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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Assessing departmental readiness to support minoritized faculty

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**Abstract**

Though increasing numbers of racially and ethnically minoritized (REM) individuals earn PhDs and national initiatives focus on faculty diversity, challenges persist in recruiting, hiring, and retaining REM faculty. While a pervasive issue nationally, the literature predominantly focuses on faculty diversity at research-intensive institutions. This exploratory case study pilots a readiness instrument to evaluate the commitment and willingness of a biomedical department at a primarily undergraduate institution to embrace faculty diversity before initiating a postdoctoral faculty conversion program. We introduce the Community Readiness Model (CRM) into an academic context, offering academic departments a robust framework and tool to evaluate readiness and capacity to recruit, retain, and support REM faculty.

**Practical Takeaways**

- Academic departments can be conceived of as a type of community.
- The adapted Department Readiness Tool can be a valuable method of evaluating a department's readiness to support the success of underrepresented minority faculty.
- Departments may score highly on some areas of readiness but relatively low on others, which provides insight into where time and resources should be invested to improve readiness.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, higher education has made significant investments aimed at diversifying faculty. Despite these efforts, there has been limited change in the proportion of racially and ethnically minoritized (REM) professors in academia. The racial and ethnic makeup of the professoriate in the United States remained relatively stable between 1980 and 2015 (Hofstra et al., 2022), particularly demonstrating a disconnect between the growth of REM talent in biomedical sciences and academic hiring practices (Gibbs et al., 2014). While an increasing number of REM individuals are earning PhDs, the rate of hiring from this pool remains unaltered, and at current rates, faculty diversity would remain stagnant for decades (Gibbs et al., 2016). According to Boyle et al. (2020, p. 4), such deep-rooted traditions of exclusion within academic spaces can only be overcome with focused, intentional effort; rather than focusing on individuals from REM groups, we must understand why institutions are failing to attract and retain the talent that exists.

The Alliances for Graduate Education and the Professoriate (AGEP), known in Maryland as the AGEP PROMISE Academy Alliance (APAA), a National Science Foundation (NSF)-funded program, was implemented at four institutions within the University System of Maryland to increase faculty diversity through postdoctoral recruitment, development, and conversion into faculty positions (Cresiski et al., 2022). Unlike traditional postdoctoral programs that prepare scholars to become faculty members at other institutions, the APAA program recruits and hires individuals with the intention of converting them to faculty members within the same department. Rather than using a deficit model that centers the supposed shortcomings of individual participants in the program, we explore the context (i.e., the department) where hiring decisions are made and where this program would be implemented.

Academic departments, often underutilized catalysts for change, are central to critical faculty-related activities (Boyle et al., 2020; Edwards, 1999; Hobbs & Anderson, 1971; White-Lewis, 2021). They embody principles of cohesive community-building in their decision-making processes, fostering a democratic consensus that values diverse perspectives. This approach mirrors the delegation of tasks within communities, emphasizing skillful management to prevent silo formation and ensure comprehensive decision-making. Within departments, the professional hierarchy, responsible for hiring and promotions, plays a pivotal role in shaping faculty composition and can expedite or hinder the success of REM groups seeking tenure-track positions.

Suggesting postdoctoral conversion programs as one method of increasing faculty diversity, Culpepper et al. (2021) argue “[t]here are several critical junctures at which the implementation...requires a dramatic shift in policy and practice but also in culture, norms, and expectations” (p. 14). However, universities may lack institutional or departmental readiness, time, resources, interest, and commitment (Sheridan et al., 2004), and are often left to curate and connect knowledge and networks via an ad hoc learning and support system. Moreover, a comprehensive review of the literature on organizational and community readiness (Castañeda et al., 2012) reveals that the concept of “readiness” is in the early stages of development. The absence of well-defined measures makes it difficult to gauge an academic department’s level of readiness to embrace a new postdoctoral career pathway to help diversify its faculty and to offer a supportive and collegial environment in which REM colleagues will thrive.

Building on the organizational and community readiness literature, our study takes a unique approach to navigating the critical domain of department readiness, extending Sheridan et al.’s (2004) evaluation of department readiness to embrace diversity by focusing on a primarily undergraduate institution (PUI) rather than a research-intensive

institution. Departing from the narrow focus on faculty attitudes in traditional climate studies, our examination encompasses the departmental climate, available resources, faculty understanding of the underlying issues affecting faculty diversity, and the department's willingness to act and commit to change. Kezar (2011) posits that a lack of solid understanding of organizational context may lead campus leaders to implement change processes inconsistent with their institution's culture. However, we argue that within a campus, departments may serve as pockets of resistance to change or may actively support change initiatives. Consequently, we assess departmental readiness by focusing on one department at a time, tailoring strategies to its unique dynamics.

