

Intellectual Entrepreneurship:

Improving Education and Increasing Diversity

BY ANA LUCIA HURTADO

The lack of diversity in graduate programs is a national crisis. A May 2005 report by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation indicated that, even though African Americans and Hispanics make up 32 percent of all U.S. citizens in the normal age range of Ph.D. candidates, only seven percent of all doctoral recipients are black or Latino.

In the words of Robert Weisbuch, the foundation's president, "The numbers make it clear: We still have a great expertise gap in the United States. Our next generation of college students will include dramatically more students of color, but their teachers will remain overwhelmingly white."

One thing is evident: Traditional methods of recruiting minorities into graduate programs just aren't working well enough. Universities often try to remedy this situation by tinkering with recruitment strategies. But this neglects a major cause of the problem: Undergraduates are not being given sufficient opportunities to explore graduate study in ways that resonate with their

personal and intellectual interests and commitments. This may be particularly important for minority students, whose career choices often are driven by a desire to give back to their communities.

Some argue that internships and career counseling meet this need. But these often come too late in the curriculum and are viewed by many students and professors as non-academic and secondary to scholarship and study. Maybe we need to start thinking outside the box. Why should education be limited to textbooks and lectures? Why must experiential learning and career exploration be viewed as less intellectual than academic knowledge?

As an undergraduate, I had the opportunity to connect my personal, intellectual, and career interests. Through the University of Texas at Austin's Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) initiative, I was given the chance to be a "citizen-scholar"—to own my education and discover how to leverage knowledge for social good. By sharing my experience, I hope to stimulate changes in undergraduate education elsewhere that will result in more opportunities like the one I had—opportunities that will increase both quality and diversity in higher education.

When I was four years old, my parents decided to leave our home country, Peru, amidst overwhelming turmoil caused by

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the Shining Path Maoist guerrillas. Although it was a painful sacrifice on their part, they wanted their three daughters to succeed in the United States, this “land of opportunity.”

In school, I studied hard and always pushed myself to be a top achiever, believing this would ultimately secure me a fulfilled life. However, near the end of high school, I grew nervous about finding the “right” career for me. I began exploring engineering and medicine via several structured programs. During the summers after my sophomore and junior years, I went to Stanford and did research with a civil engineering professor through the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s Sharp Plus Program. I also was selected for Baylor Medical School’s Doc-Prep Program (where I saw open-heart surgery and helped dissect a human cadaver) and was chosen to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Minority Introduction to Engineering and Science Program, where I took advanced physics, biochemistry, calculus II and III, robotics, and entrepreneurship courses. Furthermore, my high school itself was a magnet school for health and science, so throughout my senior year I participated in a medical-rotations course that allowed me to shadow local physicians in several medical specialties.

However, I remained uncertain. I had applied to 12 universities, hoping that some might offer me scholarships, since my middle-class parents had sent my sisters to two private institutions, Harvard and Rice. Fortunately, not only did all 12 accept me, but 10 of them also offered me full-tuition merit scholarships. Although I felt very blessed, offers from my two favorite scholarship programs presented me with another dilemma.

I was torn between Rice University’s Rice-Baylor Scholarship and Duke University’s Robertson Scholarship. The Rice-Baylor Scholarship promised automatic admission into Baylor Medical School after I graduated from Rice, while Duke’s Roberson Scholarship encouraged service, leadership, and cultural exploration. The latter would provide support during summers to allow me to create my own service projects and immerse myself in another country’s culture. Ultimately, because of my inability to commit myself to a medical career, I chose Duke University, hoping it would give me the time I needed to keep exploring my career options.

While at Duke University, however, I retreated into a state of despair, believing I might never find my vocation. I continued

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with my pre-med track as was expected of me—my oldest sister was already a top physician in her specialty, and my middle sister was finishing medical school. I probably would have become a physician too had I not confronted the greatest challenge of my life: becoming a mother. Facing an unintended pregnancy, I felt I could no longer approach my future passively—not only did *my* life depend on it, but also my son’s life. The search to find my “calling” resumed in earnest, and I began exploring different possibilities, including a career in law.

After deciding to leave Duke since my son was living with my parents in Texas, I transferred to the University of Texas at Austin. There I stumbled upon an unusual curricular offering: the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Pre-Graduate School Internship. This class was unlike anything I had encountered before. It was a largely self-directed internship, contrasting significantly with my other college courses

that were delivered in the traditional didactic fashion, with knowledge spoon-fed to students.

