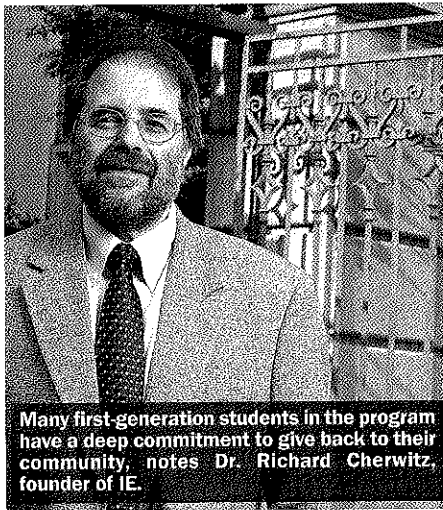


## University of Texas Program Demystifies Graduate School for Minority Students

Through the Intellectual Entrepreneurship: Cross-Disciplinary Consortium at UT, students of diverse backgrounds are being introduced to graduate-level work.

BY MICHELLE D. ANDERSON

Though it did not begin as a diversity initiative, a five-year-old program at the University of Texas at Austin designed to give undergraduates a taste of what graduate school is like has drawn a significant number of underrepresented minority and first-generation students.



Many first-generation students in the program have a deep commitment to give back to their community, notes Dr. Richard Cherwitz, founder of IE.

Together they made up 50 percent of the students who participated last spring in the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE): A Cross-Disciplinary Consortium's pregraduate internship, a program designed to demystify graduate school for undergraduate students. During the "internship," undergraduates work closely with a graduate student mentor and/or faculty supervisor to create their own research experience, investigating their chosen field of study as well as the implications of their work in their communities.

It began in 1997 when Dr. Richard A. Cherwitz founded the IE consortium, a collaboration between schools and colleges at UT that took up the task of educating "citizen-scholars." After conducting a survey about the consortium's demographics, Cherwitz found that many students were attracted to the "citizen scholar" theme and wanted to make a contribution to their community.

"Many of the first-generation and under-

represented students have really deep pas-

sions and commitments to give back to their community," Cherwitz says. The program has introduced graduate school to students who otherwise wouldn't go, like Mayra Hernández, who credits the pregraduate internship for influencing her decision to attend a graduate program in social work at UT.

During her pregraduate internship, Hernández took a statistics class with her mentor and discovered the broadness of social work. Her internship helped her understand what skills she needed to learn as a social worker and how she could obtain future practical experience.

It also allowed her the opportunity to travel. She studied in London on a scholarship and visited San Francisco to attend a Society for Social Work and Research conference. The 22-year-old was the only undergraduate student to present a paper at the conference and says her experience there intensified her passion for her discipline.

"When I got there I felt like I was in social work heaven," says Hernández. Drawn to the impactful work of social workers, Hernández says, "the positive things they do motivate people." Specifically, she wants to advocate for the needs of Mexican Americans in her community, working in the areas of domestic violence, sexual assault and human trafficking.

Many institutions don't allow students the opportunity to learn what it is like to be in graduate school and what the nature of their research area is like, says Cherwitz, also a professor in the university's Department of Communication Studies. He adds that many institutions of higher learning don't do enough to help students decide if they are in the right discipline.

"Bright students can get to their junior and even their senior year and may have defaulted into a discipline thinking that's what they want to do," he says. "Then, when they start this internship doing self-investigation, they ask questions they want to answer and

realize that there may be 15 other disciplines that go after these questions and maybe they're in the wrong area."

The consortium's pregraduate internship program has enrolled over 300 students representing an array of academic disciplines since fall 2003, when the program took off. The most recent class brought in 93 pregraduate interns representing nearly 40 academic programs.

With its success in opening the graduate school pipeline for underrepresented students, in 2007 the program became part of the portfolio of the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement at UT.

"I thought it was an innovative and effective way to help first-generation students and students from underrepresented backgrounds get interested in graduate study," Dr. Gregory J. Vincent, vice president for diversity and community engagement at UT, says of the program.

Hispanics made up 29 percent of the interns last spring, and Blacks 12 percent. Meanwhile, Hispanics and Blacks only make up about 15 percent and 4 percent, respectively, of the total student population at UT.

The pregraduate internship allowed Ana Lucia Hurtado, now a student at Harvard Law School, to focus her interests. Hailing from a family of doctors and educators, she was aware of graduate school but struggled to find a graduate program that fit her desires.

"I was going back and forth about what I wanted to do with my life," says Hurtado, a 2006 graduate who is most interested in immigration law, but has also considered practicing family, health and environmental law. "I spent hours researching careers.

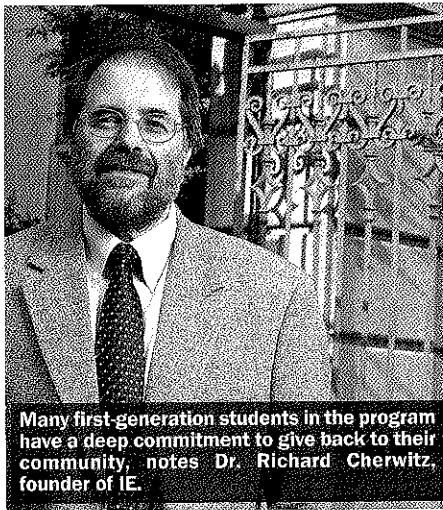
"I really wish more undergraduate institutions would implement more of these programs that help students find out what they want to do," Hurtado says, adding that her enrollment in the program helped her negotiate what areas of law she is most passionate about. ■

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