



In the Trenches...

Why Intellectual Entrepreneurship Can Increase Diversity

by Rick Cherwitz

best documented by the “IE Pre-Graduate School Internship” begun in 2003-04. This initiative pairs undergraduates with faculty supervisors and graduate student mentors. Interns work with their mentors and supervisors on research projects, observe graduate classes, shadow graduate student teaching and research assistants, participate in disciplinary activities and explore their futures. IE interns function not as passive targets of recruitment but as “anthropologists,” immersing themselves in the day-to-day experiences and activities of graduate school and then interrogating the academic culture in which someday they may reside.

Besides providing useful tools to undergraduates already certain about graduate study and committed to a specific academic discipline, the Pre-Graduate School Internship is an exercise in entrepreneurial learning: it affords opportunities for students to discover their passions, the value of academic disciplines, and the culture of graduate study – something that currently is not a staple of the undergraduate experience.

Each year, between 55 percent to 60 percent of IE Pre Graduate School interns are underrepresented minorities and/or first-generation students; approximately 35 percent are Hispanic or African-American. Interns report that for the first time in their undergraduate career, a “space” existed to reflect on the role education plays in meeting their goals. IE empowered them to view academic disciplines not as artificial containers in which students are housed, but as lenses through which to clarify their visions and as tools by which their goals might be realized. Especially exciting – about 50 percent of IE Pre Graduate School interns pursue graduate study following completion of their baccalaureate degree. No wonder this initiative received an “Examples of Excelencia” Award as a top program for graduate institutions in the U.S.

The value of IE as a mechanism for increasing diversity inheres in its capacity to allow students to become entrepreneurs – to discover otherwise unobserved connections between academe and personal and professional commitments. This potential owes to the fact that IE does not segregate intellectual, personal and professional development, as is the case on most college campuses today; instead they are linked parts of an entrepreneurial approach to learning.

From IE, we have learned that to increase diversity the applicant pool must be expanded; graduate education must be transparent and relevant. Moreover, entrepreneurial education and experiences must be available for undergraduates, enabling them to discover how graduate study brings their visions to fruition. Entrepreneurial learning begins with students’ curiosities and goals driving their lives, challenging them to own and be accountable for their educational choices and intellectual development.

Dr. Rick Cherwitz, professor in the department of communication studies at the University of Texas-Austin, is founder and director of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium in the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement.



Why do talented minority students choose not to attend graduate school? Many admit not giving serious thought to traditional graduate degrees, preferring to enter law, medicine or business – not only because of money and prestige but also awareness of the societal impact of these pursuits. Students from a minority community or those first in their family to attend college might perceive withdrawal from the rough and tumble of everyday problems as dereliction. Minority and first-generation students might be very bright and capable of learning at the highest levels, yet feel the tug of social responsibility.

But graduate education need not be viewed as an insular enterprise devoid of social relevance. At the University of Texas (UT)-Austin, “Intellectual Entrepreneurship” (IE) 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, IE has documented, for 15 years, the enormous value to society of graduate study.

What does the IE philosophy of education have to do with increasing diversity? IE was devised in 1997 to increase the value of graduate education for all students. Yet we discovered in 2002-03 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.

The spirit of intellectual entrepreneurship seems to resonate with and meet a felt need of minority and first-generation students, facilitating exploration and innovation. IE implores students to create for themselves a world of vast intellectual and practical possibilities, acquiring the resources needed to bring their visions to fruition. Put simply, IE changes the metaphor and model of education from one of “apprenticeship-certification-entitlement” to one of “discovery-ownership-accountability.”

The IE philosophy’s potential to increase diversity in graduate school is