

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



Diversity Without Dollars

You think you can't afford to transform your faculty? The University of Houston begs to differ.

HIRING AND RETENTION

By *Megan Zahneis*

SEPTEMBER 9, 2020

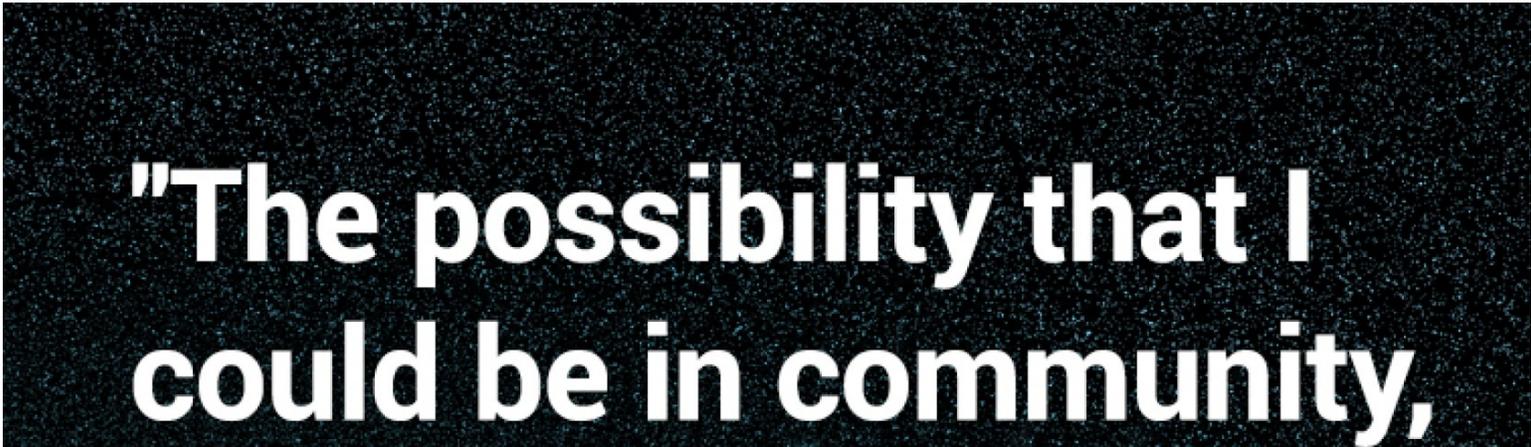
This, Monique T. Mills had become convinced, was the way it was going to be.

She'd won tenure at a top-tier research institution — Ohio State University — where her research on children who speak African American English was finding its foothold. Yes, Mills was the only Black person in her department and often faced

racial discrimination in the classroom and on her student evaluations. But she had a group of supportive communications scholars at other institutions whose external reviews had propelled her to tenure, and the successful annual reviews she racked up were another reassurance that she was doing her job well.

So, if she didn't feel much community in the Columbus suburb where she had spent her tenure-track years, she'd move to a more diverse part of town. And if her science didn't get as much attention as that of her white colleagues, she'd keep forging ahead until it did. Mills might not have been happy at Ohio State, but she was resolved. It would have to be enough.

Then, in 2017, during her posttenure sabbatical, Mills got a call from the University of Houston to give a talk about her work — a call, she soon realized, that was the first step in courting her to join the Houston faculty. The new dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences was interested in applied research like Mills's, the Houston professor told her, and Mills could recruit local Texas youth to participate in her research studies. Plus, the University of Houston had received a grant from the National Science Foundation to recruit and retain more women and women of color. Those women, Mills was told, belonged to an Underrepresented Women of Color Coalition championed by the provost.



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CHRONICLE ILLUSTRATION, PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRANDON THIBODEAUX AND MABRY CAMPBELL

Monique T. Mills

All of that sounded good to Mills.

“The possibility that I could be in community, intellectual community with other faculty of color, was just really yummy,” she says. “Like, ‘OK, I can have it all.’”

So Mills visited the Houston campus once, then again. She was invited to lunch at a campus cafeteria where R&B and hip-hop music were playing alongside top-40 tunes. Walking across campus, she could see the diversity of Houston’s student body.

But, Mills says, she’d been “indoctrinated” in “Big Ten thinking” — five years earlier she would never have left Ohio State for a less prestigious institution.

