I have occasionally used this column to report on lessons derived from studies I personally conducted on university campuses in recent years. Typically, these reports feature interventions that influence student choices, experiences and outcomes in STEM. With the Supreme Court ruling in Schuette v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action (Michigan) still fresh, it is timely to present findings from a faculty study I helped to facilitate at a flagship campus in the Southeast (which I refer to below as “SE”).

The study was prompted by the Provost’s concern over faculty retention, but executed independently as a multi-stage case study that began with access to a seven-year baseline of college-specific faculty composition data from the office of institutional research. It concluded with interviews of faculty, administrators, students and staff. Reported here are the results of the capstone analysis of participants in the SE community.

Our guiding hypotheses were these: First, what attracts candidates in the recruitment process may not suffice in retaining them. Secondly, beyond salary (and startup package), faculty perceptions and experiences are decisive in determining who stays at the SE University.
Retention of faculty raises questions about campus “climate,” or professional-social environment, which is experienced differently by members of any university community. Faculty decisions to stay or leave campus is a surprisingly under-studied phenomenon. Most research on faculty retention is more than a decade old but suggests that satisfaction with the collegial support received from their department, college, and broader community, as well as the perceived prospects for professional advancement, is key.

Armed with local staffing patterns data, a colleague and I identified two colleges for case study analysis over a six-month period. Twenty-six interviews were conducted in person and by phone. With a focus on explanations and perceptions that reflected the context of campus life, the case studies became lenses for looking at, and generalizing to, the entire campus.

The two case studies, focused respectively on new (post-2009) arrivals and veteran faculty (at least seven years at SE). They illuminated a range of “push and pull” factors that linked climate to decisions to leave or stay on a university campus. Foremost among our findings from the interviews were the following:

- Faculty indicated that diversity and cultural differences were too often dealt with as incident-driven.
- There was no concerted effort to create skills among SE faculty and students to understand diversity of all kinds.
- SE was described as a hostile climate for minorities. It was seen as doing whatever is comfortable for the majority culture, which invalidates seeing others as different as well as valued and important.
- The younger our faculty interviewees, the more optimistic they were. Widely acknowledged was the profound role of resources and the opportunity for career advancement in retention.
- Issues of gender, age and partner status, also impinged on SE faculty. Isolation of singles and child care for young couples and those without partners were constant concerns. These faculty craved a more supportive environment. Some left because they could not resolve the conflicts between professional and personal needs.
- The general perception among interviewees was that, while SE goes all out to recruit faculty, there was little to no investment to retain faculty.
We found that SE did indeed have measures at its disposal to retain key faculty and increase faculty (and student) diversity. Therefore, our recommendations emphasized the near-term and the low-cost, university-wide organizational change over financial enhancement. (Longer-term action would require additional expenditures.) These actions, we contended, would work on other flagship campuses.

Policies could be promulgated that:

- publicize the university-wide committees charged with evaluating and recognizing members of the community;
- introduce language recognizing mentoring as a performance factor in promotion and tenure; and
- improve consciousness about micro-aggressions.

Practices could be instituted that:

- provide incentives to modify faculty behavior;
- induce faculty and students to leave their comfortable silos occasionally; and
- encourage departments to measure and report results on student enrollment, performance and the minority-majority graduation achievement gap.

Any university can provide incentives, publicize achievements, and steer faculty toward the “greater good” as defined by the institutional mission. It helps faculty and students become “good citizens.” Good campus citizens are more inclined to buy into an ethos of, “I am a valued member of this institution,” and to stay. Faculty make tradeoffs to advance their careers. Their sense of comfort, as well as commitment to the university, stems from a belief that the institution can help them achieve individual goals.
Our case study at SE indicates that the convergence of individual commitment and institutional support will grow a critical mass of diverse faculty and students on public flagship campuses.