Promoting and Diversifying Leadership
The Women of Color Junior Faculty Project aims to diversify leadership at CSWS.

by Lynn Fujiwara, Associate Professor, Women’s and Gender Studies

In March 2008, CSWS was awarded a Ford Foundation grant from the National Council for Research on Women (NCRW). The aim of the grant, “Diversifying the Leadership of Women’s Research Centers,” was to promote the leadership of women of color from historically underrepresented groups in the United States within NCRW and within its women’s research, policy, and advocacy member centers. The project specifically designed for CSWS was to address the current and historical absence of women of color in leadership positions at the center. While women of color have played essential roles on the executive committee, research interest groups, and other committees and projects, they have yet to occupy central roles within the leadership structure of the center. Much of this can be due to the sheer lack of associate or full professor women of color faculty members at the University of Oregon.

With this in mind, the NCRW Ford Foundation project was designed to establish a space within CSWS that prioritizes the mentorship and leadership development of junior faculty women of color. “Women of Color, Borders, and Power: Mentoring and Leadership Development” received the maximum award from NCRW and funds were immediately matched by the Office of the Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies, the Office of the Vice Provost for Institutional Equity and Diversity, and CSWS. Associate Professor Lynn Fujiwara, newly promoted, took on the role of coordinator, and ten junior women of color faculty members signed on to participate in the yearlong project. Minigrants were offered to all participants to assist with research-related costs during the course of the year.

The project began with an all-day retreat to establish the yearlong set of activities and goals. Through immediate conversations, most noted is the dearth of senior women of color faculty members at the UO, and the impact that has for junior women of color professors newly negotiating their departments and the institution. Furthermore, the UO has been plagued with a revolving door of junior women of color faculty members, who often find their experiences alienating, isolating, and often unsupported. Thus, the group decided that at the heart of leadership development for women of color junior faculty members is academic success—a solid research record and ultimately tenure. However the path to these ends is often plagued with an overburden of service that falls on them as some of the very few in their areas who can speak to issues of race and diversity. Additional challenges include teaching at a predominantly white university, concern over the value of their work, which is often interdisciplinary or seen as alternative or experimental, and the need for more mentorship from the time they arrive through their promotion and tenure evaluation processes.

To address these issues we established a multitiered set of workshops and events. Seeking direct mentorship, we developed numerous workshops under the rubric “Academic Success/Academic Survival,” with invited senior women of color scholars to talk with us about their own challenges and strategies. The group had a lunch workshop with Rosaura Sánchez, professor of literature from University of California at San Diego (UCSD). Her experience was critical as she began her position as an all-but-dissertation visiting assistant professor, went on to get tenure as one of the few faculty members of color, and later became head of the Department of Literature at UCSD. She has also been a leader in national and international associations. Sánchez shared great wisdom in how to deal with tokenism; institutional marginalization based on race, gender, and class lines; the overburden of service; and general feelings of marginalization and alienation. We were also fortunate to meet with groundbreaking feminist of color scholar-activist Cherrie Moraga, Chicana feminist filmmaker Lourdes Portillo, and professor of English Paula Moya from Stanford University. All our conversations dealt intensely with institutional barriers that need to be challenged in terms of how our work is valued, evaluated, and positioned within our respective departments.
Given that academic success is inherently tied to an active publication record, we established several workshops that focused solely on research, writing, and publishing. We held a book proposal workshop, where one of our participants, Professor Tania Triana, presented her book proposal to three well-published senior scholars from the UO: Lynn Stephen, Michael Hames-García, and Amalia Gladhart. These senior scholars reviewed her proposal with the participation of the entire group. This workshop proved very helpful to Professor Triana as well as the group participants, who are all currently working on book projects. We followed up our publication workshop with a writing conversation with a professional editor and writing coach, Susan Quash-Mah. It was a much-needed space to talk openly about common dilemmas that we face in the writing process.

Focusing more on the institutional level of academic success, we held an extremely helpful promotion and tenure workshop with Russ Tomlin, senior vice provost for academic affairs. He not only provided a general framework and discussion of the tenure process, but also engaged in candid, informative, and supportive conversation addressing the participant’s questions, concerns, and issues related to the tenure process.

Our final event, designed to engage our university’s administrators in a conversation with invited faculty members, was held May 22. Titled “Institutional Change/Institutional Diversity,” our conversation featured Chancellor Nancy Cantor and Associate Provost Kal Alston of Syracuse University. Working in close collaboration with Russ Tomlin, we organized this event to begin a much needed and important conversation about institutional diversity and institutional change at the UO. Chancellor Cantor has written numerous articles about diversity and higher education. She has also been on the front lines of such contested terrains as Affirmative Action at the University of Michigan and the termination of the Chief Illiniwek Native American Mascot of University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Approximately fifty people from across campus participated in this conversation, including faculty members, faculty members of color, department heads, associate deans, deans, center directors, and the senior vice provost for academic affairs. Dialogue was meaningful and substantive around real issues faculty members face on this campus. Not only did the participants benefit from such a candid and honest conversation with administrative leaders, all present were calling for an additional conversation, to include all administrators (all deans, associate deans, and department heads).

CSWS has institutionalized this project within its programming for the coming year. We received $10,000 from the Office of the Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies to continue projects that center the group, allow us to expand participation, and support research. The opportunity to focus on such important efforts in the past year proved to be more rewarding than any of us could have anticipated. We are very much looking forward to continuing the work of mentorship, research support, and community building in CSWS.

“The Women of Color Junior Faculty: Borders and Empowerment Project has been one of the most rewarding professionalization experiences I have had at the University of Oregon. This cohort of women (primarily composed of junior, tenure-track faculty members) hails from a diverse range of disciplines and/or departmental homes; as a result, we have been able to share and compare strategies for progression towards tenure. Our recently tenured leader, Lynn Fujiwara, has expertly helped prepare us for this process. The workshops that she has organized on our behalf—such as a book proposal workshop and a promotion and tenure workshop with Senior Vice Provost Russ Tomlin—have greatly contributed to our cohort’s development and professionalization. In one academic year, we have generated an incredibly rich learning community, and I am better prepared for the coming years as a result.”

—Priscilla Peña Ovalle, Assistant Professor, English

“In the winter 2009 term I was given the opportunity to participate in a proposal workshop through the CSWS/NCRW Women of Color group. The workshop was organized to give the members of the WOC group knowledge about expectations for book publishing and the tenure-review process. The workshop was immensely useful to the development of my own book proposal, as I received feedback from senior faculty members on campus (Lynn Stephen, Amalia Gladhart, and Michael Hames-García) and other members of the WOC group. Lynn Fujiwara and Michael Hames-García also followed up with me to develop a timeline to submit the book proposals to publishing companies and complete writing the manuscript.”

—Tania Triana, Assistant Professor, Romance Languages