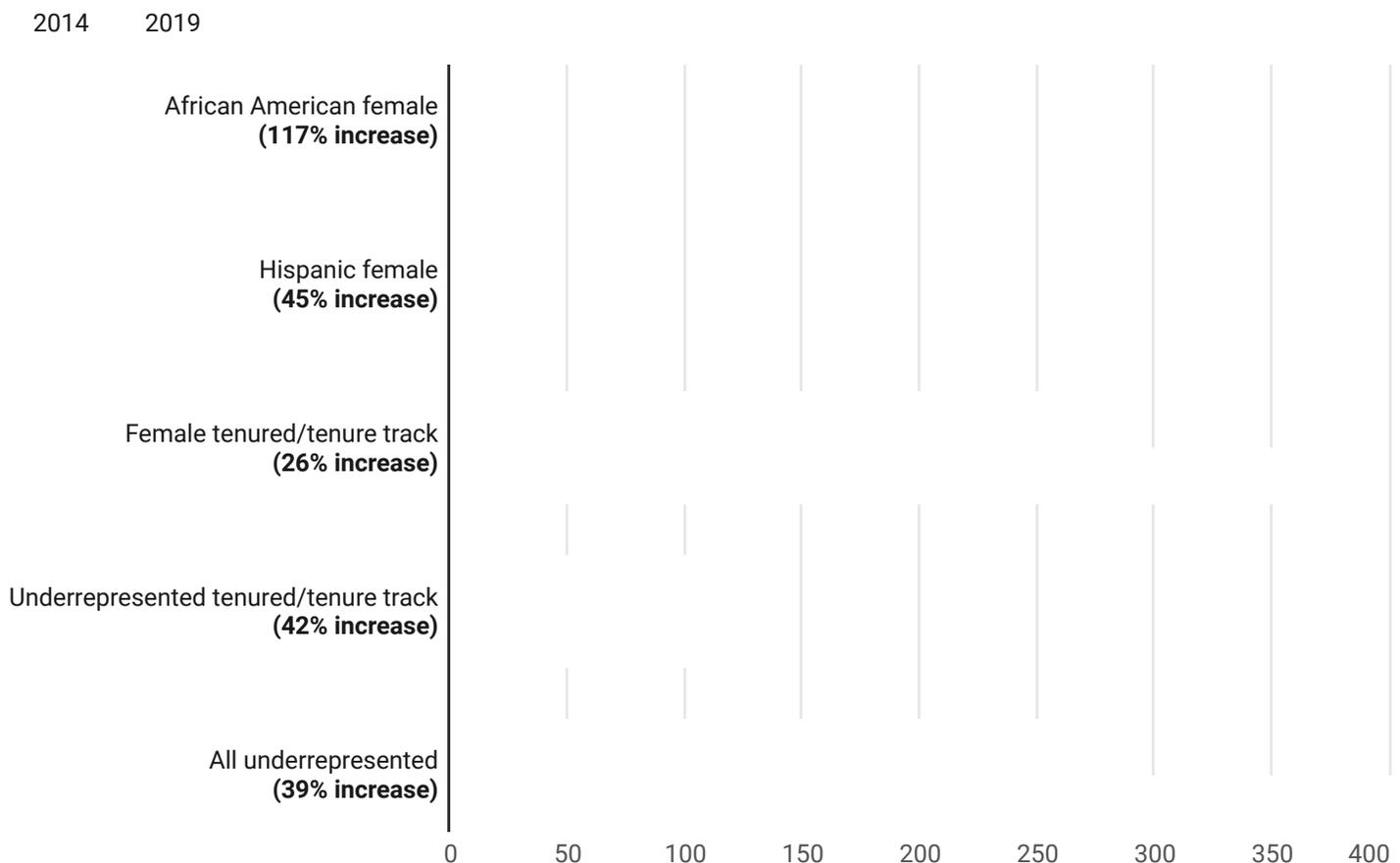
“But I was ready.”

Mills joined a surge in underrepresented faculty members joining Houston. In 2019, the university boasted nearly 42 percent more tenure- and tenure-track faculty

members of color than it had five years earlier. Perhaps even more striking: It made those strides on a shoestring budget. While wealthier, more prestigious institutions, including Brown University and the University of Pennsylvania, have made widely publicized diversity investments on the order of \$140-million and more, Houston started with a \$3.3-million grant from the National Science Foundation.

