

Star-Telegram

To diversity ... and beyond

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Since the Supreme Court's June ruling on affirmative action, a sense of relief almost euphoria -- persists among those at the University of Texas at Austin who advocate diversity in higher education.

For the first time since 1996, when the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals struck down affirmative action in the Hopwood case, UT may consider race in admissions decisions. On June 23, the high court, in two cases from Michigan, reinstated race as a permissible factor in university admissions.

Against the current backdrop of optimism, a cautionary note must be sounded regarding the prospect for increased diversity in graduate education. After all, it is not predominantly the admissions process that accounts for a dearth of minority students in graduate school but rather the lack of a substantial applicant pool.

Excluding professional schools such as 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 minorities.

For the fall of 2003, 6.2 percent of the 18,000-plus applicants to UT's graduate school were Hispanic, African-American or Native American. Never in the past 10 years has this percentage risen to double digits. More than 60 percent of these minority applicants were in less than 20 percent of the institution's available degree programs.

Tinkering with the admissions process might make some difference, but no profound increase in diversity will occur until more talented minorities are persuaded to pursue graduate study.

Nationally, top-notch graduate institutions play numbers games, waging war with one another to attract the relatively few minority applicants and then declaring victory when statistically insignificant gains are made.

The Supreme Court decision does not arm us with the ammunition needed to address the real cause of inadequate diversity. Increasing diversity requires us to ask why talented minority students choose not to seek advanced degrees.

Having taught undergraduates for a quarter of a century, and (as a graduate dean) having designed programs that attract minority students, I have some personal insights.

Many Hispanic and African-American undergraduates admit not giving serious thought to pursuing graduate degrees in traditional academic fields, preferring instead to enter law,

medicine or business. Not just money and prestige but also awareness of these enterprises' impact on society and the career possibilities attract students to medicine, law and business.

By contrast, graduate education in traditional academic fields is erroneously perceived as esoteric, not engaging a wider community.

Except for future professors, some ask, why earn an advanced degree? What can one do with a degree?

Additionally, graduate education is shrouded in mystique, operating under a Darwinian assumption that only the best survive. Accurate or inaccurate, this picture of graduate education means significant debt, uncertainty about the time needed to complete a degree program and fears regarding prospective employment and making a contribution.

Graduate education needn't be this way. A new vision of graduate education at UT -- intellectual entrepreneurship (IE) -- challenges students to be more than the sum of their degree-earned parts, to be citizen-scholars.

The IE program at UT asks students to consider what matters most to them, thus shaping their intellectual and academic development. It enriches academic disciplines and underscores the enormous value of the arts, sciences, social sciences and humanities to society.

For IE participants, graduate degrees are not rewards but rather tools for creating intellectual and practical possibilities and for fulfilling one's passions.

What does the IE philosophy of education, as a program, have to do with increasing diversity?

It demonstrates that attracting minority applicants requires more than targeting a population. Implementing changes 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 under-represented minorities, while this same group makes up 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 important, students tell us that IE provides one of the few opportunities to contemplate how to use 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.

Thus, the IE philosophy has been an important mechanism for improving odds for completing a degree, increasing chances for professional and academic achievement and leveraging knowledge for social good.

From IE and the testimony of undergraduates, we have learned that to increase diversity the applicant pool must be expanded, making graduate education transparent, relevant and capable of fulfilling students' passions and goals.

Diversity requires bold, concerted and centralized efforts across academic geography, reflecting more than obvious admissions-related issues.

When budget cuts come into the picture, it will be tempting to revert to a bunker mentality, leaving crucial initiatives in graduate education to the free-lance efforts of each academic unit.

This approach, however, will prevent schools from capitalizing on IE's most powerful lesson: Only when we transcend disciplinary boundaries, thinking as a university community, do we create the intellectual synergy for solving complex problems, saving money and accruing unintended consequences.

I challenge my colleagues at UT and nationally to tackle diversity as a whole university, not as a loose confederation of programs.

Let us acknowledge that the Supreme Court's decision focusing on admissions will not automatically eliminate a problem that has defied solution for so long.

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www.utexas.edu/ogs/development.html