

Article

# Motivations and Paths to Becoming Faculty at Minority Serving Institutions

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**Abstract:** Drawing upon 15 qualitative interviews with early- to mid-career faculty (seven men and eight women) at Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), this study examines the diverse motivations and paths those faculty members have taken to becoming professors at their respective institutions. The faculty come from a range of MSIs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions, and Predominantly Black Institutions) across the country and represent a broad spectrum of disciplines. This study sheds light on factors that guide their choices of discipline and entrance into the faculty ranks at MSIs. Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) was used as a lens during qualitative coding and analysis in order to develop the findings, which reveal that (1) teaching, activism, and community uplift were primary motivators to enter the professoriate; (2) supportive environmental factors, including single individuals, proved pivotal in influencing faculty to take these roles; and (3) career transitions into the academy were spurred by learning experiences that revealed disciplinary and teaching interests. The findings suggest that MSIs attract community-oriented individuals to their faculty positions, and that colleges and universities interested in diversifying their faculties should craft such roles in ways that are appealing to the populations that they are trying to recruit and retain.

**Keywords:** faculty diversity; Minority Serving Institutions; HBCUs; social cognitive career theory; academic career choice

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## 1. Introduction

How do Minority Serving Institution (MSI) professors narrate their motivations and paths to becoming faculty members? This study provides answers to this question through examining data from 15 qualitative interviews with early- to mid-career MSI faculty (seven men and eight women), who are from a range of MSIs across the country and represent a broad spectrum of disciplines. Specifically, this study captures what factors professors highlight as drawing them to the profession, how their disciplinary interests were formed, and what environmental factors influenced them on their journeys. Findings reveal the influences and divergent pathways that have led a diverse array of individuals to hold faculty positions at MSIs, and how they differ from their Predominantly White Institution (PWI) counterparts. These results deepen our understanding of the professoriate, and provide lessons that can be leveraged by postsecondary institutions in order to grow their pool of potential faculty and recruit more people from underrepresented communities into the academy.

### *Background*

MSIs are federally designated colleges and universities that are recognized for serving students from minority backgrounds in higher education. There are MSIs that were founded to provide educational opportunities to specific demographic groups that were historically prevented from attaining postsecondary education, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). There are also MSIs that earned designations by meeting a federally defined minimum enrollment of a particular ethnic demographic and student need, the latter of which is measured by proportion of Pell Grant-eligible students at the institution. These include Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving-Institutions (AANAPISIs) and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs). There are almost 650 MSIs across the country, 105 of which are HBCUs, and almost 250 of which are two-year colleges [1].

MSIs collectively enroll more than 20% of all college students [2], and play an outsized role in educating students of color. HBCUs represent 3% of all postsecondary institutions in the U.S., but enroll 11% of Black students. HSIs constitute just 4% of all postsecondary institutions, while enrolling half of all Hispanic students. AANAPISIs comprise less than 3% of all postsecondary institutions yet enroll one-third of all Asian American and Pacific Islanders [3]. MSIs also disproportionately serve low-income and first-generation students; more than half of all MSI students receive Pell grants, compared with 31% of all college students, and more than half of all MSI students are first-generation college students, compared to 35% of students at non-MSIs [3].

At the faculty level, demographic statistics reveal that faculty of color are represented at higher levels at MSIs than they are nationally. While African Americans comprise 5.5% of faculty nationwide, they represent 57% of faculty at HBCUs [2]. Latinos make up 4% of faculty nationally, but 21% of HSI faculty identify as Latino [2]. This disproportionality between national faculty and MSI faculty demographics is greatest for American Indian and Alaska Natives, who make up less than 1% of faculty across the country but constitute 46% of all TCU faculty.

Given shifting demographic trends in the country, which is becoming “majority-minority”, scholars have pointed out that colleges and universities nationwide should look to MSIs and learn from how they have educated students of color [3]. The presence of underrepresented students on campuses where there are few faculty of color is well documented [4–6], and has long been leveraged as a reason for increasing faculty diversity [7]; however, numerous studies highlight the importance of having a diverse faculty for reasons beyond role modeling and mentoring for students. These studies have demonstrated that having a diverse faculty benefits institutions’ research production, curriculum, and pedagogy [8–13]. Longstanding debates about the diversification of faculty have included claims that there is a limited supply of qualified faculty of color, however research has shown that these claims are overstated [7,14]. As MSIs have been recognized as institutions that other colleges and universities can learn from regarding educating students of color, they have also been cited as sources for learning how to recruit a diverse faculty [15].

The literature that exists on MSI faculty has covered topics such as their socialization and retention [16–18], as well as their disposition toward students [19,20], and it rarely looks across multiple MSI institutional types [20]. Thus, this study on MSI faculty motivations and pathways contributes to the literature on MSIs, and it also fills a gap in academic career choice literature. National surveys of college and university faculty, such as the triennial Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) Faculty Survey, repeatedly show that intellectual challenge and freedom are the primary factors that motivate individuals to become professors, and this has been consistent across the various institutional types that such surveys distinguish (e.g., comprehensive state college, private nonsectarian college, religiously-affiliated college, public university, or private university) [21,22]. In a seminal qualitative study with faculty at a large public research university, Lindholm corroborated past survey results, finding that autonomy, independence, and academic freedom were the most frequently mentioned motives for choosing to become a professor [22].

