“The idea around IDEA – pun intended – is that we can grow a community of scholars who care about equity, diversity and social justice issues.”

That’s how Professor Michael Goh answered the question, “What is the Institute for Diversity, Equity and Advocacy, (IDEA) (https://diversity.umn.edu/idea/) and what does it do?”

Dr. Goh is a professor in Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development in the College of Education and Human Development and he is just beginning his second year leading the institute within the Office for Equity and Diversity. Dr. Priscilla Gibson in the School of Social Work is just concluding her third year as the IDEA Faculty Development Fellow. They talked about the work being done through IDEA.
As with all units within the Office for Equity and Diversity (OED), Goh tells us his work with IDEA follows the tenet that “at the University of Minnesota, diversity is everyone’s everyday work.”

IDEA works behind the scenes through Bridge Funding (https://diversity.umn.edu/idea/bridgefunding) and in pre-doc and post-doc programming, towards their mission to recruit and retain a diverse faculty.

But Goh feels these terms are inadequate in defining the goals of IDEA. He prefers the terms “attracting and thriving.”

“Attracting means more than just putting out a job ad and looking at applicants. It’s about actively seeking out diverse candidates through colleagues and national networks and developing relationships with potential leads,” Goh explains. He feels that that faculty candidates need to “feel that there’s a future at this university, in this community, for them to succeed.

Goh adds that he feels the term “retaining” has a survival feel to it. He prefers to be proactive in helping faculty to “thrive” here.

Gibson is helping faculty to thrive through her Faculty of Color writing workshops (https://diversity.umn.edu/idea/workshopsevents#Writing Workshops) and through social events to help create a sense of community. “I love this term ‘thriving’,” she declares, “because I feel it is connected to welcoming and belonging.”

Gibson shares that the literature shows that faculty of color don’t always feel they belong. But forming relationships helps. And bringing people together helps form relationships.

“That’s why I think the writing group is so important,” says Gibson. “We are asking them to leave the convenience of their office or their home to come and write as a group.” Research has shown that this kind of activity, routinely gathering to work on their writing, helps writers to be much more productive and successful.

One of the most prominent programs IDEA supports is the Multicultural Research Award (MRA). (https://diversity.umn.edu/idea/multiculturalresearchawards) This award is open to all faculty engaged in research on equity and diversity issues. Since it began in 1996, the MRA has been awarded to more than 180 faculty members. For many junior faculty, this award is often a springboard to larger, external research awards.

The MRA research is presented each spring in the Diversity Through the Disciplines Symposium, (https://diversity.umn.edu/idea/workshopsevents#DTTD Spring 2105 Symposium) scheduled this year for May 5, 2016. These presentations highlight the interdisciplinary breadth of multicultural research and are open to the public. They provide the presenters a forum to share their discoveries with colleagues and engender future research collaborations.

Faculty seeking guidance in adding diversity into teaching methods, find it in the Diversity in the Curriculum (https://diversity.umn.edu/idea/workshopsevents#Diversity_in_Curriculum) workshops. These sessions are offered twice a year and represent a partnership between Gibson (IDEA) and Dr. Anita Gonzalez at the Center for Educational Innovation (http://cei.umn.edu/).

Recently Goh and Gibson have been working with Virajita Singh, Assistant Vice Provost with OED. They are trying to learn more about faculty’s perception of the work of equity and diversity in higher education, how have they been involved, where are we now and – what does this indicate for the future?

Goh is pleased that, “there is a lot more interest from administrators, faculty, staff, and students,” about equity and diversity work. Goh explains that, “student, faculty, and community activism clearly signal different ways in which we all seem to go about this work.”

This research project, says Goh “is not trying to intellectualize the issue but is a genuine attempt to learn about what motivates the different ways we engage in equity and diversity work so that we can potentially coalesce rather than collide in our efforts.”

Their findings from this research will be presented at the upcoming Keeping Our Faculty Symposium VII (https://diversity.umn.edu/kof) (April 17-19, 2016). This biennial conference has been held since 1998. So – why is this gathering still so important?

Goh tells us the symposium founders recognized the need to work together to create change. “And they recognized that no one university, no one office, no one group of scholars has the answers. Hence, the need to confer nationally about how to address this issue.”

“Issues continue to be identified,” adds Gibson, “as people become a little more comfortable, a little more empowered to talk about their lived experience as underrepresented faculty”
This makes Gibson especially excited that for this symposium “we have some of the best minds coming here to discuss, to critique and to analyze.”

“We are bringing up the next generation of scholars, and university administrators”, Gibson says. “We still need to develop that cadre.”

Goh feels, “there are a lot of good ideas being generated by higher education scholars locally and around the country that we can learn from. We need to cultivate the wisdom that is already out there and we need to be committed to moving to action.”

“Our goal for this symposium,” Goh says, “is to provide a space for scholars, campus leaders, and students to critically and honestly engage on urgent issues confronting faculty diversity so that we can discover meaningful, practical, and effective solutions for our campus and beyond.”

[Header photo credit: Amelie Hyams]