

UT's Intellectual Entrepreneurship program is trying to expand minority graduate school enrollment



By Bill McKenzie / Editorial Columnist
wmckenzie@dallasnews.com



Creating diversity on college campuses remains a challenge for many universities. It could become even more of one if the Supreme Court ends the practice of affirmative action, which some legal observers believe the Court may do this session.

The University of Texas at Austin has a program called Intellectual Entrepreneurship that is aimed at increasing minority participation at the graduate level. I asked the creator of this initiative, UT

Communications Professor Rick Cherwitz, to explain how it works. IE offers an interesting model that perhaps other schools could use to attract minority graduate students to their campuses.

Here is the exchange we had earlier this week:

We hear educators talk all the time about diversifying university campuses. But you contend graduate schools will not see much increase in minority participation until minority students are persuaded they should pursue graduate study. What do you mean?

Many minority students admit not giving serious thought to pursuing traditional graduate degrees, preferring instead to enter law, medicine, or business. This is not only because of money and prestige but also they know the social impact of these other pursuits.

Along with that preference, minority students, including those who are the first in their family to attend college, may not understand the significance of advanced study. They may perceive withdrawal from the rough and tumble of everyday problems as dereliction. Minority and first-generation students may be very bright and capable of learning at the highest levels, yet feel the tug of social responsibility.

Ironically, graduate education need not be viewed as an insular enterprise devoid of social relevance. But we need ways of allowing students to discover what graduate education entails and why it has enormous personal and professional value, as well as social relevance.

What are the numbers like at UT when it comes to minority graduate school enrollment?

UT is one of the nation's largest graduate schools and leading producers of doctoral degrees. Yet the applicant pool for programs in the arts and sciences has a small number of underrepresented minorities. Less than 10% percent of the 20,000-plus applicants to UT's graduate school are Hispanic, African American, or Native American — and this is not significantly different at other major public research institutions.

This summer, the Supreme Court allowed UT and other schools to continue using tightly-defined affirmative action programs. But perhaps only for the moment. Some think the Court could strike down affirmative action soon, which has people thinking about alternative approaches. What kind of alternative does the Intellectual Entrepreneurship program offer?

As a race-neutral initiative, IE's success in increasing diversity owes to the fact that it is a philosophy of education and not a targeted program. By creating opportunities of value to all students, for two decades the program has had a substantial impact on underrepresented populations.

IE demonstrates that affirmative action, while necessary, is not sufficient for increasing diversity. To increase diversity, we have learned that the applicant pool must be expanded and education must be made transparent and relevant.

Also, entrepreneurial experiences must be available for students at all levels, enabling them to discover how education can be put to work. 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.

How does this program help students discover their interests at the graduate level?

The crown jewel of these programs is the pre-graduate school internship. It helps students determine what they wish to do following graduation. It especially focuses on whether they wish to pursue a graduate education. The program places the students with a graduate student mentor and faculty supervisors in an area in which they are interested.

Interns work with their mentors and supervisors on research projects, observe graduate classes, shadow graduate student teaching and research assistants, participate in disciplinary conferences, and explore their futures. They get to live the life of a graduate student.

Each year between 60-70% of IE Pre Graduate School interns are under-represented minorities, first-generation, or economically disadvantaged students; approximately 35% are Hispanic or African American.

You mentioned students from families who have never attended college. How does this program help them integrate into the larger mainstream?

IE does this specifically by providing an “opportunity-based” component to learning focused on immersion, intent and integration.

Rather than merely giving them “exposure” to educational environments, IE immerses students in the academic culture and routines of higher education. Students become active agents in their education rather than outsiders and passive targets of recruitment.

IE also begins with students’ intent. The program invites students to discover what they are passionate about, using this discovery to systematically and thoughtfully develop educational pathways. As a result, students own and are accountable for their education and career choices.

Finally, IE emphasizes integration by providing opportunities where students in one space can seamlessly connect their personal goals, professional aspirations, and academic knowledge.

In short, students can “brand” their own identity, while at the same time becoming successfully integrated into the mainstream.