Other scholars have looked at the career interest formation of PhD graduates and revealed differences in motivations by social identity. Gibbs and Griffin found that the main motivator to pursue a faculty career for biomedical science PhD graduates from majority racial/ethnic backgrounds was research freedom, while participants of color were motivated by externally focused values [23]. These values included the benefit of their work for their communities, as well as the importance of representation of individuals of their social identity in the academy.

This study builds upon past work by focusing on early- to mid-career MSI faculty from a diverse range of institutional types, disciplines, and backgrounds. It introduces MSI designations as characteristics by which to differentiate trends in faculty motivations, and finds that in some cases the desire to become a professor is specifically tied to becoming a professor at an MSI, motivated by a sense of responsibility to help the institution in its mission to educate marginalized communities. It highlights the diversity in the types of degrees that professors possess, with one third of the sample having a degree other than a PhD, which points to varied educational backgrounds in the professoriate that are often overlooked in research. This study also focuses on the perspectives of early- to mid-career faculty; Lindholm notes the disproportional representation of full professors in her study, which poses a potential limitation in “mining fresh insights about the personal and environmental factors related to career choice” [22] (p. 629). In contrast, there are no full professors in this study’s sample, which has 12 assistant professors and three associate professors. For all of these reasons, this study is a unique contribution to the literature, capturing the voices of a diverse group of MSI faculty as they look back at their journeys to their current positions. By centering professors as they retrospectively consider their career motivations and choices, lessons are drawn that are relevant for improving institutional recruitment strategies, diversifying faculty pipelines, and creating new pathways to the professoriate.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Lent, Brown, and Hackett’s social cognitive career theory (SCCT) is a useful lens through which to analyze faculty members’ explanations of why they entered the professoriate. SCCT was developed to help understand how academic and career interests are formed, how related choices are made, and how success is attained in these realms [24]. Based on Bandura’s general social cognitive theory [25], which outlines interactions between personal factors, behavior, and the environment, SCCT sheds light on how individuals exhibit personal agency as they pursue careers, as well as contextual factors that influence these pursuits. SCCT incorporates social cognitive theory’s model of triadic reciprocity, in which external environmental factors, overt behavior, and personal attributes affect one another bidirectionally. SCCT also highlights the roles of self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations in forming a person’s interests and goals.

Within social cognitive theories, self-efficacy beliefs are beliefs held by individuals regarding their ability in specific performance domains, while outcome expectations include the presumed consequences of engaging in certain behaviors. They are both derived from learning experiences that an individual has had throughout the course of their life. Bandura outlined categories of outcome expectations, including the anticipation of self-evaluative (e.g., self-satisfaction), social (e.g., approval), and physical (e.g., monetary) outcomes [25]. These conceptions of self-efficacy and outcome expectations, as well as triadic reciprocity, are reflected in the interviews. While concepts and relationships from SCCT are useful in explaining and contextualizing faculty members’ paths, the open-ended nature of the responses makes SCCT’s application as a lens, rather than as a defining framework, more appropriate for this study.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Participants

The data used for this study come from a broader study on the participation of MSI faculty in a Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) International Faculty Development Seminar (IFDS). These 15 faculty members traveled abroad to the Dominican Republic for a five-day seminar in August 2016, in which they learned about leading study abroad programs. With the exception of one faculty member, Alvarez, an HBCU professor who was recruited to co-facilitate the seminar, all of the faculty are from institutions that were selected by CIEE and the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions (CMSI) for the Project Passport program. This initiative is the result of a partnership between CIEE and Penn CMSI. CIEE is the oldest and largest nonprofit study abroad organization

in the U.S. [26], while Penn CMSI is a research center in the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, which was opened in January 2014, and focuses on studying, supporting, and uniting MSIs around their common interests [27].

Project Passport is a multifaceted program, launched in 2016 to increase MSI participation in study abroad; the IFDS for MSI faculty is part of this initiative. Penn CMSI and CIEE invited a group of MSI presidents to have their institutions participate in Project Passport. Each president who joined the program was from a four-year institution, and was given the opportunity to nominate two faculty members to participate in IFDS. In total, there were 15 of these nominated faculty members who participated in IFDS. I did not attend the seminar.

Fourteen of the 15 faculty at IFDS agreed to participate in an interview regarding their experiences in IFDS and about planning study abroad at their institution. With the inclusion of Alvarez, there were 15 professors that were interviewed for this research project, and all but one of them were people of color. Eleven of the 15 faculty were from HBCUs, and eight different HBCUs were represented; the other professors were from an HSI, an AANAPISI/HSI, and an HSI/PBI. Three HBCUs and one HSI were each represented twice among the faculty, meaning that there were two faculty members who participated in IFDS from each of those institutions. The overrepresentation of HBCUs among the participating institutions in Project Passport is typical for Penn CMSI's programming, as other MSIs generally do not have the same level of awareness of their status as an MSI and their eligibility for these opportunities, so they apply and participate at lower rates than HBCUs. Moreover, it is suspected that some institutions that qualify as MSIs, and even those that apply for federal MSI grants, are reluctant to embrace the MSI designation, for fear of institutional marginalization and the potential political repercussions of being identified as institutions that "serve" students of color.

