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Making campus diversity real — starting in kindergarten

By Michael Cunningham

Among the most important issues in U.S. higher education right now is the lack of diversity in student and faculty populations.

The situation is particularly troubling in graduate education, where the lack of diversity is largely influenced by the history of deficient K–16 institutional support for underrepresented and minority groups, and consistently low levels of diversity among faculty members.

The time to diversify higher education is now, but we must do so by taking a step back and deconstructing the notion that we can fix the issue with a few tweaks to admissions or recruiting processes. We must approach longstanding, sometimes uncomfortable institutional issues with a multipronged and deliberate plan of action. This includes examining the full educational journey of a student and beginning to implement thoughtful solutions from kindergarten through graduate school if we want to challenge — and change — the status quo.

The best ways to provide K–16 students with the support that many of them haven't experienced in the past are to teach and evaluate the whole student and to consider the intersectionality of classrooms.

When students at every level of education have strong psychological support groups, they are much more likely to succeed. For example, when low-performing students in a Louisiana district were provided a "learning support" program consisting of psychological and educational support to counter barriers to success, their graduation rate rose by over 8%. The district also saw a significant rise in overall academic success.

Equipping students with tools they need to develop their social skills and emotional intelligence is another critical step. Some students have never been exposed to concepts like self-management and the regulation of emotion, not to mention the intangibles that go into building healthy relationships and making responsible decisions in their own self-interest.

Allocating funding for school psychologists, academic counselors and other one-on-one support systems are commonsense steps

for institutions to support vulnerable students during vital years of cognitive development that can ultimately impact the personal, academic and professional aspects of a student's life. While these are actions with downstream effects, there are several practical systemic improvements we can make that will be immediately felt.

Some graduate programs have identified dropping the GRE® test as a solution to increase diversity. In examining our admissions processes, faculty and admissions officers must challenge the belief that building diversity hinges solely on changing one criterion.

In an unequal society, equity will not present itself clearly with the elimination of one piece of the admissions puzzle, especially when so many of the other pieces are subjective — and therefore susceptible to our biases. Instead, it's necessary for the focus to shift toward eliminating layers of institutional bias for underrepresented groups across every educational level and to move the blame away from one single aspect.

Disregarding the one piece of an admissions packet that levels the playing field across race, gender and socioeconomic status is a step back to when social class was a determining factor in the college admissions process. Admissions processes that use standardized assessments, coupled with more subjective measures like essays, internships and interviews, are inherently fairer and more respectful to applicants, while also helping institutions achieve their diversity goals.

Beyond holistic admissions processes, faculty members need to think about targeted student recruitment as an immediate, logical step toward greater diversity. By attending annual disciplinary-society events, a graduate program can begin to build visibility among interested students, helping to grow a more diversified pipeline over time. Faculty must be open to students who come from backgrounds different from our own.

Programs should implement graduate student development plans to ensure that all students are provided equivalent opportunities for success. Additionally, bringing visibility to currently enrolled underrepresented minority graduate students during program outreach and recruitment serves to illuminate a possible path for other prospective applicants of similar backgrounds.

Continuing to grow a strong base of students from underrepresented communities must be a top priority, followed closely by the increasingly difficult task of retaining these students. Key to retention for these groups is providing on-campus support and an inclusive, welcoming environment. For example, programs can foster genuine relationships among students and faculty through advising and mentorship programs.

It is clear that increasing diversity in higher education begins in kindergarten and is slowly built up through the graduate school level. Bringing equity to our academic fields requires difficult conversations and deliberate actions — we must all commit professionally and personally to the goal of creating a more diverse and equitable academic environment.

Minimizing implicit biases, developing strong institutional support, diversifying the educator workforce and equipping teachers with the tools to provide social and emotional learning are all steps that we must begin taking to transform the idea of diversity into reality in America's graduate schools.

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