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Graduate Schools Make Hispanics a Priority

Universities Make Progress in Diversifying Graduate Schools, but Obstacles Remain

by Marilyn Gilroy

Many graduate schools have stepped up recruitment and retention efforts to diversify enrollment, and their initiatives have paid off. The most current statistics from the Council of Graduate Schools show that representation of minority groups, including American Indians, Asian-Americans, African-Americans

hovering around 4 percent. These schools face unique challenges as they try to attract minorities to campuses with small communities of color. Public universities also face obstacles because they must adhere to court decisions that have limited or barred public institutions from considering race or ethnicity in evaluating applicants.

have floundered? Moreover, what are some of the elements of successful programs and can they be replicated at other institutions?

Dr. Daryl Chubin, director of the Capacity Center at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, who has given workshops on strategies for diversifying graduate



Dr. Janet Rutledge, Vice Provost,
Dean of the Graduate School,
University of Maryland-Baltimore County



Professor Rick Cherwitz, Director, IE
Consortium, University of Texas-Austin



Dr. Karen Jackson-Weaver; a Princeton Alumna,
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Diversity
at the Graduate School's Office of Diversity

and Hispanics, has risen to 29.1 percent of first-time graduate students. Hispanics, who represent 16 percent of the population, comprised 9.1 percent of enrollment.

But at some institutions, the goal of increasing the racial mix of graduate students has fallen short, especially at elite colleges, which often have rates

As Hispanics and other minorities become an increasing segment of the population and move through the educational pipeline, the need to diversify graduate education remains critical. Two questions that dominate the discussion are: how have some institutions managed to succeed in increasing minority participation while others

schools, defines several elements of the most effective programs.

At the top of his list is the importance of creating a climate of community. This can be done by integrating students into research teams and creating support groups as a means of combating the feeling of isolation and separateness

often felt by minority graduate students. He also believes faculty members play an important role in recruitment and are key players in helping students persist toward their master's and doctoral degrees. When Chubin conducted research among minority Ph.D. candidates about barriers to diversity, the responses highlighted the importance of faculty intervention to keep minority students in graduate programs.

"Gender and racial bias is a reality," said one student. "To get over it, faculty mentoring helps."

Achieving racial diversity usually requires a multifaceted approach with many variables, including faculty, administrators and institutional policies and programs, all of which can affect outcomes. Here is a look at how three universities are increasing minority enrollment in graduate schools.

University of Texas-Austin

The strategy to diversify at graduate studies at the University of Texas-Austin has been enhanced by the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) Pre-Graduate School Internship Program. IE enables undergraduate students to work closely with a graduate student mentor or faculty supervisor to create an internship experience aimed at exploring postbaccalaureate opportunities in their field of study. The program is one initiative of the university's Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium, a collaboration of 11 colleges and schools with the objective of educating "citizen-scholars." Latino students make up the largest group of interns in the program, with more than half of them subsequently enrolling in graduate school.

The IE Consortium is part of the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement and is directed by Professor Rick Cherwitz of the department of communication studies.

"The internship is a course that undergraduate students take, but it is not like physics 301," said Cherwitz. "It focuses on the student and what their passions and interests are and what challenges they face as they navigate the university. It is an entrepreneurial incubator."

Cherwitz says that each student enrolled in the program begins by finding a faculty or graduate student mentor. Then, they write up a contract describing the kinds of activities they will engage in as part of the course. For example, an IE student might shadow the graduate mentor by going to classes and attending departmental colloquia and professional conferences. IE student enrollment is drawn from many different disciplines, including science, mathematics, art,

humanities, and medical and law school.

"We are literally showing them in a very explicit and safe way, through their mentors and their shared experiences, the good, the bad and the ugly of graduate school," said Cherwitz. "They get to see the politics of the academy."

"This is extremely important for first generations and underrepresented minority students. We know these students are smart enough, and they know they are smart enough to succeed. But they don't know the rules of game, so we are leveling the playing field."

Abraham Pena, who is now pursuing a doctorate in sociology at Florida State, did an IE internship in 2008 that, he said, helped him learn the fundamental components of a graduate school education. Although he began the internship as an education major, he switched to sociology when he discovered it was his true interest. In addition, he gained many practical skills that were invaluable as he considered applying to grad school.

"Had I not had the opportunity to participate in IE, I would be completely oblivious to the graduate school application process," he said. "The whole process is one that takes time and dedication to understand. For minority students, it becomes a battlefield where they must learn the rules to acculturate and be successful."

The IE program has been called one of the best models of diversity in the country, although it is designed to serve all students. Since 2003, nearly 1,000 undergraduates have participated, and approximately 50 percent of those students have gone on to graduate studies at schools such as Princeton, Illinois, Penn, Duke, Brandeis and Louisiana State University. In 2010, there were 250 students enrolled.

Three years ago, the IE program was selected as the top Example of Excelencia (excellence) at the graduate level by Excelencia in Education, an organization that works to accelerate success in higher education for Latino students.

But is IE transportable to other colleges? Can it be duplicated in some form that might help diversify other graduate schools?

"Yes," said Cherwitz. "IE is not a one-size-fits-all program. It is more of a philosophy of education that helps us increase diversity. We collaborate with other colleges for a way to take IE to them and make it work for their students."

Princeton University

Princeton's efforts to diversify its graduate schools could best be described as "a work in

progress." The university has mounted aggressive programs to increase the number of underrepresented and socioeconomically disadvantaged students and has made some progress; however, Hispanics, African-Americans and Native Americans account for only 5 percent of the first-time graduate school enrollment.