The faculty were assigned pseudonyms for this study, and are listed by order of first appearance in this article in the following table, (Table 1) with their degree, rank, and institution as they were at the time of their participation in IFDS (institutions that are represented twice are noted with a parentheses and number after their MSI designation, which indicates that they are part of a pair). The 2017 Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education for institutions listed as "Doctoral Universities: Higher Research Activity (R2)" and "Doctoral Universities: Moderate Research Activity (R3)" are included in the institutional type [28]. There were no faculty from institutions listed as "Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activity (R1)" in the sample.

### 3.2. Data Collection

A qualitative approach was used to guide the broader study, whose purpose is to understand the experiences of the MSI professors who participated in the IFDS program. The primary data collection method for this study was one semi-structured interview with each participant, and faculty website pages were used as supplementary sources to clarify their departmental affiliation and faculty rank. These interviews took place by phone and were conducted with the participants between January and August of 2017. All of the participants were sent an email in January 2017 about scheduling the interview with the consent form attached. I conducted the interviews by myself and sent the recordings to an independent market research firm for transcription.

**Table 1.** Participants.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Degree</b>	<b>Faculty Rank</b>	<b>Field</b>	<b>MSI Designation</b>	<b>Institutional Type</b>
Alvarez	Latino	male	PhD	associate	Spanish	HBCU	Private Liberal Arts
Baker	White	male	MFA	assistant	Filmmaking	AANAPISI/HSI	Public R3
Cooper	Black	male	PhD	associate	History	HBCU (1)	Private Liberal Arts
Delgado	Latina	female	MA	associate	Spanish	HBCU (1)	Private Liberal Arts
Ellison	Black	female	PhD	assistant	Biology	HBCU	Public
Fuller	Black	female	PhD	assistant	Rehabilitation Counseling	HSI	Public R2
Garner	Black	female	PhD	assistant	Psychology	HBCU (2)	Private R2
Harrington	Black	male	PhD	assistant	Africana Studies	HBCU	Public
Irvin	Black	female	JD	assistant	Human Rights	HSI/PBI	Private
Jabara	Black	female	PhD	assistant	Criminology	HBCU (2)	Private R2
Kemp	Black	male	PhD	assistant	Human Performance & Recreation	HBCU	Private Liberal Arts
Lee	Black	female	MA	assistant	Music	HBCU	Private
Murphy	Black	female	MFA	assistant	Theatre	HBCU (3)	Public R2
Navarro	Latino	male	PhD	assistant	English Education	HSI	Public R2
Oliver	Black	male	PhD	assistant	Psychology	HBCU (3)	Public R2

This study about their motivations and paths to becoming faculty members at MSIs draws from their responses to the first question of the interview; “We would like to learn about your experiences becoming a faculty member. What prompted you to become one?” The protocol includes probes for their academic background and their interest in their respective field. This introductory question was included in the protocol primarily as a means to begin the interview conversationally on a topic that is familiar to them, in hopes that this would facilitate active engagement in the interview and lead to candid responses to subsequent questions. Participants were notified in the consent form that I would ask about their background; however, there were several instances in which it seemed, based on intonation, exclamations such as “wow,” and requests for clarification of the question, that participants were surprised by the question. I believe that this data source is especially intriguing, because this question was not within the primary scope of the research project, which focuses on study abroad participation; therefore, it is unlikely that participants reflected on this specific topic in preparation for the interview. Thus, these responses were not planned, and the answers reflect key motivations and influences that became salient in their minds upon hearing the question. I suspect that such extemporaneous answers provide insights into meaningful factors that left a deep impression upon the participants, and therefore signify knowledge that uniquely contributes to our understanding of paths to professorship.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Prior to beginning the coding process, I reviewed all transcriptions, returning to the audio recordings when there were errors and ambiguities, and revising the transcriptions accordingly. Coding consisted of both inductive and deductive processes [29]. I began with inductive coding, in order to center the participants’ perceptions of their experiences, allowing categories and codes to emerge that I may not have anticipated [29]. I reviewed the interview transcripts multiple times, taking notes on themes and codes that arose from the data [30]. Once the inductive phase of open coding was complete, I transitioned to deductive coding. A priori codes included those related to the constructs in SCCT, such as “self-efficacy”, “personal attributes”, “outcome expectations”, and “external environmental factors”. After engaging in open coding for these a priori codes, I proceeded to axial coding through grouping the various codes into coding categories, from which I identified key concepts [29]. As I grouped the codes, I noted the frequency by which I used each code, which helped to understand the salience of different concepts. I considered how the application of SCCT-related codes in the data aligned with the relationships that SCCT describes, such as how learning experiences inform self-efficacy beliefs. I developed findings based on examining how the key concepts relate to each other and explain faculty members’ motivations and paths, and organized the findings into the three thematic sections explained in the Results section: “Teaching, Activism, and Community Uplift”, “Pivotal Individuals and Supportive Environments”, and “Disciplines and Timing”. This division facilitated a clear and concise explanation of the interests, experiences, and contextual factors that explain why these individuals became professors.

