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### Abstract

This study sought to explore the perceptions of affirmative action officers in the University of Missouri System. Each affirmative action officer on the four University of Missouri campuses participated in an electronic or personal interview in which they responded to eight questions regarding the implementation of affirmative action policies on their respective campuses. A comparison of the officer responses revealed that each university complies with federal affirmative action guidelines, but some of the institutions in the system developed additional strategies to attract minority faculty candidates.

### Keywords

qualitative research

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# **Affirmative Action: An Analysis of AA/EEO Officers' Perceptions of Campus Policies in the University of Missouri System**

by  
**Shawn Woodhouse<sup>±</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This study sought to explore the perceptions of affirmative action officers in the University of Missouri System. Each affirmative action officer on the four University of Missouri campuses participated in an electronic or personal interview in which they responded to eight questions regarding the implementation of affirmative action policies on their respective campuses. A comparison of the officer responses revealed that each university complies with federal affirmative action guidelines, but some of the institutions in the system developed additional strategies to attract minority faculty candidates.

## **Background**

Discrimination in admissions and faculty employment has been a problem in Academe throughout this nation's history. The Civil Rights Movement led to political and legal remedies for this problem, among them anti-discrimination provisions in admissions (Title VI) and employment (Title VII), and affirmative action (Executive Order 11246). All provided substantial gains for historically underrepresented groups in higher education (Travers & Rebore, [1995](#)). Long known as the "marketplace of ideas," universities should foster equity for all students and faculty. Yet, affirmative action, a primary tool for promoting equity in higher education, is being challenged in the courts and state legislatures. Recent examples of legal challenges to affirmative action include the *University of Texas v. Hopwood*, and the California Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI), also named Proposition 209. The states of Florida, Washington, and Texas have also banned the use of racial and gender preferences in admissions to undergraduate, graduate and professional schools programs, and the number of states considering a ban on racial preferences is steadily increasing.

This study was conducted at a time when the Missouri General Assembly was considering legislation, similar to initiatives in other states, which would "...abolish minority preferences in the State's system of public employment, education, and contracting..." (Garnier, [1998](#)). Local and national challenges may thwart the admissions and employment opportunities available to historically underrepresented groups. Historically, affirmative action has served as a form of remedial legislation that has helped to level the playing field as much as possible for these minority groups. There is, therefore, an urgency to understand how affirmative action officers on the four University of Missouri campuses perceive their policy, its effect and their duty in its aggressive implementation.

The four University of Missouri campuses in the system are as follows: University of Missouri-Columbia (UMC); University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC); and University of Missouri-Rolla (UMR); and University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL). The founding history for each of the institutions within the University of Missouri system is different, of course. All but one of the University of Missouri campuses were founded during the era of segregation, the University of Missouri-St. Louis. However different the history of these campuses, they all had one similarity: whether founded before or after segregation, minority faculty members have been grossly underrepresented within the faculties.

## **Problem Statement**

In recent years, the University of Missouri System and its four campuses have made extraordinary efforts to recruit large numbers of minority faculty. Extra efforts have been made to recruit African American faculty because they are the largest racial minority group in the state of Missouri. However, minority faculty members are still underrepresented, disproportionate with their racial representation in Missouri.

Not only is this a problem in predominantly white public higher education institutions in the state of Missouri, but it is also a national concern. Further, lacking in the literature on affirmative action and equal employment opportunity are the assessments of campus affirmative action officers regarding progress in minority faculty recruitment. The paucity of literature on affirmative action officers' perceptions is mystifying. They are charged with the management and implementation of institutional policies to comply with federal guidelines and achieve equity in educational institutions. Their knowledge, perspective, and experience in making realistic assessments of institutional progress will influence their perceptions of current reality, therefore influencing current educational practices. Additionally, their perceptions of past assessment will also influence current program directions and future program success. Therefore, there is a need for more empirical studies on the affirmative action officers' perceptions of minority faculty recruitment as it relates to affirmative action.

## **Literature Review**

One of the few studies on the perceptions of affirmative action/equal employment opportunity officers regarding policy implementation and effectiveness was that of Edelman, Petterson, Chambliss and Erlanger ([1991](#)). They confirmed that affirmative action officers' interpretations of the law largely determine the nature and extent to which an organization will be in compliance with the law. The affirmative action officers' interpretations of the law affect how they establish, implement, and sustain an affirmative action program. Complimentary to this study was one conducted by Romero ([1991](#)) on affirmative action officer perceptions of their functions, duties, and responsibilities. These variables significantly impact their effectiveness as affirmative action officers. In this study, affirmative action officers indicated that they could achieve a greater maximum in their performance if they could spend more time and effort on promotion, personnel, procedures, process, recruitment, goals/timetables, and grievances.