The Tri-Ethnic Center Community Readiness Model (CRM) and its accompanying Community Readiness Evaluation Tool (CRT) (Oetting et al., 2014; Plested et al., 2006) are central to our exploratory study. The CRT offers a comprehensive assessment of areas requiring attention for efficacy. Adapted to assess departmental readiness, it can pinpoint specific areas and levels of support for faculty diversity initiatives within a department. This strategic evaluation ensures that resources are allocated efficiently, maximizing impact, and bringing about change at the departmental level, where hiring takes place.

Importantly, gaps in departmental readiness should *not* be interpreted as a reason for inaction or delaying efforts to recruit and retain REM faculty. Waiting until a department is fully ready can perpetuate existing disparities. Instead, department readiness is an assessment tool to inform and guide change. Departments can work to transform their hiring priorities and address mechanisms of personnel reproduction, including coordinating with other departments' initiatives such as outreach, quality matrices, recruitment, and job announcements (White-Lewis, 2020). In this manner, our research advocates for a proactive and informed approach, steering academic departments toward more strategic and impactful efforts.

## The Community Readiness Model

Community readiness is a multidimensional concept that refers to the willingness and capacity to act on an issue (Beebe et al., 2001; Castañeda et al., 2012; Chilenski et al., 2007; Edwards et al., 2000; Goodman et al., 1998; Lehman et al., 2002; ). Oetting et al. (1995) and Oetting et al. (2014) provide a proven CRM and CRT for assessing readiness across six dimensions (Table 1). A community is ready for change when individuals and groups are willing to accept and support the implementation of new programs or activities in the community (Donnermeyer et al., 1997). Because of its "versatility and flexibility," the CRM has been widely applied "to a diverse range of health and social issues and definitions of community" (Kostadinov et al., 2015, p. 3464).

A community commonly refers to a group of individuals who, despite their diverse characteristics, are linked by social bonds, shared perspectives, and collaborative efforts. This connection often thrives within a shared geographic location or context (MacQueen et al., 2001). The definition aligns with an academic department, where faculty members form a community based on mutual interests, interactions, a sense of cohesiveness, and belonging. While the department primarily focuses on academic pursuits, its collective identity, collaborative ethos, and supportive mechanisms foster a community-like atmosphere within the academic organizational structure. The establishment of policies and strategic direction mirrors the way communities define themselves through boundaries. A department's administrative structure facilitates faculty recruitment, research agenda negotiations, the development of reward systems, and responsiveness to academic and student needs.

**TABLE 1** Readiness dimensions and corresponding APAA adaptations.

Dimensions of community readiness	Readiness assessment adaptation	
1. Efforts	Activities or services designed for the resolution of the diversity issue	To what extent are there efforts, programs, & policies that address recruiting and retaining faculty from a diversity of backgrounds?
2. Knowledge of Efforts	Reflecting on awareness of ongoing initiatives	To what extent do department members know about any of the department's efforts to recruit and retain faculty from a diversity of backgrounds and how it impacts the department?
3. Leadership	Gauging the degree of leadership support for the diversity initiative	To what extent are appointed leaders and influential departmental leaders supportive of efforts to recruit and retain faculty from a diversity of backgrounds?
4. Climate	Prevailing attitude toward services designed for diversity issues	What is the prevailing attitude of the department toward the recruitment and retention of faculty from a diversity of backgrounds?
5. Knowledge of the Issue	Familiarity with efforts and their effectiveness, ensuring accessibility across segments	To what extent do department members know about the causes, the need for recruitment and retention of faculty from a diversity of backgrounds, and the consequences for the department?
6. Resources	Availability of essential resources such as personnel, time, finances, and space to fortify the diversity initiatives	To what extent are people, time, money, space, and so forth. available to support the implementation effort?

Abbreviation: APAA, AGEP PROMISE Academy Alliance.

The community concept depends on a particular problem, situation, or place (Jumper-Thurman et al., 2003). We define a community as an academic department that shares an interest in the recruitment and retention of REM faculty, and we modified the Community Readiness Tool (CRT) into a Department Readiness Tool (DRT) to explore the concept of departmental readiness in one biomedical department at a mid-Atlantic PUI (MAPUI) affiliated with the APAA project.

