Why We Persist: An Intersectional Study to Characterize and Examine the Experiences of Women Tenure-Track Faculty in Engineering

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This project applies an intersectionality framework to identify why tenure-track women of color (WOC) persist as engineering faculty. Project goals will be achieved through the compilation and analysis of longitudinal data of WOC faculty in engineering using an American Society for Engineering Education (ASEE) faculty database; the development of a national survey investigating the perspectives of all women engineering faculty at U.S. engineering institutions on issues of race, class, and gender; and the exploration of similarities and differences in horizontal and vertical intersectionality across WOC groups via the collection and analyses of narratives of approximately 65 engineering WOC tenure-track faculty.

Our overarching research question explores the following: How do women engineering faculty’s representation and experiences differ in academic engineering as a function of race/ethnicity, class, and faculty rank? Informed from Patricia Hill Collins’ framework of intersectionality, this research applies a mixed methods approach across three interrelated and parallel research phases. The specific research questions related to each phase, their preliminary findings, and future work are described in the following sections.

Phase A: Institutional Analyses with Existing Databases

In this stage, existing databases are used to answer the following research questions:

- Which institutional-level factors influence the proportion of WOC faculty in engineering?
- Are there differences when engineering female faculty are disaggregated by race/ethnicity (i.e., Asian, Latina, and African-American)?

The available databases used for this purpose are (1) institutional level data collected yearly by ASEE on the aggregated number of engineering faculty by gender and ethnicity, (2) institutional characteristics gathered by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), and (3) public information about the list of NSF-funded ADVANCE grantee institutions. Faculty data were available via an ASEE data mining tool for the years 2001 to 2015, which allows for an assessment of the growth in the number of WOC through this 15-year period; IPEDS data permits analyzing such trends considering different groups of institutions based on their characteristics; and knowing which institutions have implemented ADVANCE initiatives, help assessing their advancements in faculty diversification. These data of 354 institutions were available for this part of the study, limiting the generalizability of our descriptive and inferential analyses.

Preliminary findings of this phase include a descriptive analysis of the available data and regression models of two time points. Descriptive analyses showed a general increase in the number of WOC across all institutions in the database. While in 2001 there was a total number of 349 WOC engineering faculty across all institutions, representing only 1.8% of all faculty, in 2015 there were a total of 1,552, representing 5.4% of all faculty. However, 70% of the institutions with no WoC in 2001 still did not employ WoC faculty in 2015. In addition, the concentration of WOC differs across institution types. Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), in general, report lower proportions of WOC than non-PWI’s (e.g., minority-serving institutions). Asian American female faculty constituted the biggest proportion of WOC among all different groups of institutions. African Americans constituted 45% of the female engineering faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) compared to about 3% of the
female engineering faculty at PWIs. However, when compared to the total engineering faculty, African American female faculty represent only 6.7% and 0.4% in each of these groups of institutions, respectively. Latina faculty were outnumbered by Asian American female faculty at Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs).

Ordinary least squares regression models using only data at two time points (2003 and 2015) were used to explore the effects of a variety of institutional variables at 2003 in the proportion of WOC engineering faculty at 2015. It was hypothesized that institutions with female leaders, an explicit commitment to diversity (expressed through ADVANCE initiatives), and those with a diverse student body would have higher proportions of WOC engineering faculty. Other institutional variables were considered for controlling purposes such as their Carnegie classification, private/public control source, minority-serving institution designation, institution size, urban status, and institutional selectivity. Individual models were created to study the proportions of (a) all women, (b) all WoC, (c) African American female faculty, (d) Asian and Asian American female faculty, and (e) Latina faculty.

The gender of the leadership had a positive effect on the prevalence of African American engineering faculty. However, there is no effect on the proportion of other WoC faculty or WoC in the aggregate. The presence of ADVANCE programs did not have an effect on the proportions of WoC when controlling for other institutional variables. Also, ethnic diversity (but not gender diversity) in 2003 is positively correlated with the proportion of total WoC and for African American female faculty in 2015.