Berry ([1999](#)) also conducted a comprehensive analysis of the affirmative action officers' role and identified institutional factors that contribute to program effectiveness. This study indicated that

lack of presidential support, lack of training and development, lack of institutional value and commitment, faculty resistance, and budget constraints are the major barriers to effectiveness for affirmative action officers. Strategies such as influencing institutional policy, coordinating corrective action, reviewing personnel operations and identifying search strategies to search committees were perceived to increase the effectiveness of affirmative action officers.

The study of Scollay, Tickamyer, Bokemeier, and Wood ([1989](#)) adds yet another dimension in concluding that more than two-thirds of affirmative officers perceived substantial affirmative action program impact on the sex composition of faculty, assessments which were associated more with institutional rather than program or individual level characteristics. Additionally, Atcherson and Conyers ([1989](#)) determined that affirmative action personnel rated receiving administrative support as very important and they believed that education and financial aid are very important in achieving equality in the workplace for women and minorities in America.

The above studies examine officer perceptions of their responsibilities and those factors which impact their effectiveness. This study, however, attempts to take a glimpse of affirmative action officers' performance in the execution of affirmative action policies as they relate to the recruitment of minority faculty in a state university system.

## **Research Questions**

To gain a more complete understanding of affirmative action's impact in higher education from the perspective of the practitioner, this study focused on three specific research questions:

1. What are the affirmative action policies for the system and the four campuses?
2. How are the affirmative action policies being implemented, according to affirmative action officers?
3. What effect has the affirmative action policies had on minority faculty recruitment?

## **Method**

### **Self of the Researcher**

Given the fact that the researcher was a former student of the University of Missouri-Columbia, potential bias becomes an inherent part of this research study. In order to control for such bias, the researcher had no established relationships with any of the affirmative action officers. Additionally, three of the four officers' responses were recorded verbatim from responses they provided via electronic media. The responses of the fourth officer were the result of a personal interview, so to ensure accuracy; the researcher clarified each response by repeating them immediately following the reply.

### **Data Sources**

*Interviews.* The affirmative action officer on each of the four campuses of the University of Missouri agreed to participate in an electronic or personal interview. The purpose of the

interviews was to determine the specific measures taken by each campus to enforce or enhance minority recruitment efforts. Each officer received a list of eight questions via electronic mail.

The affirmative action officer from the University of Missouri-St. Louis campus, however, participated in a personal interview. This type of interview process allows the participant to freely express himself without any complications or distractions. The personal interview in many ways is a manifestation of human interaction. Additionally, the interviewer has the opportunity to seek clarification of nebulous information.

*Documents.* The affirmative action officers from the University of Missouri-Kansas City, University of Missouri-Columbia, and University of Missouri-Rolla campuses responded the questions using electronic mail as the communication protocol. This form of communication restricts the natural flow of human interaction, but it allowed the participants the opportunity to carefully construct their ideas without fear of making an error. The set of questions are provided below:

1. Please define affirmative action as it relates to your campus.
2. Which racial groups and classes are protected under affirmative action?
3. Please define the term "minorities" as it applies to affirmative action.
4. What is the significance of affirmative action for your campus, and is it taken seriously?
5. Are specific measures taken to increase the number of African American faculty members which may be different from the measures taken to increase the number of minority faculty from other racial groups?
6. When did your campus begin to take affirmative action seriously?
7. Have any dramatic changes arisen since affirmative action was implemented on your campus?
8. Why do you believe that the University of Missouri has not been successful in employing a larger number of African Americans?

## **Data Analysis**

The responses of the affirmative action officers were carefully selected for inclusion based upon their relevance to the questions posed. The information was reported verbatim whenever possible in order to minimize potential author bias. Additionally, the author sought additional clarification if any concept or idea was ambiguous.

In order to gain confidence in the findings, the author extensively reviewed historical information on affirmative action, which corroborated the responses that the officers provided. Additionally, the author requested that several colleagues read the responses of the affirmative action officers and the author transcription of the responses to ensure that the transcription accurately reflected the officer responses.

The Office of Human Resources Personnel for the University of Missouri System provided information regarding affirmative action policies for the four campuses within the University of Missouri system. The affirmative action "policy" to which all four campuses must comply is called the Equal Opportunity policy. It is part of the Human Resources Policy Manual for the

University of Missouri System. According to this policy, the affirmative action officer on each campus within the system ensures that the appropriate administrative personnel who are appointed within each department to implement affirmative action policies for their campus support the Affirmative Action Program. Guidelines and time schedules have been formulated for each campus and these guidelines apply for those areas that require special attention, including the recruitment, employment, and promotion of employees. The campuses develop and maintain records that demonstrate results toward achieving equality in employment and recruitment.

