



ETHNOGRAPHY IN EVALUATION

Documenting program culture and institutional change at HBCUs

The AGEP PATHs Model to Advance Early Career Minority Faculty in the STEM Professoriate

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ABSTRACT

Understanding culture is the cornerstone of ethnography (Peltó, 2016). The PATHs program was awarded to change the culture for tenure and promotion of underrepresented faculty in STEM departments at HBCUs. The goal of the program is to develop, implement, study, and evaluate a model to advance underrepresented minority faculty in the professoriate at HBCUs.

Improving a program includes facilitating change within the program’s culture (Patton, 2012a). An ethnographic evaluation offers the ability to facilitate and assess change (Patton, 2015). The type of change observed within the AGEP PATHs program was coded as neo-institutional change (Kezar, 2013). Neo-institutional change suggests that individual agency is primarily determined by organizational context but allows for and explores individual agency within the change process. Ethnographically-informed external evaluation fieldwork serves as the investigatory approach to document the program culture and institutional change at the participating HBCUs. The neo-institutional change processes observed reveal key findings. This poster presents the theory of change, the change progress, and program results after three years.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnographic inquiry takes as its central and guiding assumption that any group of people interacting for a while will evolve a culture (Patton, 2015). Funded programs develop cultures. A program’s culture can be thought of as part of the program’s treatment.

Facilitating and assessing cultural change requires intensive fieldwork in which the external evaluator is immersed, to a certain degree, in the program’s culture. External evaluation within ethnography and evaluation fieldwork requires a particular disposition. It requires that the evaluator understand and remain conscious about the influence of their role in shaping the program. It requires learning the program culture. Saying too much too soon could result in stakeholders questioning the evaluator’s motives, or worst, spurring stakeholders to become suspicious or resentful. Providing too little feedback can contribute to the program not making necessary adjustments, failure to capture much-needed data, or stakeholders perceiving the evaluator as not doing ‘assessment’ work.

Ethnographically informed external evaluation fieldwork further requires reflecting across all stakeholders involved in a program. Stakeholders are the cultural group involved in the conceptualization, development, and execution of programs. Figure 1 shows the institutional location of PATHs External Mentors, one of several stakeholder groups.



Figure 1: PATHs Institutional location of External Mentor Stakeholders

METHODOLOGY

Ethnography is not simple observation but a way of seeing (Wolcott, 2008). Ethnography allows the external evaluator to gain an emic perspective. This means that the evaluator gains insight about the culture from the perspective of the stakeholders. Ethnography informed evaluation suggests that evaluators enter program cultures with a certain disposition and maintain a particular position. Data were collected through participant observations. Participant observations give the evaluator an opportunity to understand program processes and products and to gain an emic perspective while maintaining an etic disposition. According to Peters (2021), when evaluators conduct participant observations, they gain a unique understanding of project implementation. The external evaluator participated in 10 bi-monthly PI/Evaluator meetings, four Fellows Retreats, and two External Advisory Board meeting. Gaining an emic perspective was useful for stakeholder communications. Participant observations allowed the external evaluator to capture and share data in support of change within the program culture.

THEORY OF CHANGE

The PATHs theory of change is based on the work of Kezar (2018). The program has a neo-institutional first order theory of change model in operation. Neo-institutional theory examines how higher education, as social institutions, change compared to other types of organizations. Figure 2 is the PATHs model designed to impact change on promotion and tenure of underrepresented faculty at three HBCUs: TU, JSU, TSU