Lee et al. (2007) contend that change in higher education usually occurs slowly, resulting in isolated pockets of innovation that often fail to spread. They propose that academic departments may hold the key to more lasting reform. Sheridan et al. (2004) used the transtheoretical model of intentional behavioral change to assess readiness to embrace diversity at a research university in Wisconsin. Female faculty were less enthusiastic about diversity compared to male faculty, while humanities and social science departments were better at embracing diversity compared to biological and physical science departments. This study made important contributions to our understanding of departments' readiness to embrace diversity. However, the transtheoretical model focuses on individual-level changes rather than collective change; their results represent general faculty perceptions of department culture and may not fully encapsulate their perspective in the context of specific impending diversity initiatives.

In contrast, the DRT identifies different levels of readiness across dimensions not visible through existing institutional assessment tools (e.g., Griffin et al., 2020). The DRT allows departments to assess their readiness to adopt and integrate recommended

strategies along a continuum. Departments can candidly acknowledge their current stage of progress, with some admitting to uncertainty and actively seeking solutions, while others proceed to implementation. When an academic department is change-ready, it commits resources and is more determined to overcome setbacks and obstacles (Armenakis & Harris, 2009). Faculty members are also more likely to initiate change, exert additional effort, demonstrate greater tenacity, and collaborate.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This exploratory study adopts a single case study design, focusing on one MAPUI biomedical department. The study instrument design and data analysis are based on the *Tri-Ethnic Center Community Handbook*, 2nd edition (Oetting et al., 2014), referred to in the literature as the Community Readiness Tool (CRT), that has evolved with protocol improvements and allows for minor modifications to the methodology and interview scripts for the particular issue and community at hand (Kelly & Stanley, 2014; Plested et al., 2006). The community is defined as the members of MAPUI's biomedical department. The readiness issue addressed is "the recruitment and retention of faculty from diverse backgrounds."

MAPUI is the largest producer of undergraduate degrees in health professions and K-12 education in Maryland. It is a regional comprehensive primarily undergraduate institution (M-1; Master's colleges and universities-larger programs) enrolling approximately 16,500 undergraduate and 3000 graduate students.

The CRT interview guide includes 40 questions to assess readiness across six dimensions: Departmental Efforts, Knowledge of the Efforts, Leadership, Climate, Knowledge of the Issue, and Resources Allocated to the Issue. The questions were tailored to assess each dimension comprehensively. For example, in exploring Departmental Efforts, participants were prompted with questions such as "How much of a concern is the recruitment and retention of faculty from diverse backgrounds to members of the department?" and "Are there efforts in the department that address the recruitment and retention of faculty from diverse backgrounds?" Participants were asked to provide succinct descriptions of these efforts ("Can you briefly describe these efforts?"), indicate their duration ("How long have these efforts been going on?"), and identify the targeted beneficiaries of each initiative. Survey questions map to the six dimensions of readiness, and the dimensions were adapted to apply to the possible implementation of APAA in the department (Table 1).

Virtual semi-structured interviews were conducted by a consultant between July and August 2021 and took 45–60 min. They were recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription firm. The consultant also took handwritten notes.

Working with the institutional leadership representative overseeing APAA, we designed criteria to identify faculty and staff with significant knowledge of the biomedical department's dynamics and a history of involvement in various roles within the department. Seven key informants were selected using a combination of purposeful and convenience sampling, considering factors such as faculty role (tenured, non-tenured, previous service on hiring committees), gender, and leadership positions. Capturing a comprehensive range of perspectives was essential for a thorough examination of the department's readiness for the postdoctoral faculty diversity initiative. Recruitment involved direct communication by the consultant and emphasized our commitment to confidentiality and impartiality.

## Data analysis

We adapted the CRT scoring rubric to assess the characteristics of each readiness stage for each dimension (Table 2). We used three interview scorers, the internal evaluator and

**TABLE 2** Department readiness scoring rubric.

Readiness stage	Readiness assessment
1. No Awareness	Issue generally not recognized as a problem.
2. Denial/Resistance	At least some members of the department as a concern, but there is little recognition that it might be occurring locally in the department.
3. Vague awareness	Most feel there may be a local concern, but there is no immediate motivation or willingness to do anything about it.
4. Preplanning	Clear recognition that something must be done and there may even be a group addressing it. However, efforts are not yet focused or detailed.
5. Preparation	Active leaders begin planning in earnest. Department offers modest interest in efforts.
6. Initiation/Implementation	Enough information is available to justify efforts. Activities are underway.
7. Stabilization	Activities are supported by administrators or department decision-makers. Staff are trained and experienced.
8. Confirmation/Expansion	Efforts are in place. Department members feel comfortable using services and they support expansion. Local data regularly obtained.
9. Community ownership	Detailed and sophisticated knowledge exists about prevalence, causes, and consequences. Effective evaluation guides new directions. Model applied to other issues.

