many of the changes indicated above. At the same time, they reflected an assumption that the playing field was unlikely to be level. Most frequently, faculty advised their new colleagues to get information about how things work, to network with other faculty, and to seek and obtain good mentoring. They also encouraged their hypothetical new colleagues to find people with whom they have something in common and to avoid thinking too much about discrimination. They recommended that new faculty of color avoid taking on too much service burden, and encouraged them to "meet the institution's demands" by "producing," even "being better than everyone else."

Conclusion

Twenty-six science and engineering faculty drawn from four racial-ethnic groups (African American, Latino, Native American and Asian/Asian American) were interviewed by a member of the ADVANCE Project staff during the summer of 2006. Most of the faculty interviewed regard the University of Michigan and their departments as offering many positive career opportunities. At the same time, a large proportion of them report serious interest in leaving the UM, in part because of their experiences both in the University and in the larger community. These include isolation, a sense of being marginal or unvalued, exclusion from decision-making and from networks, and disrespect and lack of deference from students. These difficulties are exacerbated by frequent experiences of heightened visibility and of being viewed as a representative of a group. Interviewees identified policies and practices that could reduce the difficulties experienced by faculty from underrepresented groups. These included more flexibility and attention to family issues in the career path; creation of a network of faculty of color; greater transparency about rules and procedures; and better mentoring. Implementing these changes would, in all likelihood, improve the climate for all faculty at the University of Michigan.

Appendix A
ADVANCE Interview Questions—NCID Project

As you know, the focus of this project is to document the experiences of faculty of color in science and engineering at the University of Michigan. We hope to use these interviews to create an aggregate picture of what that experience is like, as a basis for conversation about how to improve the environment at a conference in Winter 2007. We'd like to build up our picture partly by having you describe your experience as an individual and a member of a particular racial-ethnic group, and partly by getting your impressions of how things work for members of your group and faculty of color more generally.

Let's begin with some facts about your position here:

1. How long have you been employed at the University of Michigan? Could you describe your position for me? (School, College, Title)

    1 a. How would you compare the racial diversity of the University of Michigan with institutions you had experience with before coming here?

2. Where do you spend most of your time on campus?

3. What are the best aspects of working there?

4. What are the worst aspects of working there?

5. Do you feel like you are a member of a racial or ethnic group? [if yes]

    5a. Which? What does that mean to you?

6. What role do you think race/ethnicity has played in your daily life?

    6a. What role has it played in your life at the University of Michigan?
    6b. Do other people here find your race/ethnicity to be important? How? In what ways? Under what circumstances?

I'd like to focus now on your observations about your department.

7. What does it take to succeed in your department? Is it different for faculty of color? How about women and men?

8. Are there things you can and/or can't get away with or do or can do more easily because of who you are (in terms of race, gender, status)?

    6a. Are there things others can do or get away with that you can't?

9. I'd like to get a sense of how you think some of the basic processes work in your department with respect to faculty. I'm interested in your view of how those processes work for faculty in general, for members of your group, for faculty of color, and where it's relevant, specifically for you. For example,

   7a. How do you think recruitment and hiring work?
   7b. What about tenure and promotion reviews? Annual reviews?
   7c. Handling of outside offers?
   7d. Assignment of courses, space and equipment resources, etc?
   7e. Dealing with tensions or difficulties between particular faculty members?
   7f. Dealing with conflicts between faculty and students?
   7g. Mentoring? (both giving it and receiving it)
   7h. Informal or social relationships with people in your department?
   7i. Professional relationships with staff

10. Are you aware of any policies or practices in the department/school/college/university that you think may work against the success of racial or ethnic minorities?

11. Are there particular policies or practices that the department/school/college/university could adopt that might improve things for faculty of color?

12. Are there particular issues that are difficult for your colleagues to understand? What are your strategies for dealing with this?

13. Have you ever considered leaving your position? If so, why? Why did you decide to stay?

14. What features of your department's functioning do you think are important to preserve or avoid changing?

15. If you have identified any problems or concerns with your unit, what changes do you think would help to address them?

16. Are there any other things that we did not discuss that make being faculty of color more difficult?

17. What advice would you give a new faculty member of your race/ethnicity at Michigan about the kind of issues we've been talking about?