## 4. Results

My findings are presented in three sections: “Teaching, Activism, and Community Uplift”, “Pivotal Individuals and Supportive Environments”, and “Disciplines and Timing”. “Teaching, Activism, and Community Uplift” emerged as key interests for the majority of faculty. Their responses revealed that many considered teaching to be an interest that they are predisposed to. Teaching was also highlighted as a motivation for becoming professors because of the outcomes that they hoped would come from it, namely, benefits for their students and progress towards social change. “Pivotal Individuals and Supportive Environments” sheds light on the external environmental factors that guided these faculty members to enter the academy. These factors manifested in various forms and influenced them in divergent ways. Finally, “Disciplines and Timing” points to the development of disciplinary interests, and how this influences career timing and transitions. This section includes

examples of how learning experiences can reveal underlying interests that lead individuals to shift their careers and become professors. In explaining the trajectories of individual faculty within a section, themes from other sections are sometimes alluded to; however, this is a testament to the complex motivations and factors that have guided these 15 faculty members, as well as an attempt to touch upon the circumstances of each of them without redundancy.

#### *4.1. Teaching, Activism, and Community Uplift*

The majority of interviewees referred to teaching as one of the reasons they became faculty members. Three had K-12 teaching experience (Baker, Cooper, and Delgado), including two whose K-12 teaching occurred abroad (Baker and Delgado), and they saw moving to the college ranks as an upward step in their careers. Baker described a desire to be challenged by students in different ways than he was when he was a high school teacher, and discussed belonging to an intellectual community with opportunities to connect with others in his disciplinary field as a complementary motivation for his transition to the postsecondary level. Cooper pointed to part-time public school teaching as motivating him to pursue advanced education, to enable him to teach full-time, and continued on to complete doctoral studies that have allowed him to teach at the college level as a professor. Delgado returned from teaching abroad for four years with a desire to teach at an MSI, and found her role at an HBCU.

Those that highlighted teaching as one of their motivations for entering the field often spoke of it as something they had maintained a longtime interest in, using phrases such as “a lifelong passion to teach” and that it was something that “came naturally” to them or was in their DNA. Alvarez plainly captured the idea that attraction to teaching roles is significantly based on innate qualities when he stated:

I love learning and sharing. So if you really love learning and sharing, I think ... it’s just a natural thing to think about becoming a professor or sharing what you know with your students and learning also from them.

Many of the interviewees not only referred to teaching as something that drew them to the profession, but also as a responsibility that sustains their commitment to it. At the same time, teaching was not a cited reason for all of the interviewees (Ellison, Fuller, and Garner) who stated that becoming a professor was not a central career aspiration for them. Their paths are explained in later sections.

Within the broader theme of teaching as a motivation arose the specific theme of activism and community uplift. For some, the professorial role serves as a platform for promoting social change, and for training the next generation to continue such efforts. Harrington noted that his early activism prepared him as an educator and set him on the path to becoming a faculty member:

I come from a family of activists, so it was something that developed over time, within the context of my actual activism, my political activity and things like that, so teaching was something that actually came naturally to me, being in front of people, organizing people, thinking about things, so that’s the environment I grew up in.

For Harrington, who is employed at an HBCU, the professorship serves as an extension of his activism, and his field, Africana Studies, allows him to educate students about the issues he cares about.

Similarly, Irvin, a lawyer who became an assistant professor at an institution that integrates social justice and human rights principles throughout the curriculum, was drawn to the faculty ranks for opportunities to assist in individual and community empowerment, and to “help shape the minds of future leaders.” Jabara, a criminologist, discussed how she has designed her coursework to create opportunities for students to have experiences that lead them to become “social advocates and fight for social justice.”

While the ability to serve communities through teaching was the predominant theme for those that cited activism, some faculty members highlighted the service-oriented research that they are

able to conduct as professors among the factors that attracted them to the profession. For Kemp, opportunities to conduct action oriented research, centered on positively impacting communities through creating and studying youth development and community recreation programs, drew him into doctoral studies. His continuation into the professorship was driven both by opportunities to maintain an active research agenda around these areas and to prepare students for careers in parks, recreation, and leisure services. The interrelating themes of teaching, activism, and community uplift as they relate to motivations specifically for faculty employment at MSIs are expounded upon in the Discussion.

#### *4.2. Pivotal Individuals and Supportive Environments*

Several interviewees cited environmental factors or external forces that influenced them to become professors. In some cases, they highlighted one pivotal person who was responsible for them becoming faculty members at MSIs, and some interesting examples stand out. Lee, an assistant professor of Music, had been a musician for her entire career and “never really wanted to teach” because she felt like she did not have much to offer. Nevertheless, she was repeatedly offered teaching positions and recalled a “persistent chairperson” at her current institution:

I told him I said I'll come and do a workshop but I don't want to teach. He called me every week until I came in. Week after week he called me and said will you come in, will you come in. So finally I went in and I've been at [her HBCU] for 15 years as a result.

After gaining teaching experience that showed her that her practical knowledge and perspective as a working musician were valuable to students, Lee initially maintained two concurrent positions, at her HBCU and at a private, predominantly white research university. However, the illness of another faculty member at her HBCU prompted her to leave the other university in order to commit more time at the HBCU, because she “saw a need to be at that university a lot more.”

