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With Faculty Diversity on Everyone's Radar, HBCUs Worry About Losing Scholars

By *Katherine Mangan* DECEMBER 08, 2015



Stephen B. Thornton for The Chronicle

“There will be pressure for some schools to raid HBCUs for everything — students, faculty, staff, even presidents,” says Walter M. Kimbrough, president of Dillard U., in New Orleans. But what institutions like his lack in wealth and resources, he says, they make up for “in quality of life, service to community, and an appeal to serving those with the most need.”

If a predominantly white university with a stepped-up diversity agenda comes

trolling for talent, Walter M. Kimbrough knows he may have trouble competing with the money it can offer.

But as president of Dillard University, a historically black institution in New Orleans, he says he can make a convincing case for his faculty members to stick around. In fact, he thinks the protests that have swept campuses across the nation, calling attention to the lack of diversity and the chilly racial climates at many universities, could work in his favor.

It's likely that one of the most lasting effects of the protests will be the commitments many institutions have made to significantly expand their minority-faculty ranks. Student activists on many campuses put diversifying the faculty toward the top of their lists of demands.

Given the paltry production of [new black doctoral recipients](#), that means many colleges will be competing for scholars on other campuses. "There will be pressure for some schools to raid HBCUs for everything — students, faculty, staff, even presidents," Mr. Kimbrough wrote in an email.

But what they lack in wealth and resources, HBCUs like his make up for "in quality of life, service to community, and an appeal to serving those with the most need," he wrote.

It's unlikely that Ivy League institutions, which tend to hire professors with similar pedigrees, will be recruiting heavily at [historically black colleges and universities](#).

But as the pressure to diversify extends through the ranks of higher education, poaching at HBCUs could be an "unintended but predictable consequence," according to Johnny C. Taylor Jr., president and chief executive officer of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, which represents public HBCUs.

"There are more than 5,000 higher-education institutions in the U.S., of which only 100 are HBCUs," Mr. Taylor wrote in an email. "If just 10 percent of the majority institutions decided to aggressively recruit minority faculty, the HBCU community could be decimated, particularly when it comes to young scholars."

Moves in Both Directions?

Some of the splashiest new commitments to diversity are coming from the wealthiest universities.

Last month Yale University announced plans to put [\\$50 million toward diversifying its faculty](#) over the next five years. Brown University [plans to spend \\$100 million](#) over the next 10 years on diversity efforts that it expects will double its proportion of minority and other underrepresented faculty members, from 9 percent to 18 percent, by 2025. Following a student-led sit-in, Brandeis University [announced plans](#) that it expects will double its number of underrepresented-minority faculty members by 2021.

Public universities are also feeling the pressure to hire more minority professors, and to [hang on to the ones they have](#).

'Working at a predominantly white institution can be quite stressful, dealing with microaggressions and feeling invisible to my colleagues and students.'

After seven years at the State University of New York at Binghamton, Robert T. Palmer joined Howard University, a predominantly black institution, in August, as an associate professor of educational leadership and policy studies.

"For me and some of my colleagues, working at a predominantly white institution can be quite stressful, dealing with microaggressions and feeling invisible to my colleagues and students," said Mr. Palmer, who studies minority-student access and retention, especially at historically black colleges. "After a while, those things take a psychological toll on you."

At Howard, he said, "I feel like I matter. I feel like my research matters. That's something you can't put a price on."

Other high-profile black scholars have bailed out recently from their predominantly white institutions. They include:

- Fred A. Bonner II, a noted education scholar whose research focuses on black men, left Rutgers University to join the faculty at Prairie View A&M University. The Texas institution gave him an endowed chair and a center on minority achievement.
- Marc Lamont Hill, a high-profile black scholar and television commentator, left Columbia University last year for Morehouse College, where he is a distinguished professor of African-American studies.

The attention to concerns about campus racial climates, Mr. Kimbrough said, creates an opportunity "for HBCUs to become poachers too."

News accounts have described how, much like their students, black professors have experienced racism, "be it the subtle comments from white students surprised they are the professor or that they possess a Ph.D., to the more blatant name calling and the like," he wrote. "So are they being set up to go into hostile environments of colleagues and students who think they are simply quota hires?"

Shuffling scholars is a short-term solution to a long-term problem, according to Bernard J. Milano, president of the PhD Project, which encourages students to pursue doctorates in business-related fields and helps connect them with programs. "We're trying to increase the applicant pool to doctoral programs," he said. "If you don't do that, you're in a zero-sum game."

He said he would be interested to see whether some universities that have announced plans to bring on minority faculty members as visiting professors end up extending many tenure-track offers. Otherwise, he said, what they're doing "has been likened to renting diversity."

Katherine Mangan writes about community colleges, completion efforts, and job training, as well as other topics in daily news. Follow her on Twitter [@KatherineMangan](#), or email her at katherine.mangan@chronicle.com.

Download a Collection of Articles About Race on Campus

Colleges across the country are gripped with questions of racial inclusivity, as students demand more recognition, more support, and more change. Their demands and protests draw attention to continuing racial disparities in higher education, where African-Americans make up a small portion of professors, presidents, and selective-college enrollments. A collection of recent news and commentary from *The Chronicle*, designed to be printed and shared, can provide a starting point for discussion of what might be done to improve the climate and conditions on your own campus. Download the free booklet [here](#).