

Intellectual Entrepreneurship: A New Approach to Increasing Diversity

by Richard A. Cherwitz and
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Following the June 23, 2003 Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action in admissions to graduate and professional programs, many institutions are contemplating how, if at all, to utilize race and ethnicity in making admissions decisions. The Court's ruling notwithstanding, a nagging question lingers: Can race-conscious admissions policies actually enhance diversity? Traditional approaches to recruitment have never produced a proportionately significant number of minority graduate students. Therefore, why should we assume that tweaking the admissions system and expanding financial aid will substantially increase the number of minority graduate students (Cherwitz 2003; Cherwitz forthcoming)? The reality is that many minority undergraduates may not be as likely as other students to think about opportunities made possible by graduate study; yet knowledge of opportunities precedes the impetus to take advantage of the application process.¹

Unfortunately, the current institution-based recruitment model does little to ensure that spaces are created where minorities may acquire sufficient and relevant insight into graduate education. To achieve greater diversity, we must increase awareness of the value of graduate education and devise experiences allowing minority undergraduates to explore how advanced study can engage their hearts and minds—helping them fulfill their professional visions and ethical commitments. Recruiting a critical mass of outstanding Hispanic and African American students requires a change in mindset.

Intellectual Entrepreneurship: A Vision of Education

At the University of Texas-Austin (UT), Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) is a program and philosophy of graduate education promoting the virtues of discovery, ownership, and accountability. IE challenges students to be greater than the sum of their disciplinary parts—to be “citizen-scholars” contributing both to academe and the community (Cherwitz and Daniel 2003; Cherwitz, Darwin, and Grund 2001; Cherwitz, Rodriguez, and Sievers 2003; Cherwitz and Sullivan 2002; Cherwitz, Sullivan, and Stewart 2002; Chu and Evans 2002; Devine 2001; Weisbuch 2001). IE is not a professional development program: it asks students in all fields of study to consider what matters to them most, using those answers to shape their intellectual and academic development. It provides a mindset and impetus for acquiring and producing knowledge in academic disciplines.

In so doing, IE explicitly underscores the enormous impact of scholarship in the arts, sciences, social sciences, and humanities to society. Yet the value of these time-honored areas of learning is something not always apparent to undergraduates who, as they weigh their options following graduation, frequently choose careers in business, law, and medicine where the perceived impact on society is transparent. 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, IE confirms that traditional areas of scholarship are as vital as the so-called “applied” fields of study and provide important venues for contributing to society. For IE participants, graduate degrees become more than certificates designating completion of institutional requirements; they are tools for creating intellectual and practical possibilities and for fulfilling one's passions.

¹ The evidence for this is overwhelming. Excluding professional schools like business, law, and medicine that historically have been somewhat more successful in recruiting minority students, the applicant pool for programs in arts, sciences, humanities, and social sciences is characterized by a paltry number of underrepresented minorities. For Fall 2003, only 6.2 percent of the 18,000-plus applicants to the University of Texas at Austin, one of the nation's largest graduate schools, were Hispanic, African American or Native American—a statistic comparable to that of many graduate institutions. Never in the past ten years, which includes the pre-Hopwood era when affirmative action in admissions and funding was the norm, has this percentage risen to double digits. Moreover, over 60 percent of minority applicants are in less than 20 percent of the institution's available degree programs.

Intellectual Entrepreneurship and Diversity

What does the IE program and philosophy of education have to do with increasing diversity? It demonstrates that attracting minority applicants necessitates more than targeting a population. Implementing changes in education that benefit all may have the unintended—but important—consequence of helping minorities. For example, IE was devised to increase the value of graduate education. Yet we discovered that 20 percent of students enrolled in IE classes are underrepresented minorities, while this same group comprises only 9 percent of UT's total graduate student population. Minority students report that, by rigorously exploring “how” to succeed, IE courses demystify graduate school and the academic-professional world, helping first-generation students learn the unspoken rules of the game.

More importantly, though, students tell us that IE provides one of the few opportunities to contemplate how to utilize their intellectual capital to give back to the community as well as their academic disciplines—something that informs the career decisions of many first-generation students. Unlike professional development, the spirit of intellectual entrepreneurship resonates with and meets a felt need of minority students. This is because IE facilitates exploration and innovation; it implores students to create for themselves a world of vast intellectual and practical possibilities, developing the toolkits, networks, and other resources needed to bring their visions to fruition.

This attitude toward students and the manner in which it supplants empowerment for traditional top-down, patriarchal methods of education and professional development seems especially attractive to minorities. After all, while minority graduate students know they are intellectually smart enough to succeed and may not wish to be “given” special assistance or professional development, they often desire—as do other students—opportunities and experiences allowing them to own and discover the value of their graduate education and to be accountable for it by giving back to the community. This propensity to foster citizen-scholarship may be one reason why Harvard Afro-American Studies scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. proudly proclaimed, “I am an intellectual entrepreneur.” The IE philosophy, therefore, may be an important mechanism for improving odds for completing a degree, increasing chances for professional and academic achievement, and leveraging knowledge for social good—outcomes that are important to many, including minority students. In fact, we contend that there might be more interest in graduate education if minority students could discern a closer link between added knowledge and fulfillment of their various political and social agendas.