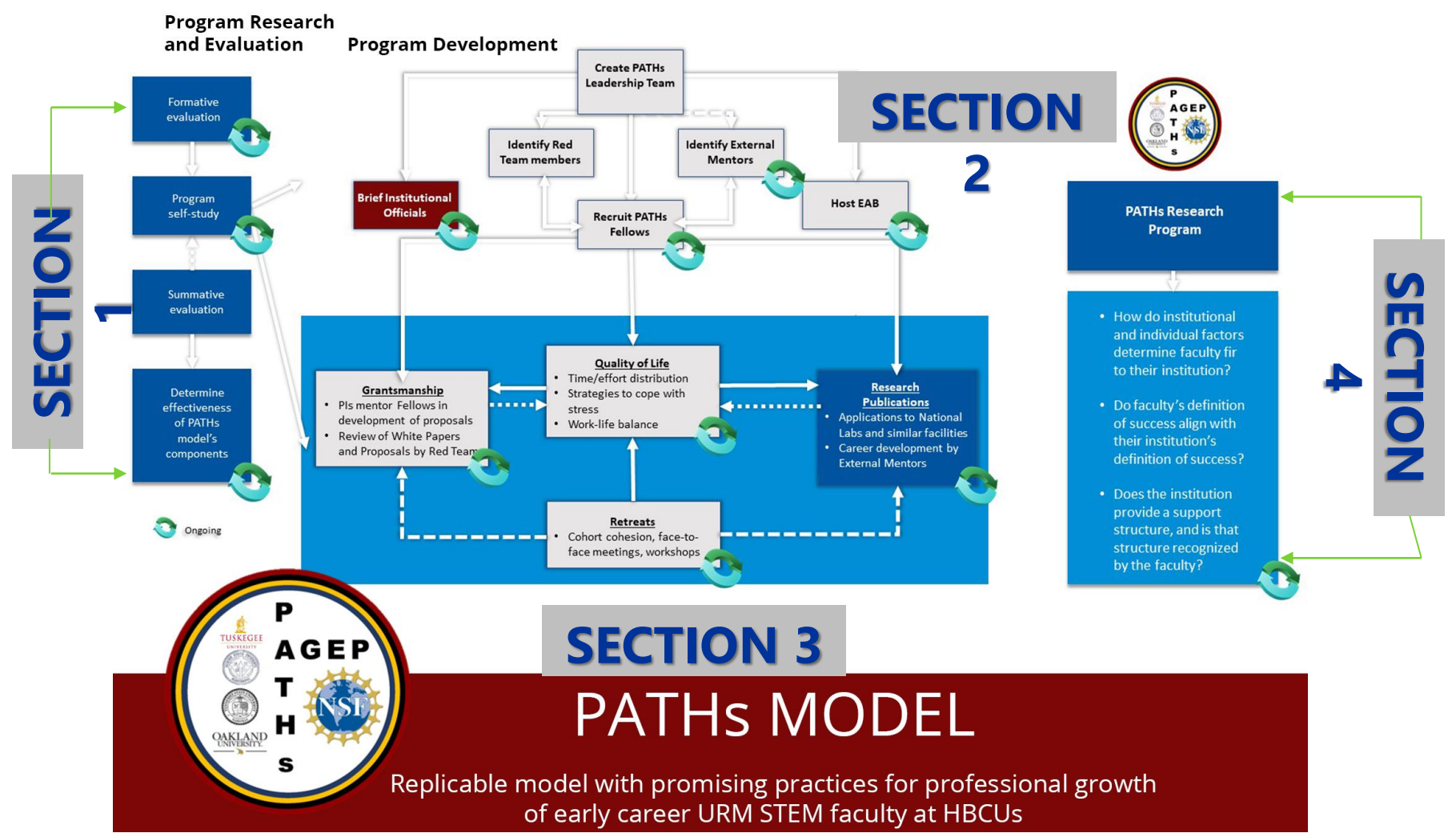


Figure 2: PATHs Program Model

STAKEHOLDER DEMOGRAPHICS

Involving stakeholders in evaluation requires the evaluator to balance multiple goals. Acknowledging that each stakeholder’s perspective emerges from their culture and context and striving to understand better their views enhances the evaluator’s ability to relate to and engage multiple stakeholders. Figure 3 shows that most stakeholders are men, albeit within the Fellows cohort, there is a balance of men and women.

