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Diversifying the Graduate-Student Pipeline

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Colleges have focused for years on improving equity in graduate schools, but life during the pandemic has made it even clearer that there are stark differences in the rates at which students of different backgrounds pursue and complete master's and doctoral programs. Diversifying the pool of admitted graduate students is a key factor in improving equity, but it is also important to get more students across the finish line. What have colleges learned from the current virtual environment that can help them make inroads to these challenges? How can they prioritize equity goals in the midst of budget uncertainty?

To help colleges understand the next steps they can take to improve equity in their post-graduate programs, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* recently hosted a virtual forum, with support from ETS, called "Diversifying the Graduate-Student Pipeline." The forum, moderated by Alexander C. Kafka, a senior editor at *The Chronicle*, included Jabbar Bennett, vice president and chief diversity officer and professor of medicine at Michigan State University; Robert Bernasconi, a professor of philosophy and African American studies at Pennsylvania State University; Robin Garrell, president of the CUNY Graduate Center; Kimberly Harris, an assistant professor of philosophy at Marquette University; and Damon L. Williams Jr., assistant dean of diversity and inclusion in the Graduate School at Northwestern University.

The following comments, which have been edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum. To hear the full discussion, access the archived version [here](#).

Alexander C. Kafka: One underutilized recruitment tool is the summer season. How do you make good use of those summer months to familiarize talented potential students with grad programs?

Jabbar Bennett: I used to be quite engaged with the Leadership Alliance, which brings students to campus to have a research experience in the summer to get a preview of what it would be like to live in those environments. It also gives them an opportunity to meet prospective faculty advisers, fellow graduate students, and postdocs. I always talk about those opportunities as being a two-way interview process. It gives students a chance to see the campus as a place that will fully acknowledge their identities, and it gives folks within our institutions a chance to understand what the students' interests are so they can align those with faculty who are doing research in those areas. It also provides opportunities for students to develop outside of the research environment, to think about all the other professional career-development opportunities that may be offered.

Kafka: Some corporations have experimented with blind admissions. Is that something grad schools are trying? What are the advantages?



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Senior Editor
The Chronicle of Higher Education



Jabbar Bennett
Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer,
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Damon L. Williams Jr.: We are starting to see more of that in graduate education. We know that there's often bias when we're looking at the graduate-application process. If we know that all students have achieved success, whether it's GPA or years of research experience, we're removing the name of the individuals, removing the institution name so that we won't have bias. Then we can look at the whole package of the student and predict and decide who is the best fit. We're looking at what is a predictor of success outside of looking at school names. We know that often there's bias against minority-serving institutions or biases against names of individuals. If we can remove that from the application, then we will see those students showing up in our competitive qualified-applicant pool.

Kafka: A lot of women and underrepresented minorities on the faculty say that they are expected to do mentoring work on top of their academic demands and that that's not fair. How do you juggle those competing demands and pressures?

Kimberly Harris: It's correct that women and minorities often get the work of mentoring diverse students in the department. That also is part of the pipeline problem. When you don't have diverse senior faculty in a department, then that kind of work is naturally going to fall on early-career faculty. So recruitment also has to be at the senior level if the goal of a department is really to diversify the graduate pool. The students are going to have to write dissertations, and it's ideal if dissertation advisers are senior faculty. I have a personal interest in mentoring, but the recruitment of diverse faculty at multiple levels needs to occur.

Kafka: Is there any way for women and minority graduate students who are disillusioned and considering leaving academe to challenge and change department cultures during their short stint in academe so that the situation improves for future students?

Robin Garrell: One thing that's important is to share your stories with people who can understand your experience. That might be your chief diversity officer on the campus, other senior administrators, a chair, or a dean. It's likely that they can help in some ways. They can engage colleagues in other departments to share best practices. They might engage in training or in a collective conversation about how to do better to support inclusive success.

Kafka: What does it mean to look holistically at an application? Do universities consider the hardships that marginalized students can experience throughout their college experience?

Williams: I get this question often: What is the perfect profile? There is no perfect profile. We're looking for a diverse cohort of students. In that diverse applicant pool, there's diversity in where the student has attended institutions for undergrad or their work experience or in their area of study. When we think about being holistic, it differs



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across departments and it differs across the graduate landscape, but it helps to put the focus on the personal statement. Does it match with the research that the faculty are conducting at the institution?

Kafka: Most institutions are financially strapped. How do you go about putting together funding packages?

Robert Bernasconi: There is a structural problem that can emerge when a department is trying to recruit a student who's being recruited by other programs. There's a tendency for money to be thrown at that student, not because anybody necessarily believes that the student is better than all the other applicants that have been selected, but simply because other programs want that student. That can create great inequities, which can I think hurt the community of the graduate students that you're trying to foster.

In my own university, there has been a problem that as we've been moving away from GRE scores as a way of selecting who gets the top assistantships, we have no idea how the graduate school is choosing who gets these top fellowships. Certainly in philosophy a few students are being hunted by a few departments and getting more and more better offers while other diverse students, maybe because they didn't apply to so many schools, are suffering with a low stipend.



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