Diversifying the Faculty

Starting with a \$3.3-million grant from the National Science Foundation, the University of Houston increased the number of underrepresented faculty members over a five-year period.



Data for all underrepresented faculty members includes ranked and unranked.

Chart: Audrey Williams June • Source: U. of Houston • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Houston's peers across the nation would love to see similar successes. Calls for a more diverse faculty have been sounded for decades. Now, as conversations about police brutality and broader systemic prejudice sweep the nation, those demands

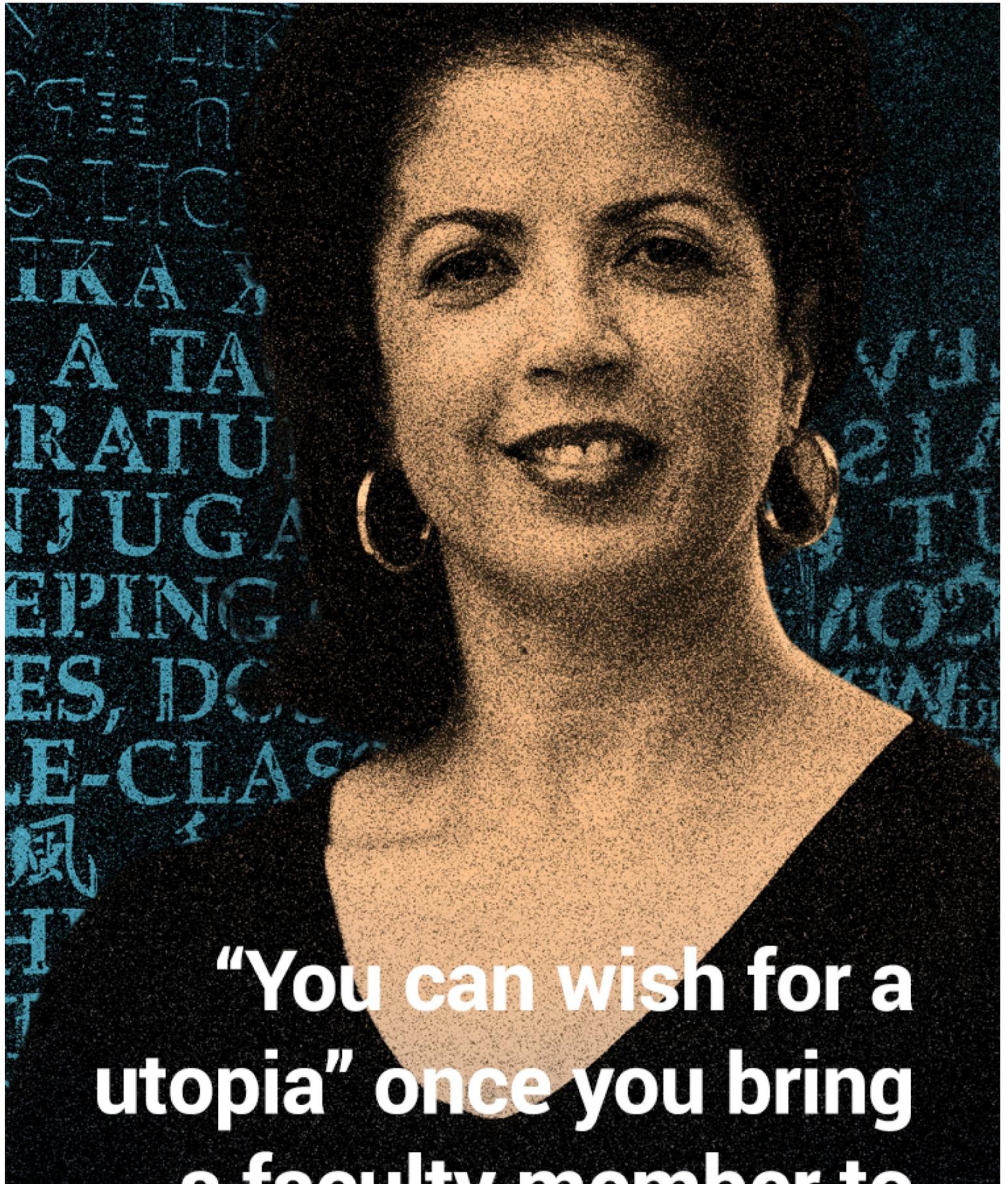
are even more urgent. Colleges face their own moment of reckoning with racial justice and equity.