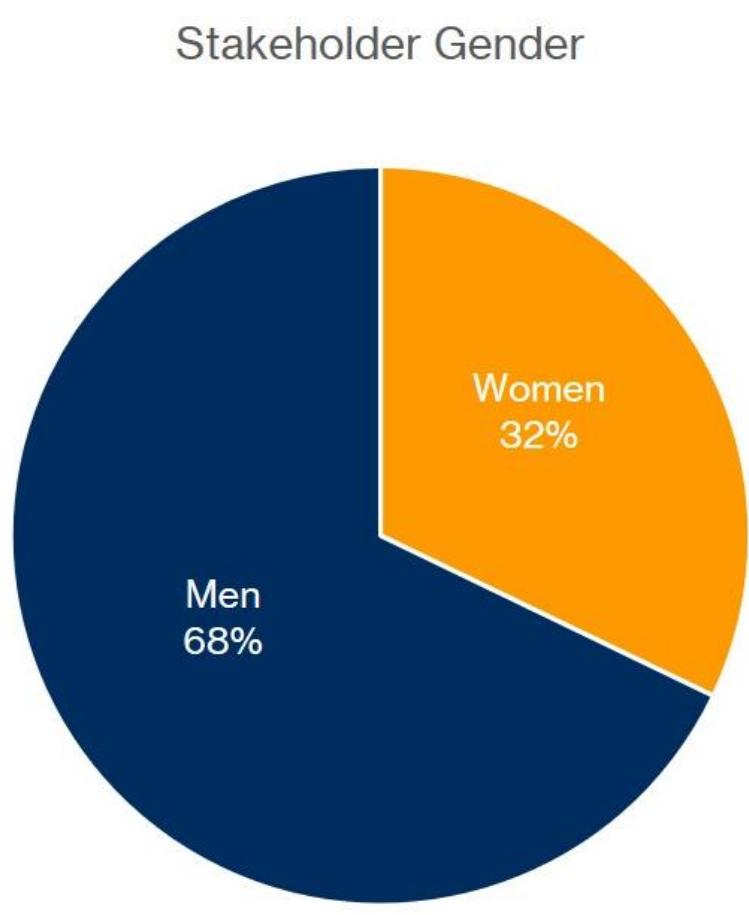


Figure 3: Stakeholder Gender

RESULTS

Evaluators must be active, reactive, and adaptive to participants in the evaluation to effectively engage all stakeholders. Figure 4 shows the PATHs national collaborative.