Also, administrative personnel from each campus actively seek to identify for employment qualified women, minorities, and persons with disabilities. They inform qualified applicants within these groups of openings and encourage them to apply for available positions. With regard to development and training, the appropriate administrative personnel identify women, minorities, and applicants with disabilities who have advancement potential and encourage such applicants to participate in training programs that will improve their employment status.

As a federal contractor, the University of Missouri campuses must abide by equal opportunity and affirmative action laws regulating employment practices. The laws and regulations include Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; Executive Order 11246 as amended by Executive Order 11375; and Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972, to name a few.

Each campus within the system does not have its own affirmative action policy since each must comply with the University of Missouri System Equal Opportunity policy. However, each campus is required to have its own "plan." This plan is produced by each of the affirmative action officers on the four campuses. The plan is a compilation of affirmative action statistical data on faculty, administrators, and staff. Each is unique and quite voluminous.

## **Findings**

The majority of the responses of the affirmative action officers on the four campuses were identical. When asked to define affirmative action, each officer provided the definition of affirmative action as defined by the OFCCP (Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs). It comprises actions, policies, and procedures to which a contractor/institution committed itself and were designed to achieve equal employment opportunity. The affirmative action obligation entailed 1) thorough, systematic efforts to prevent discrimination from occurring or to detect it and eliminate it as promptly as possible and 2) recruitment and outreach measures. When asked if affirmative action applied to all faculty, the affirmative action officers confirmed that it did.

The officers on the four campuses agreed that American Indian; Alaskan Natives; African American; Hispanic; Asian/Pacific Islanders; women; persons with disabilities; Vietnam era veterans; persons aged 40 and over; and persons who faced discrimination because of religious preference or sexual orientation were those protected under the University of Missouri System affirmative action policies.

The officers also provided a definition for the term "minorities" as it applied to affirmative action. They explained that the term included all persons of minority groups classified as African American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian, or Alaskan Native.

In addition, the officers discussed what affirmative action meant for their campus, and whether it was really taken seriously. The UMC officer explained that it was very important to the Columbia campus. The UMR officer explained that the campus was serious about affirmative action and used proactive measures to ensure that all qualified individuals (those with requisite skills) for the vacant positions were informed of employment opportunities in order to produce a diverse pool of qualified applicants from which to select the successful candidate. However, the UMR officer stated that they have difficulty hiring minority faculty because that particular university specializes in engineering and the number of available minority faculty members in that discipline is scarce. When minority faculty members in the discipline are available, the institution is not successful in attracting them because it is unable to compete with the employment offers of corporate America. The UMKC and UMSL officers explained that affirmative action is taken very seriously and that no one can be hired on the campus without an affirmative action review and approval.

The officers in this study also provided information regarding the specific measures employed by the campuses to increase the number of African American faculty members. The UMR officer indicated that they had an advisory committee to the Chancellor for African American recruitment and retention that helped to identify potential candidates for both faculty and administrative positions. Also, when academic hiring opportunities occurred, the hiring units developed a recruiting plan that the affirmative action officer reviewed and discussed with the department in the event that modifications were needed prior to advertising vacancies. The UMKC officer indicated that there was money available for all academic units to advertise in *Black Issues in Higher Education* for faculty openings. The UMSL officer indicated that they used extraordinary measures to employ African Americans. For instance, the Chancellor reserved monies for the purpose of hiring African American faculty only, so if a department identified an exceptional candidate from one of the protected classes that they wanted to hire, they bypassed the traditional search procedures. If the faculty member did not achieve tenure, the slot returned to the Chancellor; if the faculty member was tenured, however, the slot remained in the department. UMC had a similar program called the "diverse faculty plan". The Office of the Provost established a task force to identify barriers that impede the recruitment of diverse faculty. A consultant was hired to work with department chairs, for example, in the development of recruitment strategies and to provide technical assistance to help colleges and departments produce affirmative action plans that were proactive and had educational value. The consulting agency also monitored how minorities progressed through the tenure system.

The affirmative action officers also indicated their campuses began to take affirmative action seriously after the implementation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Executive Order 11246. The UMR officer explained that affirmative action came into effect in 1967 under the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, but the campus did not take it very seriously until 1981, following a visit by the Office of Civil Rights, in which the campus entered into a conciliation agreement with the federal government.