Murphy, who is a theatre professor, was focused on being a performing artist during the early parts of her career, though she noted that she has always maintained an interest in teaching as well. The need for employment upon relocating led to her undergraduate mentor connecting her with one of his former students, who was a professor and informed her that the theatre department at his institution needed a new faculty member. She was subsequently offered the position and has been deeply involved in theatre communities within and beyond her campus. Her path reveals the important role that her relationship with her mentor played: her social capital fostered her connection to her current employment, and it is unclear if she would have become a professor without the intervention of her mentor.

While these two examples include paths to faculty positions that did not require doctoral degrees, there are also examples among the interviewees of those who had attained such degrees but did not intend to become professors and were swayed into the profession by a pivotal individual. One such example of this is Ellison, an HBCU graduate who was enjoying a post-doctoral research fellowship and looking forward to a career in research outside of academia when her undergraduate mentor reached out:

My mentor ... asked me to return back to my alma mater. Because of her, and I know that all that she accomplished [sic], and I spoke to her and respected her opinion, I returned back, and that's what caused me to become a faculty member.

Though she had earned her PhD from a private predominantly white research university and was participating in a prestigious research fellowship that may have opened doors to financially lucrative research careers, Ellison's respect and admiration for her mentor led her to return to the campus that had propelled her to such success.

In another instance, the decision to become a faculty member was based on influence from a mentor that was less driven by loyalty and respect and more by pragmatic considerations. Fuller,

who was pursuing a PhD in Counseling after becoming interested in human services during her first job after her undergraduate education, became a professor because her doctoral adviser had told her that “if you don’t take a faculty position essentially immediately, you run the risk of not being able to get one later”. Such counsel from her mentor made Fuller aware of potential restrictions in future employment opportunities that are associated with perceived norms in academia, although recent research suggests that employment in non-academic sectors is not as detrimental to tenure-track faculty position aspirations as is commonly believed [31]. Fuller served as a professor for five years, but she left the role in the time between IFDS and her participation in the interview.

Beyond these examples of single individuals who directly facilitated entrance into the professorship, other interviewees discussed broader environmental and contextual factors that influenced them. Cooper and Harrington spoke about being raised by a “family of educators” and “family of activists”, respectively, who inspired and prepared them to become educators. Ellison and Lee, who were both influenced by key individuals to become professors rather than seeking it out themselves, both cite their families for helping to support and foster their disciplinary interests. Ellison recalled incessantly asking her father questions and how he guided her to look up the information on her own, instilling a sense of self-efficacy to go along with her scientific curiosity. Lee’s father was a musician and her childhood home was filled with music, which she embraced as she played musical instruments throughout her youth.

For Navarro, the pivotal individuals who interested him in higher education were not those who raised him in the home, but those whose books he read. He was the first in his family to go to college, and was raised in an urban area with limited access and exposure to postsecondary institutions. Navarro recounted learning about colleges and universities by way of reading about the lives of the writers whose literature he enjoyed. He found that these writers, who were mostly people of color, such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Sandra Cisneros, were “often affiliated with a university or they taught at a university or they became tenured as writers”. This discovery led him to “skip school several days my junior and senior year to visit campuses”. That a question about what prompted him to become a faculty member was answered with an explanation of how literature led to his enrollment in undergraduate studies is telling, and underlies how significant distal role models can be. Navarro’s interest in literature and personal awareness of how literacy can influence life outcomes have shaped his career; he is an assistant professor of English Education, whose teaching and research focus on these areas.

Some interviewees referred to environments that they encountered post-childhood that supported them to become faculty members. While participating in a summer bridge program prior to her freshman year of college, Jabara realized the extent to which she had been academically underprepared, and was motivated to become an educator to support students who might face similar challenges. She emphasized her participation in the McNair Scholars Program, a U.S. Department of Education initiative to increase the PhD attainment of underrepresented students, as providing her with enrichment opportunities that solidified her commitment to becoming a professor:

[W]hen I became a McNair Scholar, and I was introduced to undergraduate research and went to conferences and started presenting and collecting data, I fell in love with this idea of being a scholar, being a scholar instructor and always envisioned myself kind of playing in that role ... I remember thinking that I wanted to be that kind of instructor, to be able to help students understand the different resources that are available to them at universities, and specifically being of service to individuals from minority backgrounds, and so that’s kind of how I found my way here at [her HBCU].

Jabara’s experiences in the McNair Scholars Program both prepared her as a researcher and gave her a greater appreciation for universities as providers of resources, inspiring her to become a faculty member who could make students aware of these resources.

The interviewees’ narratives of their paths to becoming faculty members captured several environmental and contextual factors that led them to join the professoriate. The following section

focuses more closely on the formation of disciplinary interests and the sometimes circuitous paths that the interviewees traveled on their way to becoming faculty members.