Their ability to meet that moment is hampered. The daunting and persistent challenges of recruiting underrepresented scholars — and, just as important, retaining them — have only been made greater by the enormous financial losses the pandemic has caused. Hiring freezes preclude bringing on new faculty members; bootstrapped budgets mean no money for concerted retention initiatives. But Houston faculty members and administrators say it's possible to do a lot with a little — and some tangible steps toward diversifying a faculty may not cost any money at all.

Erika J. Henderson can attest to that. She's Houston's associate provost for faculty recruitment, retention, equity, and diversity and a key figure in administering the university's National Science Foundation Advance grant.

The \$3.3-million grant, Henderson says, served as a “stimulus” for faculty-diversity efforts, funding an exploratory period in which Houston investigated best practices. Costs offset by the grant itself included administrative fellowships and course releases for faculty members, but its real value, she says, was in identifying permanent institution-level investments to make. Those investments, funded largely through the provost's office, include allocations of \$100,000 or less and the “sweat equity” of staff and faculty members.





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Erika Henderson

The first step the university took after receiving the grant was to produce a 42-page [tool kit](#) for search committees and administrators. The kit outlines language required by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission plus tips for additional “proactive” wording to add. One example reads, “The University of Houston, with one of the most diverse student bodies in the nation, seeks to recruit and retain a diverse community of scholars.”

It also advises posting job ads not just to a discipline’s standard job board, but also to professional societies that focus on diverse populations. And it describes what sorts of interview questions are and aren’t appropriate. It is out of bounds, for example, to ask a candidate where they were born or what their native language is.

Those proactive steps work, Henderson says: In the past five years, overall applications have risen 41 percent, with greater gains in Black candidates (70

percent) and Latina/o candidates (52 percent).

Compiling resources wasn't enough, though: Leaders wanted to engage faculty members more directly in meeting the grant's goals. They created a mandatory training session for chairs of search committees. After analysis found that search committees that had more than one member go through training yielded more-diverse applicant pools, Houston started requiring all search-committee members to attend training every two years.

The training includes coaching on how to be proactive in identifying potential job candidates — reaching out to promising young scholars and encouraging them to apply, for instance, rather than relying on the pools of candidates who independently submit applications — and on using “behavioral interviewing” techniques. Asking how candidates have handled specific past situations, for example, tends to be a better predictor of job performance than posing hypothetical scenarios.

At Houston, search training also teaches faculty to use rubrics in evaluating candidates. Search committees are advised to identify the key “knowledge, skills, abilities, and orientations” applicants will need on the job, and score them on how well they demonstrate those attributes.

The idea is to remove hidden — and perhaps unconscious — biases from evaluations. Rubrics force search-committee members to explain why they are evaluating candidates the way they are. Why is a person's publication record judged “excellent”? What does it mean that another candidate has “outstanding prospects for fund raising”?

The revamped search process has made an appreciable difference for Amy K. Sater, chair of Houston's department of biology and biochemistry. Sater has been attentive to the lack of faculty diversity for a long time — her undergraduate adviser was one of only a handful of Native American scholars working in STEM at the time — but she'd noticed her department wasn't actively working to change that.

“I think a lot of us kind of fell back on, ‘We’re a basic science department, and the number of candidates who are members of underrepresented groups is really small. So we have great intentions, and we’re just going to stop there,’” Sater says. The NSF Advance work, she says, provided institutional-level resources to help individual departments diversify their ranks. But just as valuable was the conceptual framework that got faculty members talking about what departmental diversity meant. People understand the importance of diversity in the abstract, but when it comes to particular hires, “that’s never going to be as high a priority to people as, ‘I want someone who can make my research better,’” Sater says.

“A lot of them are going to say things like, ‘We don’t want to trade excellence for diversity,’” she says. They see it as a binary. “Now we get to talk about” why that binary is false, she says. That kind of conversation wouldn’t “have happened at all without the Advance program.”

Sater remembers that another department chair was “really annoyed” about the search-committee training, and complained that it wouldn’t make any difference. The Advance program encouraged him to look into the data on implicit-bias training, and he wound up presenting to a group of fellow department chairs about its efficacy.

Sater has seen results within her own department, too. She's hired six people under the Advance framework, two of whom are women, two of whom are Latina/o, and one of whom is a member of the LGBTQ community.