two graduate research assistants, with the goal of reducing bias and improving reliability (Denzin, 1978). Virtual discussions among the scoring team ensured consensus. The scoring process closely adhered to the CRT guidelines (Plested et al., 2006). The department's average score was computed by aggregating the readiness score for each dimension based on insights from the key informants, and scores were rounded down instead of up (e.g., a score of 5.55 was rounded down to 5.) This procedure acknowledges that a department close to a readiness stage has not yet reached that stage.

## RESULTS

MAPUI's overall readiness score of  $M = 5.55$ , ( $SD = .66$ ) places the department within the Preparation stage (Table 3). This indicates a prevailing perception that *we are concerned about this and we want to do something about it*. Some resources may even be identified for further efforts to address the issue, and leaders are actively working to secure these resources.

Scores on each readiness dimension provide information to help a department diagnose where to put initial efforts. The six dimension scores vary from a high of  $M = 6.32$  ( $SD = .45$ ; Implementation stage) for Leadership to a low of  $M = 4.50$  ( $SD = 1.53$ ; Preplanning stage) for Resources (Table 3).

Key respondents' open-ended comments add to our understanding of the department's readiness for change. When asked "On a scale of 1 to 10, how much of a concern to members of the department is the recruitment and retention of faculty who come from a diversity of backgrounds, with 1 being no concern at all and 10 being a very great concern?" all respondents gave a rating of 7 or higher ( $M = 8.8$ ). One respondent said, "We're warming up to it. I mean, we know it, but we're warming up to it. Sometimes people forget, though." Another respondent suggested, "I think 7 is sort of the average. I don't



**TABLE 3** MAPUI dimension mean scores and readiness stages.

Dimension	Mean score (SD) and stage	Readiness
Effort	5.71 (0.97) Preparation	Department efforts are being planned.
Knowledge of efforts	6.14 (1.02) Initiation	An increasing number of department members have knowledge of local/departmental efforts and are trying to increase the knowledge of the general department about these efforts.
Leadership	6.32 (0.45) Initiation	Leaders are active and supportive of the implementation of efforts.
Departmental climate	5.21 (1.33) Preparation	The attitude in the department is “We are concerned about this,” and department members are beginning to reflect modest support for efforts.
Knowledge of issue	5.43 (1.13) Preparation	Some department members have basic knowledge of the issue, including signs and symptoms. General information on this issue is available.
Resources	4.50 (1.53) Preplanning	The department has individuals, organizations, and/or space available that could be used as resources.
<b>Overall readiness score</b>	<b>5.55 (.66) Preparation</b>	

Abbreviation: MAPUI, mid-Atlantic primarily undergraduate institution.

think anyone would be less than 5. I think it’s recognized as an issue. But in terms of the importance placed on it, I think a 7 is kind of an average for the department as a whole.”

Regarding existing efforts, one informant noted that efforts at diversification had been more focused on the student population than faculty, and that a larger cultural shift was needed:

Our students...are a very diverse group of students...we pretty much mirror the population, the surrounding population...Now, our faculty are not. They’re not even close. So, there is a constant recognition that there’s things that we can do as faculty who are not diverse, but then there’s also this recognition as this spills out...of the culture change in the department that helps to increase the recognition by different faculty that this is a need for the department.

Key informants believed that department members were at least aware of existing efforts (Knowledge of Efforts); as one explained, “Even if they’re not interested, they have heard of it. And they know that we’re doing these efforts...how much they want to be involved is a whole different kind of question, but at least they’re aware of it.” Informants also indicated that leadership is supportive of efforts to recruit and retain REM faculty:

There’s just growing recognition by the senior faculty in the department and the leadership that this is a critical issue right now, and because we are hopefully, as I said, poised to hire several new people in the fall, this is our moment, because we don’t have four positions vacant very often.

