

# **VASTA Best Practices to Deans and Chairs: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion**

## **Academic Theater Profession: A Guide to Best Practices\***

**By the Voice and Speech Trainer's Association Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee with the approval of the VASTA Board**

### **To Deans, Department Chairs, Administrators, and Faculty:**

This letter serves as an introduction to "Equity for Minorities and Women in the Academic Theater Profession: A Guide to Best Practices," written by the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee of the Voice and Speech Trainers Association, and approved by the VASTA governing Board November 2008. VASTA recommends that administrators and faculty of academic theatre institutions use these guidelines in their planning and decision-making and that the guidelines will serve as a resource for theater faculty at all ranks.

As theater programs in the United States position themselves to meet the needs of a 21st-century education and training, it is imperative that we embrace inclusion as a value driving decision-making. The changing demographics of the population of the United States, the needs of a new generation of scholars, the aging (and retirement) of the current professorate and the internationalization of education and research have already begun to impact contemporary theater education in the academy.

Academic theater institutions have a long history of excellence in performance, education, training, and scholarship, but many academic cultures still reflect values that historically favored the population that initially established the programs and their curricula. Thus, faculty, staff, and students from a changing demographics are expected to flourish in a system associated with inherent intellectual/professional biases-- a system that often excludes contributions from historically under-represented persons within the field.

To remain competitive in the 21st century, academic theater programs need to re-think how we recruit students and faculty, how we produce and cast our seasons, how we educate a new generation of theater practitioners, and how we retain talented minority faculty. Diversity in the student body, staff, and faculty enhance the overall educational community by infusing it with differing points of view, differing educational foci, a diverse workforce of active alumni, and a flow of invigorated ideas that will stimulate scholarship and academic culture.

As Voice professionals, VASTA is keenly aware of how "voice" is linked to cultural, familial, and personal identity, and how training practices created for a majority white population of theater artists (and passed down to their students) may not enhance the educational/workplace experiences of minority faculty and students or women, and may actively work against their ability to thrive in our academic institutions and our profession. If we wish our profession, (academic and professional), to mirror the diversity of the U.S. population, we must begin to be proactive in our choices. It is especially important that Deans, Department Chairs and senior

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administrators guide and help the faculty and students in efforts to create an inclusive and equitable environment within their academic theater programs.

Although the following guidelines highlight the needs of minority and women faculty and students, many of them will apply to all members of the profession. Understanding that academic theater programs differ widely in their missions, resources, make-up, and audiences, we urge you to embrace the spirit of these guidelines to promote equity and inclusion within your academic theater programs. We hope these guidelines will be used to encourage minority students, promote inclusion among faculty and staff, guide a junior faculty member towards success, or help a senior faculty member mentor a minority faculty member or student to be successful in their career.

Sincerely,

Beth McGee, President VASTA. 2008

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## Equity For Minorities and Women in The Academic Theater Profession: A Guide to Best Practices

US Census Bureau projections highlight that the white non-Hispanic college-age population (18-24 years) will shrink from 65% in 2005 to below 50% by 2040. The “Baby Boom” professorate is beginning to retire, which will open up faculty positions to a field of MFA’s and Ph.D.’s who will be over 50% women. The new generation of students puts a high degree of importance on the integration of personal life, family life, and work life. To remain operational and inspirational to the new generation of scholars/theater artists, the academic theater community needs to be pro-active in its choices as the ethnic, racial, age, and gender outlook of the academy changes.

### Department Climate

Proactive approaches are needed to create and maintain a cultural climate that is inclusive, welcoming, and appreciative of minorities and women. The following transparent and uniform practices will help to create an equitable and transparent environment for all members of a department:

- Establish and infuse diversity strategies as a part of all departmental decisions
- Annual equity review of wages, space allocation, teaching loads, advising loads, and service loads
- Attention to providing fair and adequate start-up packages for all new hires
- Equitable and transparent allocation of all departmental resources (such as travel money, course releases, etc.)

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- Transparent, clear, and widely disseminated guidelines for promotion, tenure and teaching evaluation that take into account subtle evaluation bias often experienced by women and racial and ethnic minorities
- Charging the entire department with the responsibility of mentoring junior faculty, and implementing mechanisms for accountability
- Acknowledgment of the possibility of subtle bias with respect to the evaluation of scholarship written by or about women and minorities, coupled with pro-active tools for reducing this bias
- Attention to reducing the overuse of minorities and women on those university service committees charged with responding to the needs of minorities and women, and increasing their presence on high-profile service committees
- Refraining from asking minority and women faculty to teach outside of their expertise (an “ethnic” or “gender studies” class, for example. Acknowledging that women and minority faculty face unique biases from their students which affect the classroom environment and teaching evaluations•
- Distributing the mentoring/advising assignments of minority and women students throughout the department
- Pro-actively diversifying departmental curriculum to include scholarship/artists/thematic content, history that includes women, and the contributions of Black scholars/artists, Latino/Hispanic scholars/artists, and Native American scholars/artists, keeping in mind that diversity values can be taught in all disciplines (having a single “diversity course” can be perceived as “ghettoizing” the issue)
- Avoid assigning women duties considered undesirable by their male colleagues.
- Stereotyping women as “being better” at “touchy-feely” jobs with emotional components (advising, teaching) are false and demeaning