Much of that success has come from individual outreach to potential hires, Sater says. "If you want to recruit a more diverse faculty and retain a more diverse faculty, you have to find those people. You can't just wait until you stumble upon them," she says. "You have to invite people to apply, and you have to make sure that people have the resources that they need to establish their research careers here."

Such outreach might take extra work, Sater acknowledges, but job candidates can be found more easily than ever. Browsing Twitter hashtags like #BlackInSTEM, she says, "you can identify a whole bunch of interesting people that are doing great science, and in theory, you can come back and get in touch with them later and say, 'We have a faculty position. I'd love for you to apply for this.'"

To Sater, diversifying a faculty is in many ways in a moral imperative, and not one that ought to be driven — or derailed — by finances.

"It's not all about the money. If you're looking for an excuse to not do something, you can always find one," she says, "but I think we have to do this in order to have any credibility on our campus."

"What the Advance program did is gave us a foundation. It gave us resources. It gave us a framework," she says. "Now, as a faculty, we have to keep finding ways to make it a priority."

As any faculty-affairs officer knows, it's not enough to bring on underrepresented scholars. The next step — less well-defined, and to many more difficult — is to ensure they stick around.

At Houston, the provost's office purchased an institutional membership to the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity, which costs \$20,000 annually, giving all Houston faculty members access to the organization's on-demand resources. They've added professional-development programming to encourage women to apply to become full professors, an Academic Women in Leadership initiative that supports associate and full professors who are interested in moving into administrative roles, and a [Faculty Engagement and Development Center](#) that offers career planning and networking services.

“You can wish for a utopia” once you bring a faculty member to campus, Henderson says, “but there are unfortunately still some bad actors.” A robust network of on-campus support — including a watchful eye on the service burdens often levied on underrepresented faculty members — is crucial.

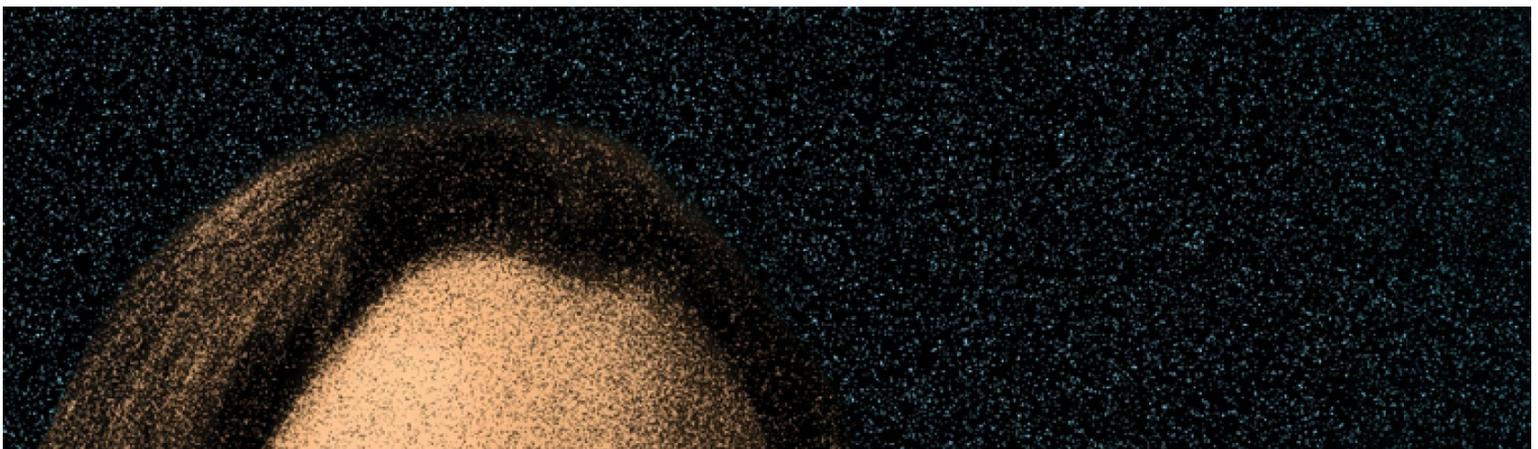
One of Houston's solutions has been its Underrepresented Women of Color Coalition. Supported by the provost, Paula Myrick Short, who gave the group \$125,000 to get off the ground in its first five years, the coalition acts as a professional and personal network for its 68 members. For Renita Horton, an assistant professor of biomedical engineering, the coalition has been a major locus of support. From her arrival on campus in January 2019, she says, it was “a community of people who really understand what I'm dealing with.”

