

VIEWPOINT

The Challenge of Diversifying Higher Education in the Post-Fisher Era

by **Richard A. Cherwitz**

No profound increase in diversity will occur until significant progress is made in convincing talented minorities to pursue graduate study.

RECENT DATA GATHERED by the Council of Graduate Schools and other educational organizations document the fact that, while progress has been made, African Americans and Hispanics remain significantly underrepresented among recipients of doctoral degrees. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the two groups comprise over 33 percent of all U.S. citizens in the age range of Ph.D. candidates but only 14 percent of those earning doctorates.

What is perhaps most disturbing about these data is the obvious implication: without more persons of color earning advanced degrees, there will remain an inadequate supply of underrepresented-minority faculty, perpetuating a lack of diversity across college campuses. To say we are caught in a vicious cycle is a gross understatement.

In the wake of the recent Supreme Court ruling in *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2013), which sent the case back to the lower court and mandated a higher burden of “strict scrutiny” be met in evaluating the use of race in admissions decisions, there may be cause for concern. Increasing diversity at institutions of higher education might prove more difficult; some argue, for example, that the insufficient production of minority doctoral degrees stems in part from the less than inclusive admissions process and a lack of financial support. While these variables do indeed contribute to the problem and thus could render efforts to increase diversity more challenging in the post-Fisher era, now more than ever we must focus on an oft-unspoken culprit, namely, the insubstantial minority applicant pool. In addition, the writing may be on the wall for affirmative action. Even advocates

of affirmative action recognize that it is a mechanism that should be used only until it is no longer needed; when that point will be continued to be debated. Hence, alternative approaches are needed to ensure diversity within universities.

Fisher v. University of Texas is a United States Supreme Court case concerning the affirmative action admissions policy of The University of Texas at Austin. The case, brought by undergraduate Abigail Fisher in 2008, asked that the Court either declare the admissions policy of the University inconsistent with, or entirely overrule, *Grutter v. Bollinger*, a 2003 case in which the Supreme Court ruled that race could play a limited role in the admissions policies of public universities. In *Grutter v. Bollinger* the Supreme Court upheld the affirmative action admissions policy of the University of Michigan Law School. The Court ruled that the University of Michigan Law School had a compelling interest in promoting class diversity, thus holding that a race-conscious admissions process that may favor “underrepresented minority groups,” but that also took into account many other factors evaluated on an individual basis for every applicant, did not amount to a quota system that would have been unconstitutional under *Regents of the Univ. of Cal. v. Bakke*. While affirming the use of race, in *Fisher* the Court sent the case back to the lower court, mandating that a higher standard of “strict scrutiny” be applied when evaluating the use of race in admissions decisions.

Consider The University of Texas at Austin (UT)—one of the nation’s largest graduate schools and leading producers of doctoral degrees. The applicant pool for programs in the arts and sciences is characterized by a small number of underrepresented minorities. Fewer 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.

While factoring race and ethnicity into the criteria considered for student admission and for awarding scholarships and fellowships no doubt makes a difference and therefore is a necessary practice, no profound increase in diversity will occur until significant progress is made in convincing talented minorities to pursue graduate study. Nationally, top-notch graduate institutions often play numbers games, competing with each other to redistribute an already undersized minority applicant population.

Why do talented minority students choose not to attend graduate school? Many admit not giving serious thought to pursuing traditional graduate degrees, preferring instead to enter law, medicine, or business not only because of money and prestige but also out of awareness of the societal impact of these pursuits. Underlying this preference is the fact that students from a minority community or those who are the first in their family to attend college 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.

Of course, graduate education need not be viewed as an insular enterprise devoid of social relevance. At UT, “Intellectual Entrepreneurship”¹ (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, and by requiring them to identify and adapt to audiences for whom their research matters, IE has documented the

enormous value to society of graduate study² over the past 15 years.

From its inception, the IE initiative required planning and cooperation among multiple sources within the university, plus coordination with the greater community. The successful development of the program is due to its integration of planning and good resource management. Owing to its entrepreneurial philosophy, IE has approached planning in a flexible and organic manner—one focused on adapting to individual students and disciplines, as well as making changes quickly yet thoughtfully.

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 2002–2003 that 20 percent of students enrolled in IE were underrepresented minorities, while this same group comprised only 9 percent of UT’s total graduate student population.

Minorities reported that, by rigorously exploring how to succeed, IE helped demystify graduate school³. More importantly, students noted that IE provided one of the few opportunities to contemplate in a genuine entrepreneurial fashion how to use 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 best documented by the “IE Pre-Graduate School

1 <https://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie/>

2 <https://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/articles/change.pdf>

3 <http://diverseeducation.com/article/11641/>

Internship”⁴ begun in 2003–2004. 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. Rather than being outsiders looking in or passive targets of recruitment, IE interns function 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 who are already certain about graduate study and committed to a specific academic discipline, the approach taken by most outreach and professional development programs, 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 about 70 percent of IE Pre-Graduate School interns are underrepresented minority, first generation, or economically disadvantaged students; approximately 35 percent are Hispanic or African American. Of the spring 2013 undergraduate IE cohort of 180 students, one third are Hispanic, compared to a university-wide percentage of 18. Similarly, although only 4.5 percent of UT students are African American, 16 percent of IE students this spring are from an African American background. As of 2013, over 2,000 students have participated in the program.⁵

Interns report that, for the first time in their undergraduate career, a “space” existed to reflect upon 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 with which their goals might be realized. Especially exciting is the fact that 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”⁶ Award as the top program for graduate institutions in the United States. In the words of Stanford President John Hennessy, “UT’s Intellectual Entrepreneurship project (IE) is a leader nationally. It provides best practices in promoting diversity in the academy, especially in attracting students to the critical areas of science and technology.”⁷

The value of IE as a mechanism for increasing diversity⁸ 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, intellectual, personal, and professional development are linked parts of an entrepreneurial approach to learning.

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IE’s potential to increase diversity in the post-Fisher era is not limited to graduate education. Based on a pilot project with local area middle and high school students, we have learned that IE has the capacity to expand the number of underrepresented minority students who attend college.⁹

Going beyond traditional recruitment and affirmative action programs, IE empowers students to discover their passion and produce an entrepreneurial plan enabling them to construct a pathway to college. To increase diversity in a race-neutral era, we must expand the undergraduate applicant pool, and one way to do that is to enable students

6 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jgmDOEPJTY>

7 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rFee_A_65I

8 <https://webpace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/articles/april4-universities.pdf>

9 <http://communication.utexas.edu/ie/ie-mentors-work-local-area-students-it-could-be-u-2011-0>

4 <http://communication.utexas.edu/ie>

5 <https://webpace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie/kern.html#pregrad>

to see the connections between their professional aspirations and education—something at the core of IE’s approach to education over the past 15 years.

IE’s success in increasing diversity is due to the fact that it is a philosophy of education and not merely a program. More importantly, it is not a targeted program; by creating opportunities of value to all students, IE has had a unique and substantial impact on underrepresented populations for nearly two decades. Put simply, IE demonstrates that affirmative action, while necessary, is not sufficient for increasing diversity. As former Ohio State University President E. Gordon Gee states: “Of special note is IE’s documented record of increasing diversity at a time when we are searching for race neutral methods for doing so.”¹⁰

From IE we have learned that to increase diversity the applicant pool must be expanded; education must be made transparent and relevant. Moreover, entrepreneurial education and experiences must be available to students at all levels, enabling them to discover how education 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. “IE is a model that works,” declares Excelencia in Education President Sarita Brown, “and it is time for other colleges and universities to adopt it.”

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10 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FW1TFV30ZXg>