#### 4.3. Disciplines and Timing

The majority of interviewees narrated their discipline as something they had maintained a longtime interest in, and elucidated why it was meaningful to them. For Oliver, psychology “relates to all elements of being, behaving, the mind, body, the soul connect”, reasons why he “gravitated toward” the field. Garner, a clinical psychologist, recalled a childhood interest in psychology that developed into a desire to become a clinician, to help combat the stigma around mental health in communities of color. For her, becoming a professor was a natural trajectory based on her postdoctoral fellowship and research experience, not a career ambition that she strategically prepared for. Garner’s research agenda integrates well with her clinical work, as she is involved in research that is related to the populations she serves. Likewise, Jabara became interested in criminology after moving from an almost all-white suburban community to an urban, predominantly black neighborhood, and witnessing the intersections of race, social conditions, and crime. She has become an expert on the effects of incarceration on communities of color and works to bring about social change for these communities through scholarship and advocacy. Such examples reflect a seemingly predetermined match between faculty and their disciplines, encapsulated by Lee’s description of her field, music: “I didn’t choose it; it chose me.”

Nevertheless, there were notable cases in which the interviewees described disciplinary and career transitions. Delgado highlighted a shift from a focus on Spanish and Latin American literatures to language instruction, which was brought about by her experiences teaching English abroad in Spain. She noted that this experience exposed an innate interest in languages that derived from her background in the “hybrid, bilingual” context of Puerto Rico. Cooper reflected on the transition of his interests:

Well my undergraduate degree is in political science but I took a number of history classes and it’s interesting because when I got older I didn’t realize how passionate I was, it wasn’t until I got older that I realized how passionate I was about history and I just love history because it often reflects the triumphant human spirit. When we think about adversity, difficulty, there’s a lot to learn there. It’s a great source of inspiration.

This notion of an underlying interest being tapped into post-undergraduate studies and spurring pursuit of a discipline was also evident in Baker and Kemp’s interviews. While teaching abroad, Baker unearthed his love of storytelling by way of his engagement in photography, which ultimately led him to filmmaking as an academic discipline. Kemp’s transition was ostensibly more dramatic; he left a successful business career in order to return to school to prepare to work in a “more purposeful” field. Yet, his chosen field, youth development and recreation, was something he had been engaged in on a part-time basis for several years prior, as an active community volunteer who coached youth sports. Delgado, Cooper, Baker, and Kemp’s stories demonstrate the various ways in which disciplinary interests emerge and career transitions to the professoriate can occur.

## 5. Discussion

The results of this qualitative study are strikingly different than what Lindholm found in her qualitative research on the motivations of faculty at a large predominantly white public research university [22]. Lindholm’s results reflected what national surveys had previously indicated, with ideas such as autonomy, independence, and academic freedom emerging as the primary motivations for choosing to become a professor. None of the faculty members that I interviewed mentioned these factors in their explanations of why they became a professor. Opportunities to teach disciplinary material and work towards community uplift were the primary motivators for these MSI faculty to become professors, and some expressed that their pursuit of professorship was specifically motivated

by their desire to work at an MSI and help them fulfill their mission of educating underserved communities. This notion of being able to work towards community uplift could be considered an implicit appreciation of academic freedom in cases like Kemp and Jabara, whose research agendas are community-oriented, but this differs from common conceptions of academic freedom as choosing research based on intellectual curiosity. Indeed, personal relationships and feelings of responsibility to serve and educate communities were more explanatory than academic freedom in motivating these individuals to become professors.

Comparison between the results of this study and Lindholm's is complicated by the fact that there is no breakdown of the racial and ethnic demographics of her sample. She notes that it "generally reflects the university's overall faculty population" and that the findings are based on conversations with "men and women of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds", but we are unaware of the proportion of faculty of color in her sample of 36 professors. Thus, it is possible that the difference in these findings is influenced by the social identities of the faculty. Gibbs and Griffin's study with biomedical science PhD graduates suggests that externally focused values, such as helping communities, are more important motivators for racial and ethnic minorities who are pursuing faculty positions than they are for those from racial and ethnic majority backgrounds, who place greater importance on research freedom [23]. The sample in this study had only one professor from a majority racial background, Baker, whose response emphasized a desire for intellectual challenge, aligning more closely with findings in the HERI Faculty Survey and Lindholm's study than with the externally focused values of racial and ethnic minorities in this and Gibbs and Griffin's work.

That the majority of faculty in this sample highlighted teaching as one of their primary motivations for entering the profession raises several points to be considered. Perhaps MSIs select for professors that are fundamentally more interested in teaching than research? While national surveys consistently show that ideas such as independence and academic freedom are the primary motivators for entering the professoriate, they also show that faculty consider teaching to be personally "essential" or "very important" at high rates (95% and up) [32]. Yet motivations to enter the professoriate and opinions about specific professorial responsibilities are two distinct phenomena.

Reporting of national survey results has not differentiated institutions by MSI designation, and there might be interesting trends across the landscape of MSIs. Two of the three faculty in this sample who did not mention teaching are employed at "Doctoral Universities: Higher Research Activity (R2)" institutions, with one explicitly articulating that her path to the professorship was a "natural trajectory" based on her research experience. This raises the point that trends within particular MSI designations might differ based on the emphasis that the institution places on research, for which Carnegie Classification is a proxy. The two R2 faculty members in this study who did not mention teaching, Fuller and Garner, are at an HSI and an HBCU, respectively, and there are four other R2 faculty members who mentioned teaching as a motivation three at HBCUs and one at an HSI. Future work might shed light on the interplay between MSI designation and Carnegie Classification as they relate to faculty interests in research and teaching.