Princeton's history and location have presented more challenges to diversifying than those of other universities. It was founded as an all-male private school and is located in a relatively small town, compared to larger, urban universities which often can attract students from surrounding diverse neighborhoods. Once enrolled in Princeton, minority students can feel a sense of isolation because the campus and town demographics still are predominately White.

Dr. Karen Jackson-Weaver, a Princeton alumna, was hired in 2007 as associate dean for academic affairs and diversity at the graduate school's Office of Diversity. She has implemented several new initiatives, such as Preview Day, which gives prospective minority graduate students a chance to visit campus and meet faculty and current students. Other programs include the Princeton Summer Undergraduate Research Experience (PSURE), which is an opportunity for 20 undergraduates who are interested in pursuing a Ph.D. to prepare applications to doctoral programs. Students work with a Princeton faculty member as a research assistant or an advisee in editing and writing research papers. There are weekly sessions about applying to graduate schools and for financial aid as well as general discussions about academic life and the graduate level.

Jessica Brown, program manager in the diversity office, says outreach to minorities includes an extensive recruiting schedule with visits to Hispanic-Serving Institutions and Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

"We also hold a number of open houses and campus visits where prospective students meet with faculty and learn about graduate student life at Princeton," she said.

The presence of high-visibility minority faculty such as Cornell West, Toni Morrison, Marta Tienda and Patricia Fernández-Kelly has helped boost Princeton's image as a welcoming community. Overall, the university faculty is 9 percent African-American and 8 percent Hispanic. In addition, graduate students have formed support groups such as the Asian Pacific Islander Caucus and the Graduate Women of Color Caucus.

Daniel Polk is the current co-president of the Latino Graduate Student Association and is typi-

cal of those who come to Princeton from very different environments. He was raised in Southern California and graduated summa cum laude from the University of California-Riverside. He is currently a third-year doctoral student in anthropology at Princeton.

“Daniel often helps us in our recruiting efforts,” said Brown. “He is a good ambassador for the university.”

Princeton’s efforts have resulted in a greater number of minority applicants. In 2010, the uni-

advanced study in STEM doctoral programs. Nationally, dropout rates run as high as 50 percent for minorities and women in STEM fields.

Dr. Janet Rutledge, vice provost and dean of the graduate school at UMBC, says the program has been successful because it promotes the values of academic success, self-confidence, life balance and professional development for students.

“We say that the Meyerhoff program produces super students,” said Rutledge. “This means they are so well prepared that they can go

ages and becoming members of Phi Beta Kappa.

Meyerhoff scholar Carla Valenzuela studied biological science at UMBC before going on to a graduate program in neuroscience at Vanderbilt University. She hopes to conduct research on the potential of stem cells to serve as therapeutic tools for neurodegenerative disorders. She credits the Meyerhoff program and an additional Goldwater scholarship as “motivators” that pushed her to work harder and to envision being a leader in her field.

One important aspect of the Meyerhoff scholar program is that it does not function in isolation; instead, it has been integrated into the fabric of university academics. It uses the most productive research faculty as mentors, retains an advisory board from various departments and reports directly to the provost’s office.

“The university as a whole serves as a mentor to shepherd each student,” said Rutledge.

When Rutledge describes the Meyerhoff program at conferences and workshops, she speaks of “lessons learned” that other universities might want to be mindful of in diversifying graduate programs. One of those lessons is the recognition that underrepresented minorities and women students are especially vulnerable. Rutledge encourages leaders at graduate schools who want to increase minority participation to put into place programs and services that foster engagement and minimize marginalization.

“Minorities and women need to develop confidence to face academic adversity,” she said. “The literature shows that when they get to graduate school and face a setback, they often blame themselves for not being good enough or smart enough to be there. We fortify them to be more sure of themselves.”

Meyerhoff scholars also develop a strong sense of community, one that stays with them even when they move on to different graduate schools.

“Our students retain their Meyerhoff network, even when they go to other places to study,” said Rutledge. “They keep in touch with their cohort, and it helps prevent a feeling of isolation if they find themselves in a graduate program with less support and few minorities.”

It is no surprise to find that UMBC has replicated its success at the graduate level. The university boasts a Meyerhoff Graduate Fellows Program with an equally impressive track record of achievement. Approximately 79 percent of students who have participated as fellows have been retained in or completed the Ph.D. or M.D./Ph.D. program with an average time to degree of five to six years.



Students from the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Citizen Scholars group at the University of Texas

versity received 371 applications to graduate school from Hispanics, up from 256 in 2006. However, the number of Hispanic applicants actually accepted declined from 16 percent to 11 percent during that same time period.

University of Maryland-Baltimore County

The pride of the University of Maryland-Baltimore County’s (UMBC) initiatives to promote graduate school inclusiveness is the Meyerhoff Scholars Program, which has been at the forefront to increase diversity among those who study science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). It has centered on giving students tools for academic and personal success that will prepare them for the rigors of

into any graduate program and succeed.”

The success rate is enviable. Since 1993, the program has graduated 600 students. More than 150 alumni have earned a Ph.D. or M.D., and an additional 85 have earned graduate degrees in engineering. There are nearly 300 alumni currently attending graduate or professional degree programs. In the 2010-11 academic year, there are 230 students enrolled as Meyerhoff scholars, of which 56 percent are African-American and/or Hispanic.

The program has been described as one that changes the perception about minority achievement because it increases the expectations of students who participate and the faculty who teach them. By all accounts, these students are exceptional, with many earning 4.0 grade point aver-