## Season choices and casting

Understanding that season choices and casting are contingent upon available resources, talented artists, educational goals, and the known audience, the following practices are pro-active ideas for diversifying theater seasons, the make-up of the theater student body, and presenting a more diverse view of the theater to your audiences:

- Departmental review of the promotion of “Standard Speech” as the only appropriate dialect for the theater
- Understanding that one’s voice reflects one’s cultural, personal, and ethnic identity and that artists of color are often called upon in the profession to reflect their race or ethnicity in performance dialects
- Create opportunities for students of color to study and learn dialects related to race and ethnicity
- Incorporating the works of women and minority playwrights, designers, directors, and other guest artists into the season

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- Offering workshops and courses in diverse theater studies
- Actively request diverse works for the library or another student accessible entity, especially works by contemporary minority and women playwrights
- Active departmental engagement in discussions about choice of a season and how it serves the entire student population. Investigation of stereotypes, choice of plays,
- Collaborations with Cultural, Minority, or Women's Studies Departments in order to promulgate accurate and diverse perspectives through theater
- Refraining from asking minority students to always do race-specific roles

## Recruitment and Hiring

As the growing racial and ethnic minority and female population of theater graduates enter the professoriate, more attention will need to be paid to equitable hiring practices for qualified minority and women faculty. The following best practices can promote the successful recruitment and hiring of quality candidates:

Prior to serving, require search committee members to receive formal training on how to run an equitable search. They may be exempted if they received training within the last six months. Training would include:

- The University's Equal Opportunity policies for hiring and questions that are illegal in nature
- Subtle racial and gender bias that can be embedded in the search process and endeavor to observe it when it happens and eradicate it
- How to pro-actively search for qualified women and minority candidates by using professional organizations, graduates of HBCU's and HHCUs, women and minority Ph.D. guides, and internet tools
- The role and responsibilities of the search committee chair
- How to establish the committee determined uniform qualifications needed in a successful candidate so that standard questions can be created and asked of all candidates to avoid subjective biases
- The use of partner or target-of-opportunity hiring if used in your institution
- The search committee should be open to new or different fields in the discipline ("We have never had a Hispanic historian, and his/her area doesn't fit in your departmental focus" sets the committee up to continue the status quo)
- Ask women and minorities outside the department to be on the search committee to ensure that "minority opinions" are heard; search committees tend to "clone themselves" in their evaluation of qualifications. Alumni and Emeriti understand the university culture and may be willing to serve

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## Students and Professional Development (“Growing our Own”)

Academic theater professionals who see talented women and minority students that might enjoy the professoriate or the theater profession should actively encourage them to consider graduate school or further training. Often professors are unaware that students have a very narrow view of academic life, and need to be mentored to consider its many rewards. Or, students are unclear of the skills needed to compete in the professional realm. Formal and informal mentoring and/or added curriculum offerings can serve this purpose.

- Make students aware of possibilities, without making judgments about their “ability” to seek those possibilities (don’t “track” students into certain areas without making them aware of the many possibilities)
- Be aware that many minority artists are particularly interested in the history and the activity of their ethnicity/gender in the profession, and give them the tools to investigate these areas

## Mentoring

Effective mentoring often is the difference between minority and women faculty and student to succeed in the academic theater profession. Effective mentoring improves departmental climate by encouraging collegiality, highlighting scholarly activity, and supporting artistic invention and production. The following practices help to create a high-quality mentoring environment:

- Ensuring that newly hired minority and women faculty have opportunities to share their artistic production or scholarship with the departmental faculty and the university community
- Creating a mentoring process that includes mentors both within and outside the department
- Make all processes for salary review, work review, teaching review, and allocation of resources transparent and available to everyone
- Making sure that non-minority faculty mentor minority students so that minority faculty are not tacitly expected to be their mentors
- Mentoring all faculty towards promotion from Associate to Full Professor
- Ensuring that information helping faculty and students find publishers, grants, or fellowships is disseminated to all

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## Service

Minority and women faculty members often view community service as an important link between the academy and their surrounding community, as an obligation to their ethnic communities, or feel that it is important to “give back” to their communities in any a number of ways. Administrators should be aware that this is the case for some minority scholars and artists and recognize these contributions to society when evaluating their service.

\*drafted with many insights from the American Historical Association’s “Equity for Minority Historians in the Academic History Workplace: A Guide to Best Practices © June 2007, by the Committee on Minority Historians  
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