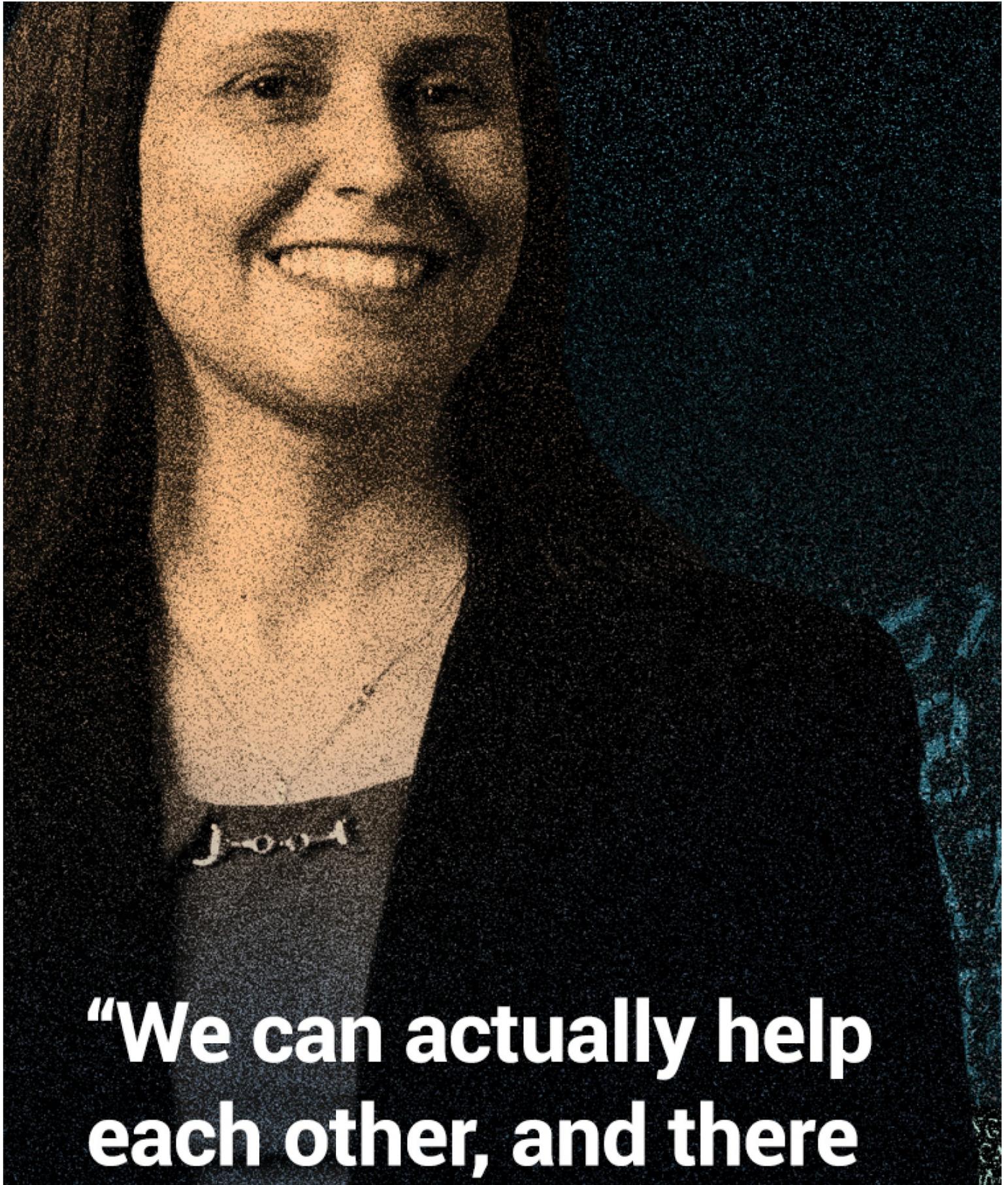
The group meets at least once a month, and holds a retreat at the start of each academic year. Its members share tips on writing, teaching, and research. They're

able to apply for small seed grants provided by the provost's office, and often collaborate with one another in doing so. Horton, who is Black, particularly appreciates the small gestures of support she often sees from fellow members. If she's been silent on the group's email listserv, she says, a colleague might send her a note to check in. Amid the challenges of academe — juggling publishing, teaching, grant writing — “it's nice to feel like someone has a life raft if you need it.”

