



LAST | WORD

By DR. RICHARD A. CHERWITZ AND SUSAN ALVARADO BOYD

INTELLECTUAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: SUCCESSFULLY ENGAGING HEARTS, MINDS IN GRADUATE EDUCATION

Following the Supreme Court's recent ruling on affirmative action in admissions to graduate and professional programs, many institutions are contemplating how, if at all, to use race and ethnicity in making admissions decisions. The court's ruling notwithstanding, a nagging question lingers: Can race-conscious admissions policies actually enhance diversity? Traditional approaches to recruitment have not produced a proportionately significant number of minority graduate students. Therefore, why should we assume that tweaking the admissions system and expanding financial aid will substantially increase the number of minority graduate students? The reality is that many minority undergraduates don't think about opportunities made possible by graduate study; yet, knowledge of opportunities precedes the impetus to take advantage of the application process.

Unfortunately, the current institution-based recruitment model does little to enable minorities to acquire sufficient and relevant insight into graduate education. To achieve greater diversity, we must increase awareness of the value of graduate education and devise experiences allowing minority undergraduates to explore how advanced study can engage their hearts and minds—helping them fulfill their professional visions and ethical commitments. Recruiting a critical mass of outstanding Hispanic and African American students requires a change in mindset.

The Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) program at the University of Texas-Austin is an example of this new mindset. IE is a program and philosophy of graduate education that promotes the virtues of discovery, ownership and accountability. It challenges students to be greater than the sum of their disciplinary parts — to be "citizen-scholars" contributing both to academe and the community. By demystifying graduate education and enabling students in traditional areas of study to put their knowledge to work in the community, it is not surprising that IE has attracted a disproportionate number of minority students; 20 percent of those enrolled IE are under-represented minorities, while the same group comprises only 9 percent of the total graduate student body.

Consider Daisy Fuentes, a UT senior studying biology who, along with nearly two dozen of her classmates and students from local colleges and universities, participates in a 2003-2004 IE pre-graduate school internship program administered by the authors of this essay. These internships pair undergraduates with faculty mentors and graduate student "buddies," immersing them in the culture of graduate study — something about which most undergraduates, especially minorities and first-generation students, are often unaware.

Fuentes' story is a familiar one. As a science student, she always assumed she would become a medical doctor, using her talents to contribute to the well being of others. Until recently, Fuentes never imagined that a graduate degree in a science or education discipline might equip her to fulfill her vision of contributing to the community. Fuentes' revelation did not occur because a graduate program "recruited" her or because of a recruitment workshop that explained how to apply to graduate school and obtain financial aid. Fuentes' transformation came from her epiphany that she is an "intellectual entrepreneur." Early in her internship, she is discovering the desire to develop a comprehensive community health center.

Fuentes' experience documents that increasing diversity in graduate education means moving beyond mechanistic recruitment strategies. We must create experiences enabling undergraduates to discover how graduate study brings their visions to fruition.

Dr. Richard A. Cherwitz is a professor in communication studies and the division of rhetoric and composition at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the Founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) program—recently renamed Professional Development and Community Engagement (www.utexas.edu/ogs/development.html). Susan Alvarado Boyd is a doctoral student in the College of Education and an education specialist for the Longhorn Link Program in the Office of the Dean of Students.