Improving Student Recruitment, Retention, and Graduation-Graduate Students

Subcommittee Report

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To our knowledge, the University of Akron has never developed a systematic plan for the recruitment and retention of underrepresented/first generation graduate students although the Graduate School has had an underrepresented/first generation recruitment position in the past. The aim of this document is to provide an outline of steps that might be taken to develop such a plan.

Recruitment

Current Status

The identifiable ethnic/racial population among UA graduate students is approximately 10.1 percent. This compares to a national average of 24 percent as reported by the Chronicle of Higher Education. (We have not compiled data for first generation graduate students at UA).

Recruitment for graduate programs is largely conducted at the departmental level. There are no funds allocated for underrepresented/first generation student recruitment and no source of guidance for how to do this. In 2008-09 the Graduate School provided funding for a UA representative to attend 2 national conferences that featured underrepresented/first generation undergraduate scholars for the purpose of recruitment. Additionally the Graduate School provided travel funds for two departments that sent their own representatives to such conferences. The Graduate School made the National Directory of McNair Scholars available to all departments and offered 10 “diversity” assistantships for the successful recruitment of underrepresented/first generation graduate students. (Only 2 students were successfully recruited.) The Graduate School does not have sufficient funds to support these efforts in the current academic year.

The University of Akron website does not contain any information for diversity applicants on its Home Page or on any Admissions pages. Individual department websites rarely mention an interest in recruiting underrepresented/first generation graduate students. Also, it is difficult to ascertain the current diversity recruitment efforts and to quantify them as an institution.
**Actions**

Although not recommending how these actions should be accomplished, the following actions are suggested:

1. Provide departments with information on how to recruit underrepresented/first generation students.
2. Add material to University and departmental websites to attract diversity applications.
3. Provide funding for the active recruitment of underrepresented/first generation students by either the Graduate School or the Office of Inclusion and Equity.
4. Provide funding to offer competitive funding packages to underrepresented/first generation applicants.
5. Draw on McNair program experience.
6. Encourage academic departments to use the graduate assistantship program to attract external funding which supports underrepresented/first generation applicants.
7. Collect data on departmental efforts to recruit diverse students and provide appropriate support.
8. Recruitment should not be restricted to external applicants. The University can raise awareness among underrepresented/first generation UA undergraduates that graduate school is an option by creating progressive interventions that have multiple contacts throughout the undergraduate academic experience. (The sub-committee believes that a program to raise awareness of graduate school opportunities should be available to all undergraduates. However, the program should be marketed to underrepresented undergraduates in a way that is culturally and situation sensitive.) Such a program would represent an innovative recruitment tool.

The program would include:

Early introduction to the notion of attending graduate school (sophomores). ACTION: Repeat the all-Ohio graduate fair sponsored by the Graduate School. Create literature targeted for freshmen and sophomores.

Make students aware of research opportunities at our institution and at other locations (all levels). ACTION: Create a database of research opportunities at UA and throughout Ohio.

Disseminate information specifically targeted to assist students in applying to graduate programs at UA and in Ohio (sophomores and juniors). ACTION: Create marketing materials that help educate students on this process and the timeline for graduate school applications.

Enlist faculty in identifying undergraduates that are appropriate for graduate school. ACTION: Create awareness that often diverse students need to be encouraged to participate. Educate faculty about cultural differences that cause diverse candidates to remain in the background.

Create a database of diverse candidates throughout Northeast Ohio Institutions similar to the McNair Scholars Directory. ACTION: Enlist schools to participate and share information or disseminate information.
Retention

Current Status

There are no current data on retention of underrepresented/first generation graduate students at UA. The Graduate School allocates approximately $570,000 per year to support diversity assistantships (approximately 75). We do know that providing full-time students with a stipend and tuition remission retains students. This money is not specifically budgeted at the University level but is “set-aside” from the overall Graduate School budget for this purpose. There are no student groups at the Graduate level that are intended to support underrepresented/first generation graduate students. There is no information about department-level efforts to retain students. There are no student services at the graduate student level designed to assist underrepresented/first generation graduate students.

Actions

1. The McNair Scholars Program provides some strategies that can be applied to graduate student retention.
2. A University office might be made responsible for assisting underrepresented/first generation graduate students with academic and social concerns. This may also require hiring new personnel.
3. Departments require advice on how to retain underrepresented/first generation graduate students (in addition to all students).
4. Explicitly fund graduate assistantships intended for underrepresented/first generation students.
5. Develop means to track and stay in contact with underrepresented/first generation graduate students once they arrive on campus.
6. Identify national organizations that have adopted initiatives to attract and retain underrepresented students. For example, the Institute for Higher Education Policy promotes several diversity initiatives (see http://www.ihep.org/Resources/diversity.cfm).
7. Create a diversity mentoring program for graduate students – linking graduate students with faculty who are interested in supporting diversity education at the graduate level.

The following actions are often found in graduate programs but need to systematically incorporate all students.

8. Encourage faculty to collaborate with graduate students to present papers and conduct research.
9. Have faculty develop panels with graduate students to present at national, state and local conferences in the students’ academic field.
10. Provide funding to pay for student membership in professional associations for the purposes of networking, professional training and development.
The actions listed above reflect general programmatic responses that UA might develop to improve retention. In addition, there are some internal barriers that underrepresented/first generation graduate students confront and that make persistence in Graduate School difficult.

**Issues confronting Graduate Students after they are in Graduate School**

1. For parents – Title 22 does not cover daycare for students taking graduate level classes and as a result daycare expenses often play into the thought “I just need to stop here and get into the work field”

2. Concerning the financial burden and the need to work– the graduate assistantship contract states that students cannot work more than 8 hours a week off campus. The assistantship alone is not enough to support myself and/or my family. There is no choice but to secretly break the contract. It is obvious that the amount of time spent on academics is less as a result, so the rule is understood, but the structure does not allow it to be any other way.

3. Concerning professional development and conferences – although many departments reimburse for traveling expenses and have food allowances, individuals have to have the money upfront or a credit card and this is not often the case so they either cannot attend or go or go with little money in their pockets.

4. Connected to the above issues (daycare and/or attendance at conferences) – there appears to be a traditional model of what a committed student looks like and what their progression looks like and, as a result, students that do not fit that traditional model are targeted in various ways and made to feel that they do not fit in or can’t be successful.

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1. **FIRST GENERATION:** the term first generation college student means an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree, or; in the case of any individual who regularly resided with or received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree.

UNDERREPRESENTED: African American / Black, Hispanic, American Indian / Alaskan Native. The Department of Education also includes Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders (with an affiliation with the United States, such as residents of American Samoa, Guam, Mariana Islands and the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands) in the underrepresented groups designation.