The program isn’t merely an “applied” or “work” experience. It also offers a space where students can reflect on their experiences, discovering how everything fits together with their unique personal commitments and intellectual ambitions.

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The site of my internship was the Children’s Rights Clinic at the UT law school. Through it, I was allowed an insider’s look at law. For the first time, my “teachers” asked me what *I* wanted to learn—what *I* wanted to get out of the experience. For the first time, I asked questions for which I genuinely sought answers, and I directed my own course of study.

In collaboration with two faculty supervisors and a graduate-student mentor, I was able to create the most enriching experience possible, crafting a schedule that would provide me with a balanced overview of family law. When I first met with my supervising attorneys, I told them that I not only wanted to experience the obvious legal activities such as hearings and mediations but also the behind-the-scenes work involved in the cases. So throughout my internship, I accompanied the attorneys to court hearings and mediations, visited their clients with them, participated in meetings, listened in on phone conferences, helped with the research for some cases, and filed court

documents. Each week, my supervisors would list the activities I could take part in. And each week, I told them exactly what I wanted to spend my time doing, observing, and learning.

The internship was a perfect blend of academic give-and-take, as I eagerly took what I thought were the best learning opportunities available, and they graciously gave what they felt would be the most worthwhile family-law experiences. Ultimately, the internship proved to be the most valuable educational experience of my college tenure.

I chose to explore law during my internship because I felt I hadn't given the field a fair chance, even though I had always thought my talents would lend themselves well to a career in law. In high school, I had competed extensively in debate, extemporaneous speaking, and persuasive speaking and had come to love rhetoric and argument. I would catch myself thinking about how I might enjoy being a lawyer but would quickly abandon the idea. The problem lay in my conception of what a lawyer was.

Growing up, I somehow had come to picture lawyers as dishonest, unethical, self-serving, and money-grubbing people who never had time for their families and didn't really care about helping others. Therefore, in retrospect, one of the most important aspects of the internship was that it dispelled many of these myths about the legal profession. Through extensive interaction with my two supervising attorneys, both of whom were highly respected lawyers and dedicated mothers, I learned that being a good lawyer and a good mother were not mutually exclusive.

For instance, one of my supervising attorneys had just returned from a three-year leave of absence to care for her twins. With the goal of balancing law and motherhood, she had worked a few years after receiving her JD in order to establish a good professional reputation and then took some time off to have and care for her children. She planned to work part time until her children were older so that she could remain deeply involved in their upbringing.

Both of my supervising attorneys were great examples of how being an ethical lawyer is not an oxymoron but rather a choice. They were involved in service projects in the community, had dedicated much time and energy to social-justice issues (especially domestic violence), and were practicing members of their faiths.

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Finally, the Children's Rights Clinic introduced me to a legal setting in which superfluous billing was not practiced and legal services were not reserved for the most affluent and privileged clients. By bringing together my personal, academic, and professional interests, the internship helped me discover and own my education.

Along the way, I learned that the Intellectual Entrepreneurship program attracts a disproportionate number of first-generation college students and students from under-represented minority groups. Students with those backgrounds make up nearly half of the IE interns. This is hardly surprising, since IE empowers students to make connections between their academic interests and real-world concerns—something especially important to first-generation and under-represented minority students who want to contribute to their communities.

The philosophy of the program shows promise as one approach to increasing the number of people of color who attend graduate school. In the words of Richard Cherwitz, IE director and founder, "The spirit of intellectual entrepreneurship seems to resonate with and meet a felt need of minority and first-generation students, who acquire through it the resources to bring their own visions to fruition."

Based on my experience, I hope educational administrators will expand the opportunities, such as the IE internships, for students to learn beyond classroom walls. The IE internship has enabled me to face the world, diploma in hand, with a sense of direction and purpose. With my son now a bit older, I plan to attend law school next year and am in the process of applying to several institutions—all of them in places where I would have a strong support system from family and friends. In the meantime, I'm working as a science teacher and am helping my son master his ABCs, phonics, and numbers before he enters kindergarten.

During the coming months I will be saving as much money as I can for the upcoming three-year journey through law school. My ultimate dream is to practice family law at a non-profit organization for a number of years and then become a clinical professor of law at a major law school, not unlike my supervising attorneys. This dream, of course, will not be deterred by my other, equally strong, desire to have more children and be a loving wife and mother. Who knows—maybe one day the Children's Rights Clinic will see me again, but this time I'd be guiding a new generation of IE interns. ☐

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