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Dearth of diversity in natural science faculty

Posted By [Niraj Sheth](#) On May 26, 2006 @ 8:40 am In [News](#) | [No Comments](#)

Math students ask their teaching assistant about questions in a problem set at the Math building yesterday. The Math Department has never had a black faculty member. But that may change.

The faculties of Stanford's natural science departments are renowned for their academic achievements, but certain minorities are seriously underrepresented among them. While the University has struggled to recruit and retain diverse faculty, many say it may be pushing new efforts to do so.

Currently, the Chemistry Department has no black, Native American or Latino faculty members and has had only one in its entire history. The Physics Department, meanwhile, has only one Latino member, Prof. Blas Cabrera, out of a faculty of 33.

Blacks in particular are underrepresented on natural science faculties. Neither the Chemistry nor Mathematics Departments has ever had a black member on their faculties. Physics Prof. Art Walker was the only black member of that faculty until his death in 2001.

In comparison, female representation is significantly stronger on these same faculties. The Physics Department currently has five female professors and another will join the faculty next year. There are also two women on the Chemistry faculty, which has had women faculty members dating back to 1927. And the Math Department, which currently has no minority faculty members, has two women.

Sally Dickson, associate vice provost for faculty development, told The Daily that while the University encourages the recruitment of diverse faculty candidates, it has had difficulty achieving its goals in the natural sciences. According to Dickson, there are fewer doctorates awarded to minorities in the natural sciences than in other fields, and therefore a smaller pipeline of qualified applicants of color.

"But it is wrong to say that because the pipeline is very thin, that ends the challenge," she said.

The University does make special efforts to recruit faculty of color across all fields. According to the publication "Building on Excellence" — Stanford's official guide to recruiting and retaining diverse faculty — these efforts include reaching out to qualified minority candidates during faculty searches, actively seeking to increase minority faculty leadership and monitoring the representation of women and minorities on a yearly basis.

As Dickson explained, the first step to having a more diverse faculty in the natural sciences is promoting a more diverse graduate student body in these fields. And this process begins at the undergraduate level, where minorities thinking about majoring in the natural sciences should be encouraged to consider academic careers.

Having a diverse faculty to begin with has helped improve diversity in the graduate student body. Mechanical Engineering Ph.D. candidate Cullen Buie, co-chair of the Graduate Student Council's Diversity Committee, explained that, during his tenure, Walker was instrumental in helping Stanford award more doctorates in physics to blacks than any other university.

Dickson concurred with this opinion, stating that it would help to have minority role models in these

fields to improve diversity.

One such opportunity has emerged recently, as Stanford may be in contact with Edray Goins, a prominent black mathematics professor at Purdue University. Goins has made a name for himself in his field with his work on Fermat's last theorem.

At a panel discussion last Monday hosted by Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA) and several other ethnic groups regarding diversity in the graduate student body and faculty, a question was raised regarding Goins. Sources at the meeting have offered different accounts of what happened.

According to Buie — who was a graduate student representative on the panel — and one other event attendee, Dickson said that Stanford is making an offer to Goins.

Sophomore Bernard Fraga, an organizer of the event, said that there might have been some miscommunication. Dickson only implied that the University is interested in Goins and not that an offer has been made, he said.

Dickson firmly denies making any such a comment at the discussion.

"I did say that I recently became aware of Prof. Goins," she said in an email to The Daily. "I made no statement about Stanford making an offer to him."

A source within the Mathematics Department confirmed that no offer has been made. Department Chair Yakov Eliashberg was out of town and could not be reached for comment about the professor.

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