Ongoing and future quantitative analyses using the described data include, (1) clustering analysis of the type of institutions that have the higher/lower numbers and proportion of WOC engineering faculty; (2) a Granger analysis\(^3\) that would correlate the considered variables across different points in time; (3) a longitudinal analysis that would allow extracting the effect of each variable across time; and (4) a survival analysis of the event when institutions started hiring WOC engineering faculty.

**Phase B: Development of a National Survey of Women Engineering Faculty**

Although our quantitative analysis studies institutional level variables, it cannot capture how the WOC faculty experience such institutional elements. In addition, the sample of institutions considered in the quantitative analysis is limited. In order to explore the actual experiences of women faculty, capture the differences across race and class, and expand the generalizability of such exploration, we are developing a National Survey of Women Engineering Faculty that aims to answer the following research questions:

- How do women faculty in engineering self-identify race, class, and gender?
- How do individual, institutional, and symbolic dimensions of oppression\(^1\) connect to one’s persistence as a woman faculty in engineering?
- In what ways, if any, do persistence align with intersectionality?

In this stage, two parallel objectives are being advanced: (1) the creation of a National Database of Engineering Faculty and Institutional Leaders, and (2) the development of a scale to study their experiences through the lens of intersectionality. Each of these steps is further described next.

*Creation of a National Database of Engineering Faculty and Institutional Leaders*

A total of 619 institutions with 3,245 ABET-accredited engineering programs were identified based on ABET’s website in January 2016. On Spring 2016 our data collection process
started, to gather information of professors’ name, title, picture, and contact information at each of the identified programs is being collected. In addition, information on the institutions’ president, provost, and diversity officers is also being collected. All the information is being accessed through publicly available sources online using a web-crawler. As of November, of 2016, there was a 40% advancement on the data collection process to complete the database. Once the survey is launched, the gathered data will help us conduct analyses similar to those described in Phase A to support stronger conclusions on the institutional elements influencing the advancement of WOC engineering faculty.

Scale Development

For the scale development, the team generated an initial pool of items exploring how intersectionality relates to women engineering faculty’s persistence from individual, symbolic, and institutional perspectives. The survey is being generated through a step-by-step process of planning, construction, qualitative evaluation, and validation. In the planning phase, we specified our target group as tenured/tenure-track women faculty in engineering, and a statement of the purpose of the intended survey was formulated accordingly. Construction of the survey occurred after conducting an extensive literature review on the persistence of women faculty and the operational definitions of persistence as the constructs were made and the components to be measured were identified. Grounded in the theory of intersectionality of race, class, and gender, a pool of Likert scale question items was written and reviewed by the item writers. Through the methodological consultations with a research center at the project’s lead institution as well as the four Advisory Board members with expertise in higher education, diversity, and gender studies, the initial scale/survey questionnaire was discussed and assessed for its qualitative validation. After multiple revisions and/or deletions, approximately 72 survey items were ready for a pilot testing. Ongoing content validation and pilot testing will be conducted to confirm the validity and reliability of the instrument and its alignment with intersectionality and persistence prior to launching the national survey.

Phase C: Interviews with Women of Color Engineering Faculty

Our research will use interviews to examine the experiences of women of color in tenure-track faculty positions in engineering. We especially want to interview the WOC in a focus group format (about 5 faculty per group discussion) to learn about the factors that influenced your career decision-making as well as your persistence in academia.

Through the institutional analysis above, we identified colleges and universities with one or two WOC faculty in engineering to recruit potential participants for the next phase of our project, interviews. We are seeking assistance from the Deans of the universities with identifying engineering or computing women of color faculty. If they are willing to assist, they submit their contact information and we will send each potential participant a formal letter of invitation. The focus group interviews will coincide with the annual conference American Society for Engineering Education in Columbus, OH for the 124th Annual Conference & Exposition, June 24 - 28, 2017.

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