

Community

At OSU, women of color find struggles continue

By Theresa Hogue
Gazette-Times reporter

What gets to Del Armstead the most about her work at Oregon State University is not the times when she encounters subtle racism from a restaurant staffperson, or watches someone hold open the door for a line of white people, only to let it swing shut in her face. Those things do happen to Armstead, and are extremely frustrating. But what gets to her the most, she said, is when students come in for counseling the first time, and afterwards, change therapists.

Armstead, who is African American, said she first wondered if it was just her counseling style. But then she began recounting the 10 years she worked as a university counselor in Illinois. In all that time, she never had the turnover in student clients that she's experienced in less than two years at OSU.

"I know people want therapists that match what they perceive their values are," Armstead said. But it appears that at least some of the students aren't comfortable seeking counseling from an African American woman.

Being a woman on campus isn't easy, as a newly released parity report on the status of women at OSU has revealed. Although significant steps have been taken in the past nine years since a previous survey was done, OSU is below the national average in number of female professors, salary equity and professional development.

For women of color on campus, the results are even more stark. According to the report, women of color say that OSU and the surrounding community lack racial, ethnic and other forms of diversity and that there is a dominant perception that the area is an ideal community and has no problem with racism or sexism.

The report shows that academic women of color are even further away from reaching parity than their white female counterparts. Less than 0.5 percent of tenured full professors are women of color, and less than 4 percent are tenured associate professors. Only 7 percent of tenure-track assistant professors are women of color. Only one dean in the entire university is a woman of color, and only five other women of color are in academic or administrative leadership positions on campus.

Several women of color from OSU met Wednesday afternoon at the Women's Center to discuss their experiences on campus. Farah Ibrahim, department chairwoman in the School of Education, remembers her time at the University of Connecticut in a school that was 90 percent male faculty. She said without the Women's Center on campus, she would not have survived her early years there.

"Things have really changed," she said, "but a lot needs to be done."

One of the challenges Ibrahim said women on campus face is not being heard, literally. At some faculty meetings, women can be talked over entirely or ignored when they speak up. One of the problems is that they have not learned how to communicate in a meeting type setting by others.

"I have studied mentoring, and women do not mentor each other very well," she said. "There's a whole system men have learned from the cradle."

When new men come into a workplace setting, other men help them learn the ropes. When new women arrive, Ibrahim said, the common reaction is for other women to get competitive, not to provide support and guidance.

Janet Nishihara, an academic counselor and coordinator with the Educational Opportunities Program (EOP), said she's often been talked over at meetings, and when she does speak up loudly, others take it as a rude gesture.

"One of the things I run into is in the backs of their brains, people have stereotypes (about) Asian women. They think they're quiet and passive," she said. Nishihara considers herself outspoken, but when she does voice her opinion, people seem to either ignore it as if it couldn't have happened, or act shocked.

"That makes me act out more," she said, laughing. "I get loud and vocal about stuff."

Del Armstead said she's always lived in predominantly white communities, and she's used to dealing with stereotypes and racism on a daily basis. But that doesn't make it easier.

"When I come to the university it's hard to continue to feel 'Okay, I have to prepare myself,'" for confrontations or misunderstandings. She said sometimes she feels she wears a suit of armor to protect herself.

"Yes, I've experienced this my whole life, but that's the problem," she said. "I'm tired of it."