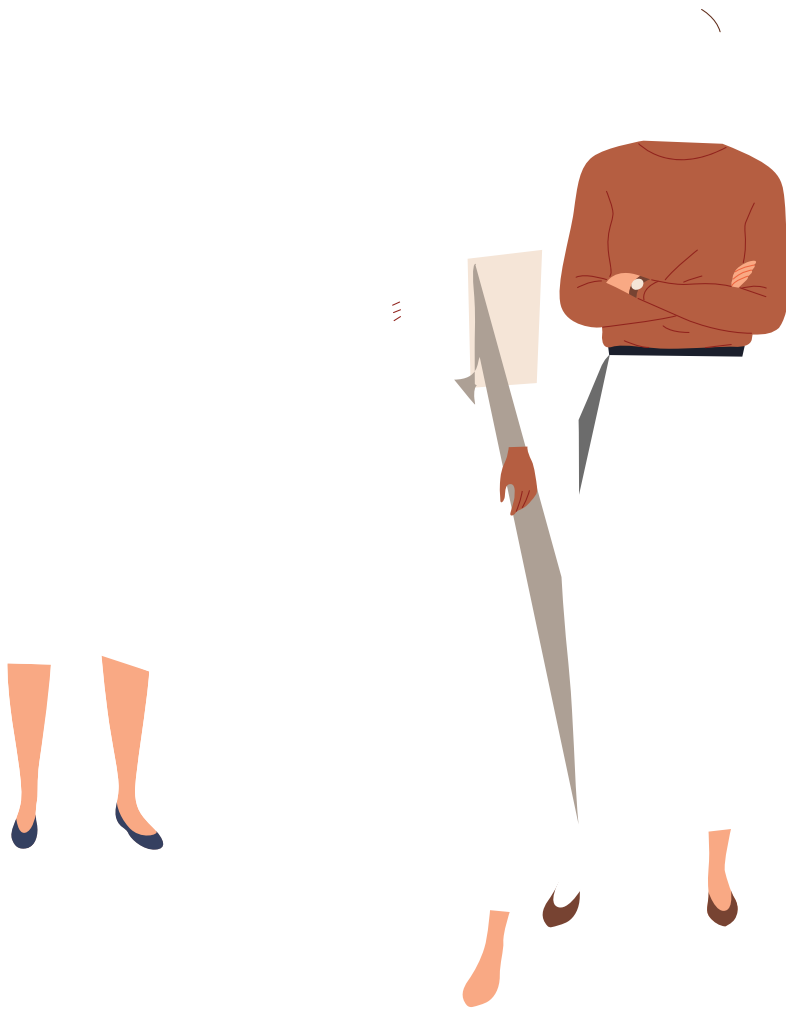


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s a Black woman who studies the educational experiences of Black her work was never quite valued.

“If you focus on minoritized populations, there’s a lack of understanding about why this research is relevant,” she says.

Editors of top-tier journals couldn’t comprehend why she chose to focus on Black women instead of Black people generally, and if she wanted to talk about Black women and girls in the courses that she taught, she had to figure out how to slip the material into the pre-designed curriculum. She was even told that she focused too much on race in a class about diversity.

The experience was isolating. Steele describes going to conferences with few sessions centering on Black women and having trouble finding mentors.

“We have to find those pockets of other researchers who are doing this work and creating spaces for ourselves,” she says.

But all of that changed in 2022, when Steele saw a listing for a job at the University of Rochester’s Warner School of Education and Human Development. Rochester was looking to hire faculty whose work focused on diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. And they weren’t looking to just hire one. They were hiring three.

Rochester was engaging in a cluster hire, the technique of simultaneously bringing on several faculty members with similar backgrounds or research interests in the hopes that they can work together and, if all goes well, create a sense of belonging. Cluster hiring instantly injects diversity into departments that have little, while making the experience easier for minoritized faculty members. Because several minoritized professors are being hired at once, they are less likely to be tokenized and burdened with extra diversity, equity, and inclusion work. And by providing support, mentoring, and a ready-made network of peers, clusters can help minoritized faculty avoid burnout and stay in their roles.

A diversity strategy

It’s an important method to diversify a professoriate that remains stubbornly white. And an increasingly popular one. Since the racial reckoning of 2020, sparked by the murder of George Floyd at the hands of a Minnesota police officer, many

institutions have announced cluster hires of either minoritized faculty or professors who study issues like race and justice. Among them are Harvard; Stanford; the University of Michigan; the University of California, Berkeley; and the University of North Carolina, Wilmington.

Cluster hires are also taking on increased significance as diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts come under attack nationwide.

“We’ve seen a rise in hate,” says Dr. Bridget Kelly, an associate professor and student affairs & diversity officer at the University of Maryland’s College of Education. “[Cluster hires are] a really interesting way to try to make departments and fields more equitable.”

For Steele, being part of a cluster hire made her experience at Rochester much easier.

“I didn’t feel like I was doing it by myself,” she says.

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Showcase and is scheduled to screen at the St. Louis International Film Festival in November.

Building community

Clusters can also support researchers of color when the academy doesn't. Steele remembers being at an event for new faculty. An older white male asked her what she did at the university. After she told him, he said, "Hmmm... the school has definitely changed." Steele was offended, but she wasn't sure if she was being overly sensitive.

"As a Black woman, I want to have a heart-to-heart about certain things. I had to go to one of my cluster hire mates," she says. "It was an affirmation that you're not crazy, you're not making things up, you're not blowing it out of proportion. It just made me feel OK."

Hall has had similar experiences and received similar support.

One time, she was teaching an evening class, and a white custodian asked why she was in the building. Another time, a white staff member tried to kick her out of a room because a meeting was going to be held there. Hall had been invited to the meeting.

"It's definitely helpful to hop on the group chat and process or go eat lunch together," says Hall. "Just being able to say what you're feeling out loud and to be heard and to be validated is helpful."

Of course, institutions can't simply hire a group of minoritized faculty and expect them to flourish without any support.

"It has to be done with intentionality and care," says Hall. "To simply pursue it because it's on-trend is irresponsible. These are people's lives and livelihoods."

Hall says she has received good assistance from SIUE. She was paired with a mentor who, like

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