The third of these three faculty who did not mention teaching (Ellison), recounted leaving a research career that she was enjoying in order to return to her alma mater, an HBCU. In general, HBCUs are known more for their teaching than their research, and have a reputation for creating nurturing environments for their students [33]. TCUs, the other MSI type that was founded to serve a particular population, are known for contributing to the preservation of tribal cultures and working on issues within their communities [34]. MSIs of other designations embody their service to minoritized populations at varying levels [35].

Several faculty members in this sample alluded to being drawn to becoming professors at MSIs in order to serve particular communities. Some faculty members were explicit about wanting to teach at an MSI, and this was particularly evident for HBCUs, which were well-represented among faculty in this study. Delgado described wanting to teach specifically at an MSI, and while her aspiration was not tied specifically to HBCUs, she found a position at one. Lee maintained concurrent positions at an

HBCU and a predominantly white university for a period of time, but felt a greater responsibility to the HBCU, and ultimately transitioned to solely teaching there. Ellison felt a particular responsibility to return to the HBCU of her undergraduate studies.

For others, this alignment between their interest in service to particular communities and their institutional belonging was implicit. Jabara, Garner, and Harrington's intellectual interests are specifically tied to African American communities, and their employment at HBCUs could indicate a sense of belonging and convergence of their service interests with the institutional culture. Garner, as a clinical psychologist interested in the stigma associated with mental health in communities of color, is able to integrate her service as a practitioner with her work as a professor at an HBCU. Harrington's identification as an activist and involvement in work outside of his HBCU also reflects this practitioner-institution alignment. Irvin, who is a lawyer by trade, found an HSI/PBI where her interests in human rights and social justice are reflected throughout the curriculum and embedded in the institutional culture. The narratives of the professors in this study suggest that MSIs attract community-oriented individuals to their faculty positions.

SCCT lends us language and relationships that prove useful for analyzing these professors' career motivations and pathways. Of note are the examples in which faculty narrated their skills and interests as "natural", which falls within SCCT's notion that personal attributes and predispositions interact with behavior and environmental factors to drive career choice. This was reflected most clearly in how faculty articulated their motivation to teach, but also manifested in how they discussed their disciplinary interests as fields that they were naturally inclined to pursue. In Lee's case, while she described music as a field that "chose" her, her interest in teaching came about after she tried it and learned that her contributions were valuable. Hers is an example of how a learning experience fed into self-efficacy beliefs, and her long-held interest in music coalesced with an emergent interest in teaching, making service as a music professor an ideal role for her.

Moreover, the desires to teach, serve communities, and promote positive change were expressed as being driven primarily by self-evaluative expectations. The faculty considered the professorship to be a meaningful profession, so much so in Kemp's case that it led to a mid-career transition from working in business. For him, the ability to serve and work for a greater purpose drew him to the role, and his active research agenda is geared specifically to those goals. This desire to serve was also reflected in the fields Fuller and Garner chose to pursue and work in, counseling and clinical psychology. Disciplinary choice and entrance into the professorship appeared to be guided by concern for the welfare of others, which in turn gives the faculty a sense that they are living a purposeful life.

Ellison and Navarro's paths reflect SCCT's notion that role models serve as contextual supports that directly influence career choice. Ellison was inspired to become a professor by her undergraduate mentor, whom she admired as a female professor in the academy, while Navarro's role models were the writers of color whose literature he enjoyed, and who he learned were affiliated with postsecondary institutions. Pivotal individuals who proved to be consequential for these professors becoming faculty members were not always their role models, but sometimes the recruiters and facilitators of academic employment opportunities. Other external environmental factors mentioned in the interviews, such as families and support programs like the McNair Scholars Program, highlight the importance of enrichment opportunities and nurturing environments in promoting access to and preparation for academia.

## 6. Recommendations

### 6.1. Recommendations for Practice

This study points to strategies that MSIs could use to develop and refine their recruitment strategies, and that PWIs could use to recruit more people of color to join their faculties. The results of this study reaffirm Gibbs and Griffin's conclusion that institutional leaders and policy makers interested in diversifying the academic workforce must attend to individuals' values and promote

institutional and systemic reforms. For example, the significance of community uplift as a motivation for these faculty members suggests that the explicit prioritization and support of professors who are interested in scholarship and service to marginalized communities could be leveraged for the diversification and retention of faculty at postsecondary institutions across the board. Institutions could market positions in a way that resonates with individuals interested in helping their communities, and reframe the professor role as one that is action-oriented and capable of bringing about change. Such outreach would increase the pool of candidates, draw more people to graduate study, and attract practitioners to consider academic careers.

The examples of pivotal individuals in this study reflect how significant one person can be in recruiting a potential faculty member. Institutions interested in recruiting a diverse faculty should be deliberate and strategic in leveraging social networks and identifying role models and mentors who may be able to recruit talented applicants for positions. These are actions that some people already undertake without reminders, but institutionalized and incentivized encouragement might lead others to think deeply and creatively about potential candidates for roles.

