



Getting Real About *Graduate Diversity and Inclusion*



By Janet C. Rutledge

Building a qualified, diverse and inclusive student body does not magically happen overnight. Fortunately, some very high-profile universities have proven that it's possible to increase graduate program diversity, and they have been willing to share the steps that worked for them. If you put in a sustained and concerted effort, these steps can work for your program, too. Here are a few strategies that have worked at my institution, the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC).

First, the importance of in-person interviews cannot be overstated. Bringing an applicant to your campus before making an offer is worth every investment of money and time. At UMBC, programs conducting on-campus interviews before extending an offer have a higher program completion rate than programs that don't, in part because the in-person interaction gives interviewers valuable insights they might not have otherwise learned. It also provides applicants with the opportunity to evaluate whether the program is right for them.

Interviews are typically offered to applicants after a holistic file review, inclusive of essays, letters of recommendation and research experiences. Faculty should also review transcripts to ensure applicants have taken the courses needed to prepare for a particular program and earned at least a threshold undergraduate GPA (UGPA), indicating a baseline of knowledge to be successful in graduate school. However, it's best to limit interviewers' exposure to UGPAs and GRE® test scores prior to applicant interviews to prevent them from developing preconceived notions about students that are difficult to correct even when new information is introduced. Limiting exposure to quantitative information lessens the chance that conversations about applicants' interests, experiences and attributes will be affected by interviewers' unconscious assumptions.

That leads into the next strategy: faculty and recruitment committees must move away from judging applicants solely on quantitative data points, and toward examining all pieces of an applicant's

background holistically. Small score differences on standardized tests, or small point differences in students' UGPA, say little about a student's ability to complete a program. It's true that high standardized test scores correlate to high first-semester graduate GPAs, but the critical thinking and writing skills measured by these tests are only some of many crucial factors of student success. We should be looking for intangible assets from applicants that may supplement their quantitative measures. Some of the most brilliant applicants we have seen at UMBC never anticipated going to graduate school and thus never prepared for entrance exams, but students like these are no less capable or worthy of consideration. We must commit to looking beyond the numbers to get a true sense of who an applicant is and can become.

Another tendency is to frame UGPAs as comparable standards, but there are discrepancies that often go unnoticed, or undiscussed. Not only are more students getting As and Bs than they were a decade ago (see [gradeinflation.com](https://www.gradeinflation.com/)), but elite, private universities generally give higher grades than public universities. So weighting UGPAs heavily in your admissions decisions could further advantage those from families with higher socioeconomic status, and one of the many reasons why ranking by UGPAs alone is unfair to applicants. Instead of focusing solely on UGPAs, admissions committees should also pay attention to the relevant contributions a student made to their undergraduate programs, particularly through research or independent projects. Any student with the ability to work through complex problems to affect positive change is someone we want in our program.

Holistic admission practices are an important first step. Developing a comprehensive program to support retention, professional development and successful completion is critical to achieving your diversity and inclusion goals. Ultimately, you must commit to following methods that have been proven to work, bringing your entire program on board, and fostering those methods all the way through to the end. There's no simple solution, and pretending there is will only harm students and programs.

We have seen true commitment lead to success firsthand at UMBC. In 1988, UMBC pioneered the Meyerhoff Scholars' Program, a program designed to boost underrepresented undergraduate students in STEM fields who go on to earn Ph.D. degrees. It has been recognized nationally as a successful model for attracting a broader and more diverse student body. Other institutions that have adopted the Meyerhoff principles have been extremely successful when they replicated the method in full, meaning they adopted all [13 Meyerhoff principles](#). Institutions that try to pick and choose principles instead of applying the method in full are not nearly as successful. We later adapted these principles at the graduate level through the IMSD Meyerhoff Graduate Fellows Program and PROMISE: Maryland's AGEP.

Achieving any diversity goal starts with a commitment, followed by a real, sustained effort. This may include reflecting on the shortcomings of previous attempts and testing some of the many strategies available to discover what will work for you. There is a growing body of research that documents what works well and, more importantly, why it works. Programs struggling to increase diversity and inclusion can be successful by avoiding shortcut solutions and learning from other institutions that have done it well.

Janet C. Rutledge is Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), where she is also a faculty member in the Computer Science and Electrical Engineering Department. Janet is Past Chair of both the GRE Board and its Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee.