

The Women of Color Project

In 2008, CSWS was awarded a Ford Foundation grant from the National Council for Research on Women for “Diversifying the Leadership” of CSWS by promoting the leadership of women of color from historically underrepresented groups in the United States. Coordinated by then newly-tenured associate professor Lynn Fujiwara, “Women of Color, Borders, and Power: Mentoring and Leadership Development” involved ten women of color junior faculty from a broad range of disciplines in a yearlong project designed around mentorship, leadership development, and academic success.

Leadership development for women of color junior faculty fundamentally involves academic success, as demonstrated by a record of research and publication. Women of color, however, often find that in addition to research expectations, they are overburdened by service requirements. Being among the very few in their areas who can speak to issues of race and diversity, daily confronting the challenges associated with teaching at a predominantly white university, having to persuade colleagues and departments of the value of work that is often interdisciplinary and understood to be “alternative” or “experimental,” women of color junior faculty must balance a complex series of expectations and demands on their time.

To address these issues, the Women of Color (WoC) Project held a retreat at the beginning of the grant period that helped establish a multi-tiered set of workshops and events for the first year. Understanding the importance of mentoring, Fujiwara organized numerous conversations under the rubric “Academic Success/Academic Survival” with invited senior women of color scholars who shared their own challenges and strategies. Participants benefited from the insights of internationally known scholars like professor of literature Rosaura Sanchez from University of California–San Diego, scholar/activist Cherrie Moraga from Stanford University, filmmaker Lourdes Portillo, and professor of English Paula Moya from Stanford University.

Mindful of the need to promote academic success, the WoC Project held additional workshops on research, writing, and publishing, including a book proposal workshop for one faculty member and a lunch conversation with a professional writing coach and editor to discuss issues and problems encountered by academic writers. Participants also had a very productive and candid promotion and tenure workshop with senior vice-provost for academic affairs Russ Tomlin.

The year’s events culminated in a discussion with chancellor Nancy Cantor and associate provost Kal Alston of Syracuse University on “Institutional Change/Institutional Diversity.” Designed to engage the university’s administrators in a conversation with invited faculty, the event featured core issues of recruitment and retention of faculty of color, equity issues within academic units and departments, and ongoing climate issues that commonly lead to experiences of isolation and alienation. Working in close collaboration with senior vice-provost Russ Tomlin, this event initiated a much needed and important conversation about institutional diversity and institutional change at the UO.

In its second year, the WoC Project built on its previous year’s successes, holding a second book proposal workshop and organizing mentoring events and dinners like the one held in October 2009 with visiting scholar Rebecca Wanzo. However, recognizing the enormous time commitment that was placed on the participants during the first year, in its second year the focus shifted somewhat to ensure that leadership within CSWS would be diversified. In order to do this, CSWS established two coordinator positions, which were filled by associate professors Lynn Fujiwara and Lamia Karim. These new roles allowed Fujiwara and Karim to play a more active role in decision-making and programming. In their co-coordination of the WoC project, Fujiwara organized her projects through the rubric “Centering Intersectionality,” which allowed her to focus on the both theoretical and institutional elements of diversity, while Karim’s “Going Global” emphasized the necessity of understanding intersectionality and diversity in a fully international context.



At Celebrating Research, left to right: Lynn Fujiwara, Dayo Mitchell, Russell Tomlin (photo by Jack Liu).

In order to learn from more established scholars about their institutional experiences building leadership and diversity, the WoC Project invited scholars who had been involved in these efforts on their own campuses. During the winter, Gina Dent (professor, feminist studies and director of the Center for Advanced Feminist Research at the University of California–Santa Cruz) gave a talk on “Transforming Feminisms” that directly addressed how her department was able to build a feminist studies program that centered intersectionality, building an emphasis on transnational feminisms and integrating race studies with feminist studies. In the spring, professor Kamala Visweswaran from the Department of Anthropology at the University of Texas–Austin spoke about the role of feminist scholars in a postcolonial, globalized world.

The year ended with two key events. The first event was a celebration of the research of women of color faculty members at the University of Oregon, an event that brought administrators and faculty members together to recognize the significant contributions women of color faculty members make to the research profile of the university, including numerous books, documentaries, articles, and awards. The vice president for research, deans, chairs, and friends and families of faculty attended this afternoon event.

The second was an intensive Writing and Promotion Workshop held at the end of spring term 2010. Including assistant and associate professors, the Writing and Promotion Workshop was open to all women faculty. The four-day workshop included sessions with peer reviewers from external institutions (among which were Boston College, Cornell University, Indiana University, University of Michigan, University of California–Irvine, Tulane University), offering a rare opportunity for participants to get feedback and build networks with scholars around the country. In addition, it allowed UO participants to benefit from each other’s editorial abilities, as well as to get to know the research of their cohort of feminist scholars.

In the coming year, the WoC Project will continue to pursue its goals of mentoring and promoting leadership, but the wider intention has always been to center the WoC Project within the institutional structure of CSWS. The work of the WoC Project has already resulted in a series of changes within CSWS. This fall, Karim will join CSWS in the newly created position of associate director. This two-year position is intended to create leadership opportunities within CSWS that will also help to diversify leadership in the university as a whole. As associate director, Karim will continue the important work of centering intersectionality and bringing a global perspective to CSWS. ■

—report by Lynn Fujiwara, Lamia Karim and Carol Stabile