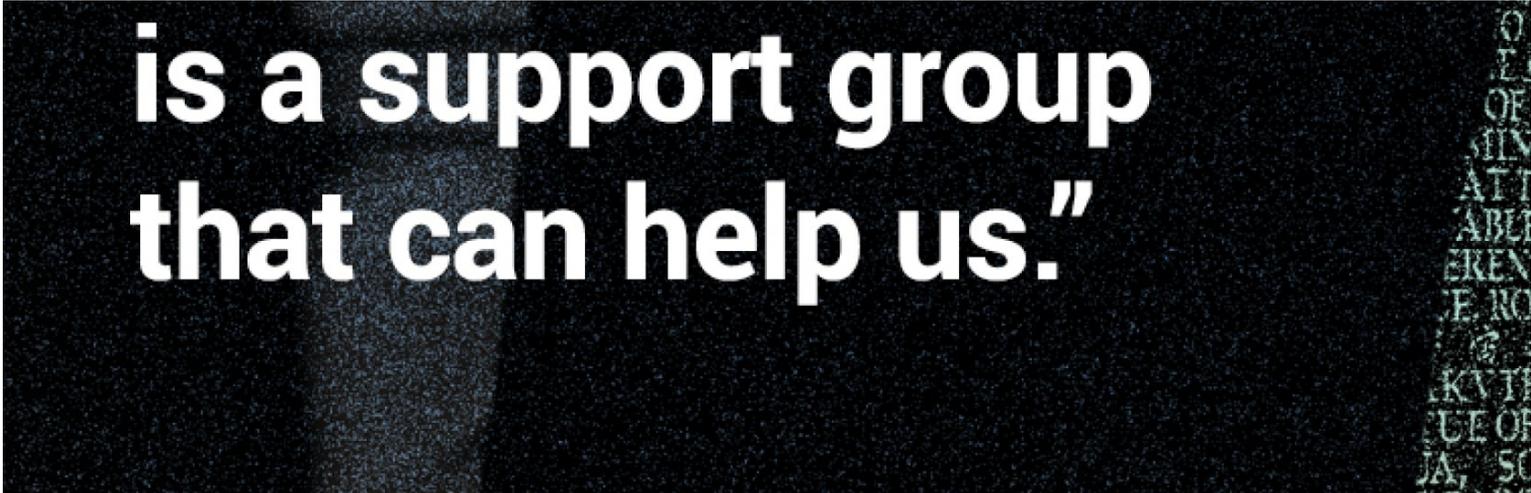
But more than a momentary life raft, Horton says, the coalition has given her a cadre of role models. “You see all these people, some of them who look like you, and they're succeeding,” she says. “You hear the stories and the different paths that they took.”

Debora F. Rodrigues, a professor of civil and environmental engineering, remembers attending her first coalition meeting and being surprised at how many female colleagues of color she had in other departments. She's found value in the informal interactions she has with her fellow members — one helped her troubleshoot her online-class setup for an hour over Zoom; another sent along a successful NIH grant for Rodrigues to use as a model, and referred her to a third colleague who was particularly experienced in getting NIH funding. The group celebrates members' professional accomplishments regularly.





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Debora F. Rodrigues

It all amounts to a significant cultural change from when Rodrigues first arrived on campus. A native of Brazil, she came to Houston in 2010, fresh off a postdoctoral appointment at Yale University. As the sole woman of color in a department dominated by white men, Rodrigues found it difficult to connect with her colleagues and sometimes felt excluded from their coffee-break chats.

As an assistant professor, Rodrigues faced the extra service burdens familiar to so many faculty members of color. She says she was often recruited for committee work, in her own department and others, as if the line of thought were: “OK, who is diverse enough? Debora!”

Rodrigues didn't feel she could decline such requests, nor could she share her concerns with her dean or department chair. Both were supportive of her and other underrepresented faculty members, but their authority — and the knowledge that eventually, they'd be reviewing her case for promotion and tenure — made it difficult for Rodrigues to be frank with them. “There was not so much the sense of community, or people concerned about my personal life or my life-and-work

balance,” she says.

But when Houston landed the Advance grant, Rodrigues says, that began to change. There were workshops and luncheons dedicated to professional development for female faculty members. At one presentation, a guest speaker shared national statistics about pay disparities faced by faculty members of color, and though they were disheartening, they propelled Rodrigues to think about changing the system — and her own perceptions of what was possible.