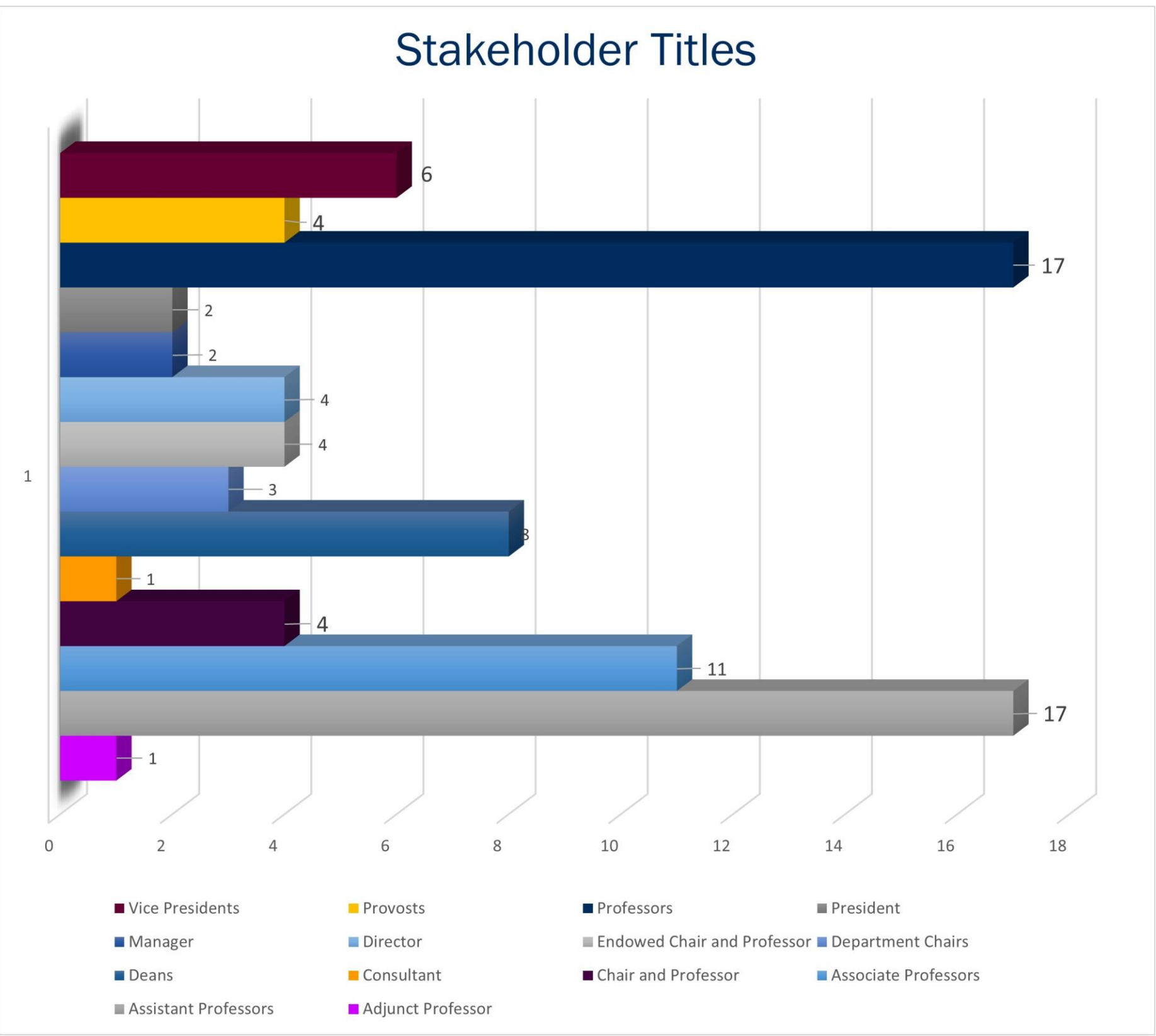


Figure 4: PATHs Stakeholder Titles

The project has the active engagement of one president; 6 Vice Presidents, 4 Provosts, 8 Deans, 17 Professors, 11 Associate Professors, 4 Endowed Chairs, and 3 Department Chairs.