Longer term recommendations include the formation of partnerships and the development of pathways. Institutions could work to identify partner organizations and create pathways to develop talent and train for openings that they anticipate in the future. Jabara's participation in the McNair Scholars Program exemplified the important role that such a pathway can play in the preparation of future faculty members. Other programs that are geared toward service and teaching, such as Teach for America, HealthCorps, and AmeriCorps, are sources for community-oriented individuals who could be developed in pathway programs and prepared for action-oriented faculty positions in the future. Another example of such a partnership could be to partner with study or teach abroad programs for recruiting to language departments. Online or part-time pathway programs could make career transitions into academia more feasible for a range of individuals, like the professors in this study whose disciplinary interests did not emerge until later in life.

## 6.2. Recommendations for Research

There are several lines of inquiry that this study raises. As reporting of national faculty survey results has not differentiated institutions by MSI designation, tapping into these rich data sources and investigating trends across MSI types could yield interesting results. Especially relevant to this study are questions in the HERI Faculty Survey about the personal importance of different professorial roles (research, teaching, and service), and a question that asks faculty members if they experience close alignment between their work and their personal values. For the latter question, the percentage of all respondents who answer that they experience close alignment between work and personal values ranges from 59% to 70% across the institutional types that the survey distinguishes, but this study's results suggest that the percentages may be higher for specific MSI designations, such as HBCUs [32]. For a comprehensive picture of MSI faculty, instruments would need to be utilized that capture such responses for faculty at two-year institutions. The examination of the alignment between MSI types, Carnegie Classifications, institutional missions and cultures, and faculty values and motivations is an area ripe for future inquiry. Further, comparison of the motivations and values of faculty of color at MSIs and PWIs could address the ambiguity that arises in comparing the findings of this study and Lindholm's study, as it is unclear if the differences are mediated by the social compositions of the respective samples.

Future research could probe the salience of outcome expectations, including self-evaluative, social and physical outcomes, in the motivation for individuals to pursue the professoriate, and in the goals they set forth to accomplish in these roles. As Gibbs and Griffin suggest, individuals considering entrance into the professoriate assess the congruence between the expected outcomes of faculty positions with their personal values, so examining how these values are developed and how potential candidates think about their values in relationship to academic cultures could prove worthwhile. Integrating SCCT with theory that explicitly addresses value formation processes would help us better

understand why individuals pursue these roles. Moreover, deeper investigation into the reasons behind career and interest transitions that lead individuals to become professors could deepen our understanding of faculty pipelines and reveal an untapped pool of talented and motivated candidates. Such research could shed light on practitioners who pursued faculty positions but concurrently maintain careers outside of academia.

The pivotal individuals explored in this study signify the significance of social capital in the decision process for becoming a professor. Social capital has been explored in theoretical models to explain job search and labor market outcomes, and could be leveraged in theoretical models that build upon SCCT to elucidate the choice and attainment of professorship as a career [36]. Quantitative methods could be used to identify motivation and pathway trends by demographic, discipline, and institutional type, and targeted qualitative work could provide greater insight into the underlying reasons for these phenomena. Future research could address some of the limitations in this study, principally the sampling restrictions, by recruiting a broader range of faculty and including more representation from respective institutional types. This study only had one professor from a STEM field; selecting more faculty from various academic disciplines may reveal interesting trends. Unearthing such nuances will deepen our understanding of the professoriate and the individuals who occupy these essential roles in the academy.

## 7. Conclusions

MSI professors' narrations of their experiences becoming faculty members reveal key personal and environmental factors that can be leveraged to diversify and strengthen pathways to the professoriate, as well as retention and success within it. The journeys that led these individuals to join the academy reflect the various paths to such positions, and disrupt traditional conceptions of academic pipelines as linear trajectories through undergraduate and graduate studies directly into tenure-track faculty positions. These journeys were varied and contained a range of personal and professional experiences, yet there were trends in their narratives. Values centered on benefitting others, such as community uplift and education for social change, emerged as more instrumental in drawing MSI faculty to the professoriate than values such as autonomy and academic freedom, which have been repeatedly documented as primary motivators for PWI faculty in national surveys. MSIs appear to attract community-oriented individuals to their faculty positions, and for some participants in this study, the aspiration to become a professor was directly linked to helping MSIs serve marginalized communities. As many MSIs recruit and retain diverse faculties, PWIs interested in embodying the diversity rhetoric that they espouse could reflect on the extent to which they value such service, and support professors who are engaged in it.

The importance of supportive individuals and environments in preparing and influencing the faculty members in this study cannot be overstated. Role models, mentors, and persistent recruiters were all decisive in inspiring and drawing these individuals to the academy, and institutions should be more intentional in both fostering and leveraging these relationships. Policy makers should identify and support programs that facilitate training for the professorship, taking into consideration programs that prepare nontraditional faculty aspirants, such as practitioners for the various roles that they will maintain as professors.

By understanding the motivations of professors and the values that are important to them, colleges and universities of all institutional types can gain greater insight into areas of congruence and dissonance that their faculty members experience. Interrogating the alignment between their missions, cultures, and faculty values and motivations may lead institutions to discover practices that increase the job satisfaction of their professors while furthering institutional interests. Diversity-related goals for faculty could become more attainable through deliberate efforts to craft faculty roles and expectations in ways that are appealing to the populations that institutions are trying to recruit and retain. Through such efforts, colleges and universities will be able to engage their various roles more

effectively, improve the status of U.S. postsecondary education, and benefit communities within and outside of the academy.

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