She took on a semester-long Advance fellowship and joined the coalition, in the process gaining a better understanding of the inner workings of academe and “getting out of my little cocoon.”

Other people shared her experience, she realized. “We can actually help each other, and there is a support group that can help us.”

For Monique Mills, who had spent her entire academic career at majority-white institutions, arriving at the University of Houston was a refreshing change.

“I don’t have to hold my breath anymore and worry about being under the white gaze or, ‘How can I just tone myself, my dress, my speech down so that I can not disrupt, so that I won’t be seen as an outlier?’” Mills says. Instead she can walk into a space like the faculty café feeling like, as she puts it, “I belong here, because she probably uses the same hair product that I use, she has the same curl pattern that I have.” People smile at her, engage her in conversation, want to collaborate.

Mills finds her scholarship is more broadly recognized at Houston, too. There, she’s

“seen for my expertise and for something that I have to offer,” she says. “No matter where I turn, there’s a community.”

Mills has done her best to contribute to that community, too. She’s a coach with the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity, and she’s drawn on that expertise in talks she’s given to her colleagues.

Cross-campus interaction is key. Mills wants to participate in programming specific to faculty of color, but also in campuswide professional-development initiatives. “It’s both/and in order for us to feel like we are valued as scholars, as teachers, and as colleagues in the larger community,” she says.

Mills’s former institution, Ohio State, has also taken steps in that direction. Under the leadership of James L. Moore III, vice provost for diversity and inclusion and chief diversity officer, who assumed his role the same year Mills left, Ohio State has added targeted diverse-recruitment efforts, an online portal to track the institution’s investments in diversity, and several racial-justice initiatives. And Mills has heard anecdotally that the climate at her former institution has improved vastly.

“These are persistent issues for all universities, and Ohio State is not immune,” Benjamin Johnson, an Ohio State spokesman, wrote in an email to *The Chronicle*. “Some colleges and departments have made great strides in creating more inclusive spaces for their faculty; others still have work to do.”

Houston isn’t the only college to recognize that faculty diversity can be advanced without big money.

Shontay Delalue, who as Brown University's vice president for institutional equity and diversity helps oversee its \$165-million "Pathways to Diversity and Inclusion" project, suggests administrators take a hard look at existing campus practices to inform change. Lack of deep institutional reserves, Delalue says, shouldn't prevent an institution from thinking about how to embed diversity, equity, and inclusion in the way it does business.

"I know some would say, 'Well, that's easy to say. You work at a place that's resourced,'" she says. But "I would do this at any institution where I work." (And, in fact, she once managed the recruitment of students from historically underrepresented groups at the University of Maine at Orono.)

Delalue encourages a tight focus when setting goals. Brown's plan deliberately identified a relatively small number of actions that leaders thought could have the biggest immediate impact to begin with — such as doubling the number of faculty from underrepresented populations — expecting that more would follow.

Big-money initiatives, too, come with their own set of misconceptions. Lubna Mian, associate vice provost for faculty at the University of Pennsylvania and an overseer of her institution's \$140 million-plus [Action Plan for Faculty Excellence and Diversity](#), knows that firsthand.

"One of the misconceptions is that there's some central budget you tap and you release a bunch of funds, and that just solves the problem," Mian says. "If you view these plans as solely a financial investment and don't see that underneath, it is really a lot of human activity that cuts across the institution, you're not really understanding it very well."

The price tag an institution places on faculty diversity goes only so far, says Christianne C. Hardy, a special assistant to the president at Dartmouth College, which started its [Action Plan for Inclusive Excellence](#) in 2016.

“The dollar amount is a good, crude measure of an institution’s level of commitment. It conveys very efficiently the sense that we care enough about this to throw money at it,” she says. “We do care enough to throw money at it.” But “if it were just about money, the richest institutions in American higher education would have solved this problem.”

Dartmouth, Hardy readily acknowledges, hasn’t solved it yet. In 2016 the college set a goal of having 25 percent of its tenure-track faculty members be from underrepresented groups by 2020. But in 2017, it extended its deadline to 2027. At Brown and Penn, Delaloe and Mian, too, know that much work is yet to be done.

And at the University of Houston, despite its progress elsewhere, Debora Rodrigues remains the only woman of color in her department.

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Megan Zahneis

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