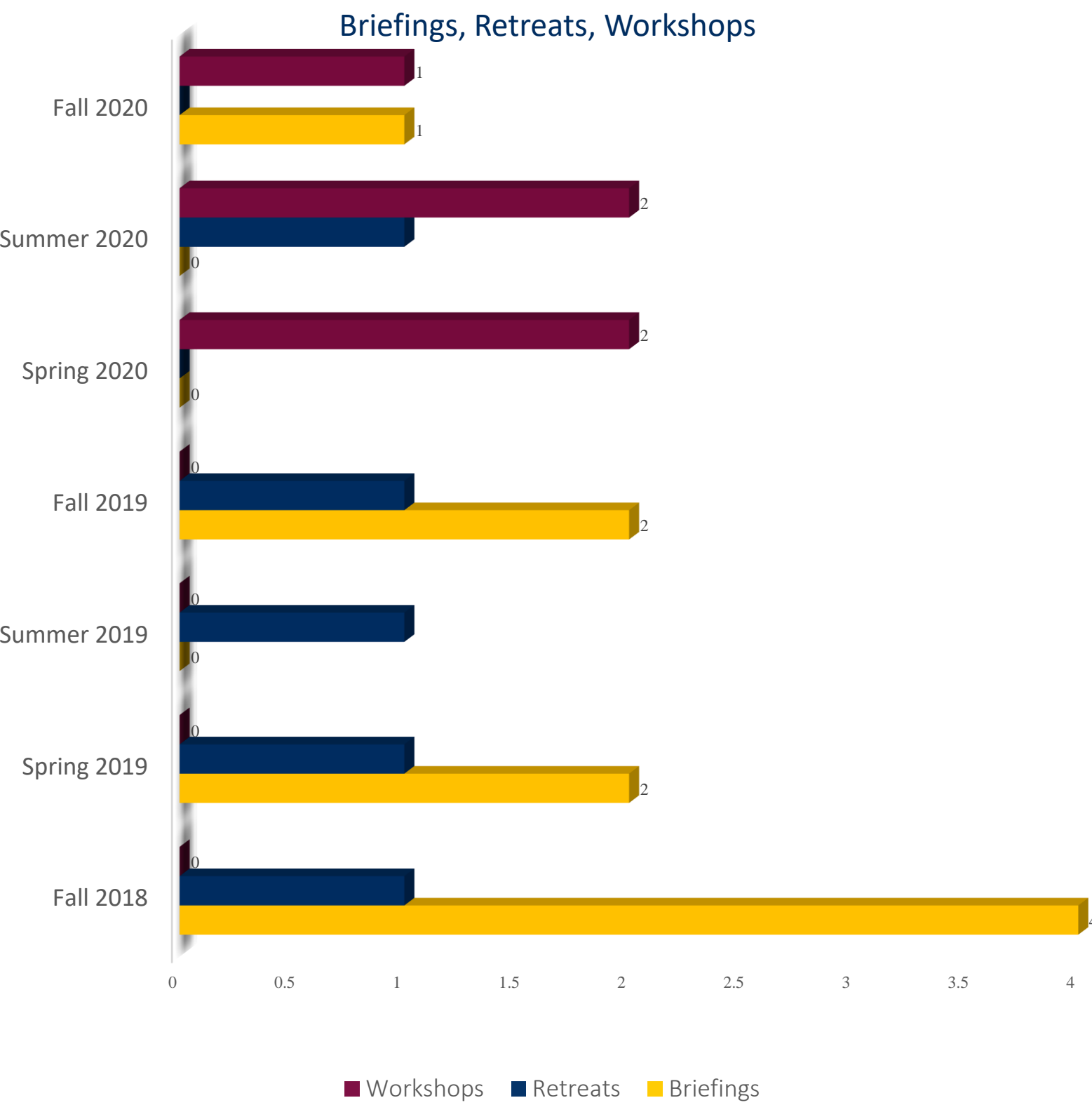


Figure 5: Number of PATHs Briefing, Retreats, Workshops

An analysis of briefing sessions conducted between the Fall of 2018 and Fall 2020 shows that there were nine briefing sessions with senior level administrators. These briefing sessions were held at the President level at Tuskegee University, with the Provost and VP for Research at TSU and with the Provost at JSU. Senior level administrators, including Deans and Provosts attended five PATHs hosted retreats.