Reflecting on Departmental Climate, informants felt that attitudes toward faculty diversification within the department are positive but passive; for example, an informant explained, “It’s not overwhelming, ’cause otherwise we’d already be more active...but I think people are kind of generally positive. It’s not the biggest thing on people’s burners all the time, but it’s generally positive.” Another informant believed department members



understand faculty diversity primarily as a benefit for students, rather than providing benefits for the department itself:

I think there's more of this knowledge of, "Hey, our faculty doesn't look like our students and this is bad because the students don't necessarily see themselves in the faculty." But I don't know if everyone has the same viewpoint of, "If we have a more diverse faculty, we're going to be more creative in our problem solving, et cetera"...I don't know if we've moved to that outcome.

When reflecting on Departmental Resources, informants identified existing funding. However, there was concern about sustainability: "Sustaining these efforts through grant funds suggests that the efforts are temporary. So some efforts are funded externally and the funding will go away. My hope is that the efforts will be sustained through support of the university..."

As we applied the DRT to this biomedical department, the open-ended comments provided useful insights into the readiness ratings that informants gave the department on each dimension, and added to the understanding of its strengths and potential areas for improvement.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this exploratory study, department readiness is modeled descriptively as an outcome variable; the more ready a department is, the more likely it is to adopt the APAA faculty diversity initiative. MAPUI initially planned to be a supporting APAA partner by providing professional development for the postdoctoral scholars hired at other institutions within the alliance. However, based on the findings and ensuing internal discussions, MAPUI decided to move forward with implementing the postdoctoral conversion program. Understanding the department's readiness was crucial, as postdoctoral scholars are not normative at primarily undergraduate institutions (PUIs) and the faculty conversion model is not a typical pathway to a position in the department.

The CRM proved to be easily adaptable for a new setting, population, and issue. The model's guidelines are straightforward and the scoring tools are easily employed. A reasonable amount of staff time was dedicated to scheduling and conducting interviews, transcribing video audio files, and consensus scoring. The results of the readiness assessment have value in program implementation and understanding the variability across the department. Conducting the assessment prior to implementation may reveal contextual factors that can further inform program design and delivery.

The DRT measures readiness across multiple dimensions, allowing departments to assess the likelihood of successful implementation based on strengths and weaknesses and decide where to concentrate efforts. For instance, our interviews showed that the false belief that increasing the number of REM PhD graduates is sufficient to increase the number of REM faculty in the academy is still prevalent. Many interviewees referenced the "Myth of the STEM pipeline" (Boyle et al., 2020). This illuminated an area for education: how institutions promote and hinder advances in faculty diversity within the department (Griffin, 2020; White-Lewis, 2020). In addition, key informants were unable to identify all the department's activities; when they were able to determine which activity was prioritized, they consistently cited recruitment over retention.

Once a department's level of readiness is determined, the CRM provides goals and strategies to improve readiness in each dimension (Jumper-Thurman et al., 2003; Plested et al.,

2006). Departmental readiness scores can reveal trends across a discipline, campus, or a state higher education system. Departmental differences in readiness may impact the success of coordinated initiatives, and awareness of such differences can help leadership determine appropriate interventions or changes to the program.

Limitations of this project include the pilot application solely to one biomedical department at a PUI in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Nonetheless, the CRM and CRT's straightforward guidelines and scoring tools proved to be easily adaptable to an academic setting. The results of this assessment tool facilitated a customized implementation of the APAA initiative at a PUI and set a potential baseline for future diversity initiatives that the department may contemplate. Future research should focus on the DRT's reliability in departments in more diverse types of institutions, in a variety of disciplines as well as over time to substantiate its utility as a repeated-measures instrument. Researchers should also investigate how the DRT compares to, or can be integrated with, other institutional self-assessment tools (e.g., Griffin et al., 2020), organizational readiness for institutional change (Weiner, 2009), or organizational readiness for implementing change (Adelson et al., 2021; Shea et al., 2014). Campus leaders are attempting to address faculty diversity with limited resources; the greater their access to research-based models, frameworks, and resources, the more likely they are to successfully bring additional diversity to the faculty ranks.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Wendy Carter-Veale was the internal evaluator, spearheaded the development of the research project; constructed the initial draft of the manuscript; supervised graduate students who scored interviews; and conducted data analysis. Robin Cresiski was the key personnel on APAA project; provided manuscript development support and editing. Gwen Sharp pulled key quotes from interviews for qualitative data section; edited multiple drafts and edited manuscript to meet all journal requirements. Jordan Lankford read and scored interview transcripts. Fadel Ugarte read and scored interview transcripts.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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