Intellectual Entrepreneurship: A Recruitment Model

IE offers not only a distinctive vision of education attractive to minorities but also a unique methodology for expanding the minority graduate applicant pool. By shifting from insti-

tutional recruitment strategies to initiatives addressing students' intellect and passions, the IE philosophy has the capacity to help those who have never contemplated advanced study discover whether graduate education resonates with their personal and professional aspirations. In the language of public administration, this represents a shift from “place-based” to “person-based” policy.

Consider Daisy Fuentes, a UT senior studying biology who, along with nearly two-dozen of her classmates and students from local colleges and universities, participates in an IE pre-graduate school internship program administered by the authors of this essay. These internships pair undergraduates with faculty mentors and graduate student “buddies,” immersing them in the culture of graduate study—something about which most undergraduates, especially minorities and first-generation students, are frequently unaware.

Fuentes's story is a familiar one. As a science student, she always assumed she would become a medical doctor, using her talents to contribute to the well-being of others. Until recently, Fuentes never imagined that a graduate degree in a science or education discipline might equip her to fulfill her vision of contributing to the community. Fuentes's revelation did not occur because a graduate program “recruited” her or because of a recruitment workshop that explained how to apply to graduate school and obtain financial aid. Fuentes's transformation came from her epiphany that she is an “intellectual entrepreneur.”

Early in her internship, Fuentes is discovering the desire to develop a comprehensive community health center. When asked what knowledge and skills might be needed to accomplish this, Fuentes has begun to approach her education in a more inductive, entrepreneurial manner. Instead of starting with an academic discipline (typically the one in which an undergraduate degree is earned) and then devising a strategy for admission, a practice common among most would-be graduate students, Fuentes is utilizing her desire to contribute to society as a lens for determining the most appropriate, relevant fields of study.

While Fuentes's story is just beginning, her participation in the pre-graduate school internship has already produced a major revelation. She learned the importance of approaching academic decisions as an intellectual entrepreneur—to discover, own, and be accountable for educational choices. Fuentes discovered that becoming a professor may afford her the requisite intellectual capital and therefore the greatest potential to impact both academe and the community. Via teaching and research, she envisions a plan for sharing her knowledge and training with the widest possible audience. While never seriously considering being a professor, she now admits that this is an important professional prospect. Not surprisingly, Fuentes recommends the IE internship for first-generation, minority students: “It connects you with experiences and opportunities relevant to your dreams and goals, placing you strategically on the game board of life.”

Fuentes's experience documents that increasing diversity in graduate education means moving beyond mechanistic

recruitment strategies. We must create experiences enabling undergraduates to discover how graduate study brings their visions to fruition. This entrepreneurial approach to recruitment doesn't commence with institutions, academic disciplines, professional development initiatives, or questions about "how to apply to graduate school." It begins with students' curiosities and goals driving their lives; it challenges undergraduates to own and be accountable for their educational choices and intellectual development, viewing themselves as active agents who are the recruiters rather than the passive targets of institutional recruitment.

This entrepreneurial approach also challenges the customary habit of institutions of higher learning that, in an attempt to increase diversity, begin by asking current minority graduate students why they decided to pursue an advanced degree. The hope is that their answers will translate into persuasive strategies for convincing others to attend graduate school. In addition, a typical tactic is to identify minority students who have taken the GRE, encouraging them to apply to one's institution. These efforts, while well-intended and useful for many reasons, miss the point when it comes to dramatically increasing diversity. To expand the national applicant pool, which is absolutely essential in order to increase the total number of students of color in the graduate school pipeline and eventually the number of minority faculty, we should be inquiring of and engaging students not presently enrolled in graduate programs. We also should focus our efforts on undergraduates who have not taken the GRE, especially those who have never seriously contemplated advanced study. Attention must be directed to students like Daisy Fuentes who can help us discern why many talented minority undergraduates do not pursue or even contemplate graduate study. And, if we are willing to adapt our methods of education and models of recruitment to what is learned, it may be possible to increase the number of minorities enrolled in graduate programs.

Conclusion

The IE vision of education offers an avenue for increasing minority enrollment in graduate school. Unlike current recruitment models, IE affirms diversity by affirming students' unique passions as well as their intellectual capacities. This is the strong sense of affirmation; persons are not viewed politically as members of a group targeted for recruitment, but as individuals whose distinctive goals and aspirations await discovery. Traditional recruitment methods don't present the "package"

students—particularly minorities—need for connecting their academic, professional, ethical, and personal commitments. Unless students learn how graduate education incorporates and satisfies these various dimensions of their lives, the prospect of a more representative graduate student body remains bleak.

Focusing on admissions and financial aid won't markedly increase diversity. A new mindset is required—one valuing students as individuals, creating opportunities for them to discover, own, and be accountable for their education. Abdicating institutional responsibility by pointing to an insufficient minority applicant pool is no longer acceptable. Believers and doers among the professorate and administration of universities are needed to expend the time and energy demanded by this new, labor-intensive approach to recruitment.

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