RESULTS

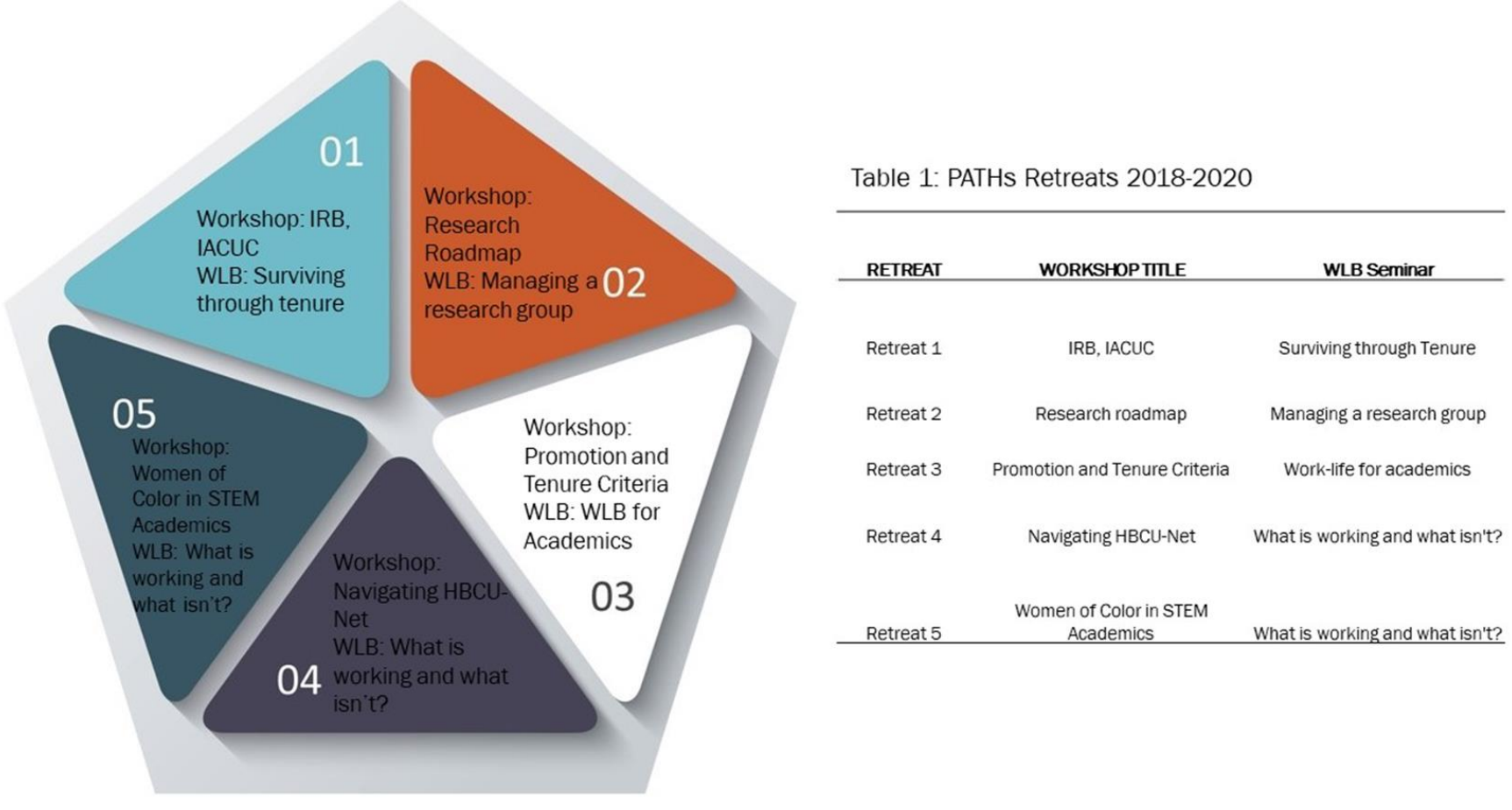


Figure 6: Retreat and Workshop Topics

Figure 6 shows the retreat and workshop topics. Senior level administrators participated in most of the retreats and workshop. Quotes from senior level administrators:

“The project should create professional development modules for leaders to facilitate tenure and promotion using the PATHs model.” (Provost)
“We are reducing the course load” (Provost)
“We need to provide support in putting together their dossiers.”
“It (the program) is an incentive. When the Deans and the Chairs talk to faculty to recruit them, they can tell them that this is an opportunity you can have with us.” (Provost)
“Because of this model, I am protecting my faculty.”(Provost)

IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

The awareness-building feature of the program’s culture was initially intended to inform campus Presidents, Provosts, and Deans about the program and to heighten their awareness of the need to increase the number and success of African Americans, and women STEM faculty seeking tenure. Awareness-building sessions were not intended to impact policy decisions on tenure and promotion. However, the awareness-building sessions prompted HBCU Provosts to convert adjunct professor positions to tenure-track Assistant professor positions and reduce teaching loads to provide Fellows with more time to focus on research and proposal development. Furthermore, Deans began offering start-up packets to underrepresented STEM faculty who are being heavily recruited by STEM industry professionals. This individual agency within the HBCU context, at the impetus of the AGEP PATH’s program culture, facilitates underrepresented faculty members’ success towards tenure and promotion. Ethnography, through participant observations, allowed the external evaluator to document the program culture, capture administrators’ reflections, and document immediate changes in institutional practices and policies as a result of the PATHs model.

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