

Murray State University ADVANCE
Summary of Social Science Research Findings
2023-24

Funded by an ADVANCE grant from the National Science Foundation, the purpose of this research was to examine the experiences of marginalized¹ faculty at Murray State University (MSU), with an emphasis on marginalized gender identities intersecting with race/ethnicity; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual plus (LGBTQIA+) status; and disability. Data was collected through a survey open to all MSU faculty, along with individual interviews and focus groups for those identifying in one or more of the target identity categories. 23.7% (N = 109) of full time faculty participated in the survey, including 12 faculty who identified as an underrepresented racial/ethnic minority (URM), 11 who identified as LGBTQIA+, and 29 who identified as having a disability. 13 full-time faculty participated in more intensive interviews or focus groups.

KEY FINDINGS

Intersecting Identities

Participants described the ways in which their intersecting, marginalized status(es) shaped their day-to-day interactions and overall experience at MSU. Many perceived the default norm of Murray to be white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, Christian, and conservative. While this characterization tended to concern the town itself, it manifested also at the university. As a result, many of our URM and LGBTQIA+ faculty participants, along with those with disabilities, experienced a sense of vulnerability. Faculty who endorsed two or more intersecting marginalized identities in the survey reported a significantly more negative overall campus diversity climate than faculty with all majority identities. Marginalized faculty frequently shared feelings of exhaustion and frustration regarding the campus climate.

Varied policy interpretations

Marginalized faculty did not necessarily assume that the system would protect them. Rather, some depended on support from chairs/deans. However, others were not able to do so, reporting supervisors' insufficient concern for the challenges they faced as marginalized faculty, bullying, and even retaliation. Workload and scheduling was a common point of contention, especially regarding caregiving concerns (e.g. childcare) and inflexibility regarding schedules and work modalities.

(De-)Valuation of DEI labor

Most participants reported doing labor on campus to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This work included teaching DEI-related courses, supporting marginalized students and faculty, and/or responding to hostile/harassing students in their department. Though it took many hours, this emotional and intellectual labor was not always valued or formally credited towards faculty members' advancement. Several participants also expressed concern about anti-DEI legislation pending in the state legislature (e.g., SB6).

Micro- and macro-aggressions

¹ We use the term “marginalized” to describe identities that have been historically disadvantaged, disempowered, and oppressed. However, we acknowledge that not all of our participants used this term to describe themselves.

Some participants described facing or witnessing micro- and macro-aggressions from supervisors, colleagues, campus police, or (less commonly) students. In some cases, these subtle or more overt exclusionary actions/comments were directed at the participants. In other cases, participants heard or saw stereotypes being used in decision making about things such as hiring and tenure & promotion. Half (50%) of URM faculty who completed the survey reported experiencing one or more microaggressions in the last two years.

Campus infrastructure

Participants describe an inaccessible campus. Concerns were raised regarding parking, sidewalks, buildings, bathrooms, and technology. Only 8 (27.6%) of 29 survey participants who identified as having a disability reported that the campus was very or extremely accessible to them with respect to their specific disability. Participants also described challenges accessing specialist medical care in the community. This further compounded challenges they experienced on campus and in the community, enhancing feelings of isolation as well as time and resource burdens.

The salience of gender

For most participants, alongside their URM, LGBTQIA+, and/or disability status, gender was also quite salient. They noted, for example, that those with a marginalized gender identity tended to provide more (unrecognized) support to students, have heavier teaching and service loads, experience more student challenges to authority, face bias in evaluation, and be paid less.

Lack of awareness and protection from university administration

Compounding these day-to-day challenges was the perception that university administration lacked awareness of said challenges or a willingness to address them. In particular, many participants expressed concerns about the campus offices meant to protect them. Several participants reported being denied reasonable accommodations for medically-documented disabilities and 28.4% ($n = 31$) of faculty surveyed reported that they did not know how to request a reasonable accommodation for a disability. Some participants noted that when they or others reported harassment, they saw nothing happen to the perpetrators nor any actions taken to protect the victim/reporter's safety. Many also perceived the Title IX training to be ineffective.

Survival Strategies and Sources of Support

In response to the challenges they faced, participants described a number of survival strategies and sources of support in Murray and at MSU.

“Code-switching” and “passing”

In order to fit into the predominately white, able-bodied, and heteronormative environment, participants described “code-switching” and/or “passing.” “Code-switching” involves changing ways of speaking or interacting, while “passing” refers to some participants’ experience being perceived as white, able-bodied, and/or Christian (despite not being so). Notably, “passing” confers privileges that are inaccessible to those who are unable/unwilling to do so. 82.7% ($n = 24$) of survey participants with a disability reported sometimes, usually, or always avoiding disclosing their disability at Murray State, with the most common reasons being not wanting to be treated differently and fear of discrimination. Likewise, the majority of survey participants who identified as LGBTQIA+ reported not being open/out to any of their students (54.5%; $n = 6$) and being open/out to fewer than half of the faculty/staff/administrators they work with (63.6%, $n = 7$). The most common reasons for not being open/out at work included the possibility of making people feel uncomfortable and the possibility of being stereotyped, with three faculty also citing fear for their personal safety.

Self-censorship and self-isolation

In order to avoid ostracization and/or retaliation, participants control what they say and to whom, sometimes trusting only a handful of people and choosing largely to keep to themselves. Some reported following the status quo of their departments, even if they were not in agreement, simply to avoid facing negative repercussions. In addition, two faculty surveyed who identified as LGBTQIA+ reported avoiding social events and talking about their family and social life to avoid possible harassment or discrimination due to their sexual orientation.

Campus connections and community ties

Many participants were encouraged by their relationships with students, supporting them through work with student programming offices and organizations. Some also found support from colleagues, supervisors, and ADVANCE grant initiatives. Faculty surveyed generally agreed that their chair director was supportive of faculty mental health and well being (74.3% agree or strongly agree) and work-life balance (76.1% agree or strongly agree). However, only 27.5% of faculty surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that Murray State provides sufficient resources to support faculty mental health and only 22% agreed or strongly agreed that the available resources are sensitive and responsive to their cultural identities. Outside the university, participants relied on community clubs, advocacy groups, faith-based organizations (if religious), therapy, yoga, and meditation. They also cultivated their own friend groups external to the university.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The above findings were presented to senior university leadership, including our President and Provost, at an internal steering committee meeting in 2024 and were accompanied by recommendations for improving the campus climate for marginalized faculty. In particular, the MSU ADVANCE team recommended that MSU recognize, reward, and protect diversity-related labor that often goes unpaid/devalued. This often takes the form of low-status, time-consuming, largely invisible service that nevertheless needs to be done and we are hopeful that the Faculty Senate will take this up. Furthermore, MSU ADVANCE recommended improving campus accessibility. Some progress has been made towards the latter with respect to parking. The MSU ADVANCE team also recommended that the university provide more ways for faculty to connect with each other. The President and Provost have expressed interest in growing existing ADVANCE programming such as the Mentoring Circles to address the needs of URM and LGBTQIA+ faculty participants.