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Why Do So Few Talented Minority Students Pursue Doctorates?

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Richard Cherwitz

With commencement season upon us, it's time for universities to ask: How well are we doing in producing a diverse class of students?

Recent data documents that, while progress has been made, African-Americans and Hispanics remain significantly underrepresented among recipients of

doctoral degrees. These two groups comprise more than 33 percent of all U.S. citizens in the age range of Ph.D. candidates but less than 20 percent of those earning doctorates.

What is disturbing is that, without more persons of color earning advanced degrees, there will remain an inadequate supply of underrepresented minority faculty, perpetuating a lack of diversity across college campuses.

In the wake of recent court decisions and public reactions, there is cause for concern. Increasing diversity is more difficult in a race neutral era. While insufficient production of minority doctoral degrees owes in part to the admission process and a lack of financial support, now more than ever we must focus on an oft unspoken culprit, namely, the insubstantial minority applicant pool.

Less than 20 percent of applicants to graduate school are Hispanic, African-American, or Native American. Nationally, therefore, top-notch graduate institutions often play numbers games, competing with each other to redistribute an already undersized minority applicant population.

Why do talented minority students choose not to attend graduate school?

Many don't give serious thought to pursuing graduate degrees, preferring instead to enter law, medicine or business, not only because of money and prestige, but also awareness of the societal impact of these pursuits.

Underlying this preference is the fact that students from a minority community, or those who are the first in their family to attend college, may perceive withdrawal from the rough and tumble of everyday problems as dereliction. Minority and first-generation students may be very intelligent and capable of learning at the highest levels, yet feel the tug of social responsibility.

Ironically, graduate education need not be devoid of social relevance. At the University of Texas at Austin, intellectual entrepreneurship is an innovative vision and model of education that challenges students to be citizen-scholars. By engaging students in community projects where they discover and put knowledge to work, as well as requiring them to identify and adapt to audiences for whom their research matters, this intellectual entrepreneurship approach has illustrated the enormous value to society of graduate study.

What does intellectual entrepreneurship, or IE, have to do with increasing diversity? IE was devised in 1997 to increase the value of graduate education for all students. Yet we discovered that 20 percent of students enrolled in IE were

underrepresented minorities, while this same group comprised only 9 percent of UT-Austin's total graduate student population.

Minorities reported that, by rigorously exploring how to succeed, IE helped demystify graduate school. More importantly, students noted that IE provided one of the few opportunities to contemplate in a genuine entrepreneurial fashion how to utilize their intellectual capital to give back to the community -- something motivating many minority students.

IE's potential to increase diversity in graduate school is best documented by its pre-graduate school internship. This initiative pairs undergraduates with faculty and graduate student mentors. Interns work with their mentors on research projects, observe graduate classes, shadow graduate student teaching and research assistants, participate in disciplinary activities and explore their futures.

Each year, about 70 percent of IE Pre-Graduate School interns are underrepresented minorities, first-generation or economically disadvantaged students. Of the spring 2018 undergraduate IE cohort of 150 students, one-third are Hispanic, compared to a university-wide percentage of 18 percent. Similarly, although only 4.5 percent of UT-Austin students are African-American, 18 percent of IE students this spring are African-American.

Interns report that, for the first time in their undergraduate careers, a space existed to reflect upon the role education plays in meeting their goals. IE empowered them to view academic disciplines not as artificial containers for students, but as lenses through to clarify their visions and as tools to realize their goals.

To increase diversity in a race-neutral era, we must expand the undergraduate applicant pool, and one way to do that is to enable students to see the connections between their professional aspirations and education -- something at the core of IE's approach to education in the past 20 years.

Richard A. Cherwitz is a communication professor at the University of Texas at Austin and the founding director of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium. He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.