

By Focusing on Leadership Development, universities can advance equity for Women of Color in the tech workplace

SUMMARY

Women of Color (WOC) in tech often languish in entry-level positions despite their qualifications or aspirations for advancement. A 2019 McKinsey report noted that for women in tech, the “first rung” of the corporate ladder is broken. Leading research makes clear that inherent deficiencies are not responsible for the stagnation or slow advancement of WOC in tech. Instead, systemic issues arising from bias about the perceived skills, knowledge, and adaptability of WOC are largely accountable for their lack of career progress. The National Association of Colleges and Employers found a significant workplace readiness gap in the notion of leadership between employers and new graduates. Closing this perception gap through leadership development is essential for the acceleration of WOC to positions of influence in tech. Higher education is well positioned to play a leading role in equipping WOC to excel in the tech workplace but too often these institutions employ a colorblind, gender neutral approach to preparing students that maintains the status quo. A promising new intervention to prepare WOC for leadership in tech was piloted in 2020 by Dr. Rati Thanawala, former VP of Nokia Bell Labs and current Fellow and Leader in Practice at Harvard. From research and experience, Dr. Thanawala developed a framework of 19 actionable levers for thriving early in one’s career. Some of the levers include an ability to create connectedness and self-belonging, getting great early assignments, and decoding corporate culture. Further, Dr. Thanawala conducted interviews with more than 40 experienced WOC in tech and created a curriculum that culminated in the development of the Leadership Academy for Women of Color in Tech. The pilot class of 54 students reported gains in their perceptions of future career success, more confidence in negotiating abilities, and greater pursuance of additional opportunities to improve leadership skills, among other indicators of success. Upon the pilot’s conclusion, a set of recommendations to further support WOC pursuing tech was developed for higher education institutions.

4.83 out of 5- The likelihood that pilot participants will recommend the Leadership Academy to friends, peers, or classmates.

POLICY OPPORTUNITIES FOR HIGHER ED TO ADVANCE EQUITY FOR WOC IN TECH

- Require STEM faculty and advisors to complete **training in systemic racism, unconscious bias, and intersectionality** so they are more aware of the systems that contribute to inequities and better positioned to structure their courses and **support to advance equitable outcomes for WOC in tech.**
- Provide and incentivize professional development opportunities for faculty and staff that center upon research by and about the experiences of WOC in tech.
- **Create leadership courses** specific to needs and experiences of WOC in tech. Engage tech companies and WOC within those companies to learn what factors are associated with success and career advancement.
- **Encourage more WOC to pursue MS/PhDs** if they have positive trajectories that indicate persistence and high speed of learning.
- Assume responsibility for the workplace readiness of WOC in tech. This requires a **recognition that the tech playing field is not level**, a commitment to understanding the specific issues WOC face in the tech workplace, and a plan of action to prepare WOC for leadership positions.

For minorities and women, being noticed early in career is critical to success (Thomas & Gabarro, 1999).