When asked if any dramatic changes had arisen since affirmative action was implemented, the UMR officer explained that in 1981, although the campus was culturally diverse, the diversity was not sufficiently inclusive of African Americans. As a result of the conciliation agreement, UMR agreed to take proactive measures (affirmative action) to make the campus more inclusive of African American students, faculty, and staff. As a result, UMR has increased the percentage of African American and female professors (tenure and tenure-track). However, only one was a native born U.S. citizen. The UMKC officer noted that opportunities for women had increased. For instance, their presence was more prominent in a variety of academic disciplines, they have been awarded a larger number of external contracts and more women have been admitted into professional and graduate programs. Additionally, there is an identifiable middle class of Hispanic and African Americans that was not there before affirmative action. Minority participation in higher education has increased at UMKC according to the officer. The UMSL officer indicated that some state actions have brought about significant changes. For example, state representatives held hearings on campus regarding affirmative action progress at UMSL. This was a catalyst for improvement, in his opinion. He also spoke of a major thrust ten years ago in which the President of the UM System wanted to increase the number of African American faculty. Each campus was given a financial allocation to hire African American faculty. After the monies were exhausted, the Chancellor at UMSL continued to contribute money.

The officers also provided insight about why the University of Missouri had not been successful in employing more African Americans. The UMR and UMKC officers believed that it was because the minority faculty pool was very small for fields such as engineering. Those who are qualified faculty members are usually recruited by private industry and Ivy League schools, offering higher salaries and better program benefits. The UMC officer explained that although the Columbia campus was doing many things to assist in the recruitment of minorities, i.e., advertising in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and obtaining membership in the National Minority Faculty ID Program, they had not been very successful in employing African American faculty. The UMSL officer believed that they had been quite successful in attracting African American faculty since they received data indicating that they were ranked twelfth in a nationwide survey on African American faculty in colleges and universities conducted by *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. He also believed that competition from local institutions such as Washington University of St. Louis makes it difficult to recruit African American faculty who were prepared to succeed in academia.

## **Limitations**

There are limitations to this study because 1) affirmative action officers in one state system of higher education were interviewed; 2) the term "minorities" is a very nebulous term; 3) the small number of officers in this study may affect reliability and validity of the results; and 4) the unequal distribution of interview protocol may have skewed the results. Despite its limitations, this study is important because it provides a detailed account of the bureaucratic procedures that affirmative action officers must follow as players in the recruitment process. This study may also provide administrators and staff members at other institutions with some innovative recruitment ideas as well as a snapshot of the intricate recruitment procedures of a single university system.

## Conclusions

Affirmative action officers' perspectives, interpretations of the law and experiences are important to the appropriate implementation of federal mandates and the achievement of equity in the workplace. Additionally, these variables influence the components of a program that will be given priority as well as the allocation of program resources. Affirmative action officers assess the relative progress of a program based upon these procedural components, which attribute to their perception of current reality and influence future human resource practices in minority faculty recruitment.

The affirmative action policy to which the four campuses of the University of Missouri must comply is called the Equal Opportunity policy, which is part of the Human Resources Policy Manual for the University of Missouri System. The University of Missouri affirmative action policy and the individual campus plans were derived from federal laws regulating employment practices. As a federal contractor, the University of Missouri must establish policies that prevent discrimination and encourage the recruitment of underrepresented groups protected by affirmative action. All of the campuses took affirmative action serious after the implementation of applicable federal legislation in the 1960s except the University of Missouri-Rolla campus, which did not do so until entering into a conciliation agreement with the federal government in 1981. All four campus affirmative action officers indicated that dramatic changes in faculty diversity have arisen since the implementation of affirmative action.

According to the University of Missouri affirmative action officers, each campus is serious about affirmative action and uses proactive measures to ensure that all qualified personnel are aware of employment opportunities. Each campus has their own method of handling recruitment and retention, but these methods were designed to achieve the same results. The four campuses of the University of Missouri have not been very successful in minority faculty recruitment. However, the affirmative action officers believe that they are making great efforts to recruit minority faculty. The lack of results may be due to a limited pool of candidates in certain disciplines and less competitive salaries and benefit programs available for collegiate faculty members.

An in-depth analysis of national affirmative action policies and their direct impact on minority recruitment at the institutional level may be necessary because of the lack of significant results. The federal government may need to examine the national policy for deficiencies and consider a system of checks and balances that mandates a realignment of national and institutional goals to reflect an adequate representation of minority professionals in the academic workplace.

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### **Author Note**

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