



## ***Building Successful Graduate Programs with a Humanistic Approach***



By Jeremiah Nelson

There is nothing I care more about than diversity and inclusion. It is, without a doubt, the most important part of my job. In my experience as Vice President at The Association for Graduate Enrollment Management (NAGAP), and Director of Enrollment Management at Wake Forest University Business School, I've learned a few key principles to share with others who care about creating diverse and inclusive communities:

- think about diversity broadly
- storytelling and creating connections are key
- build your programs and processes with intention

With these principles in mind, here is how Wake Forest University's School of Business works to build a diverse and successful program throughout a student's journey.

### **Recruitment**

We're intentional about building pathways. If students aren't likely to know about our program, then we show up where they are — on their campuses and through marketing channels — and we ensure our messages are inclusive. This also means educating and cultivating potential applicants early in their careers — either through traditional marketing tactics or alumni referrals. Some students from underrepresented groups never consider graduate school as an option because they don't see themselves reflected in marketing materials or alumni stories.



## Application

It can be easy to approach the application review process from a purely data-driven standpoint, but it's important to remember that we're evaluating human beings, and data will only get us so far. Admissions committee members must reconcile data from an admissions packet — information like GRE® test scores and undergraduate GPAs — with qualitative and personal information when evaluating applications. One way to do this is to meet with applicants at some point during the evaluation process. Having an in-person interaction with an applicant pays dividends in helping prospective students find their fit and allowing faculty and staff members to make connections. It's also an opportunity for applicants to speak to their past work or their academic and personal interests — something data alone cannot accomplish.

## Class structure

Our students are placed on teams for the full 24-month program. When putting these teams together, we consider diversity from every possible angle — not just in terms of racial and gender makeup but also the varying perspectives and backgrounds that students can bring. Our student services director builds teams based on varying strengths (pairing students with quantitative skills with students who have strong soft skills) and differing academic and professional experiences (students with nonprofit experience working alongside those with Fortune 500® experience) to create an environment in which students can lean on and learn from each other.

## Learning

We try to be thoughtful about the whole life cycle of a student, including their past experiences and future goals, and how we can best help them succeed. When students first come to campus, some are reluctant to ask questions or ask for help because they have a false perception that they should already know how to navigate graduate school just because they were accepted. That is a toxic perception, and we encourage students to ask for help when they need it. It's up to us to create an inclusive environment where students can feel comfortable seeking support and taking advantage of resources. At our program, one solution is to have second-year students tutor and mentor first-year students. This helps build networks among peers and reinforces collaboration between classes.

## Alumni relations

If programs are investing in nurturing their students throughout the program, they can reap the benefits of successful and engaged alumni. Students give you a lot of their time and a piece of themselves — they're quite heavily invested and proud, and there's a lot of potential for them to be engaged postgraduation. Successful alumni refer good students and those students in turn graduate successfully — it's a whole cycle that feeds itself. If we're doing the right things, then we're creating a successful and self-sustaining system.

For us, it's incredibly important to not only look at the candidate holistically, but also to think about the candidate's experience with the university from a holistic perspective. Graduate school is a journey that begins well before the admissions process and requires dedicated resources from all to build and sustain a diverse and successful community.

For more information about holistic admissions approaches, visit [www.holisticadmissions.org](http://www.holisticadmissions.org).

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