

# **REEXAMINING GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL ADMISSIONS PRACTICES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA**

## **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

The central purpose of this university-wide initiative is to generate a dialog among and between academic and professional programs that leads to the adoption of admissions practices supportive of excellence and diversity. This project recognizes of the challenges faced by all institutions to diversify their graduate student bodies. Historically, it has been a great challenge to identify and eliminate the barriers for underrepresented graduate students and to create inclusive environments that support all students to be able to succeed and flourish. This has become even more challenging since the 1996 Hopwood decision in the 5<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals, the 2003 Supreme Court cases involving admissions practices at the University of Michigan, and the enactment of anti-affirmative action legislation in numerous states across the country. Progress has been further complicated by a lack of understanding about the impact of these cases and statutes and by retrenchment in some institutions that goes well beyond changes mandated by the Supreme Court.

There is widespread institutional commitment to diversity and inclusiveness at the University of Minnesota, including in graduate education. In his inaugural speech, University President Robert Bruininks recognized diversity as one of the University's four core values. And for the last three years, the University has been engaged in a strategic positioning process that includes “Build a Diverse Community” as one of the six foundations for this work. Long committed to promoting inclusive practices in graduate education, the University of Minnesota’s well-established diversity activities span the spectrum of proactive recruitment efforts, particularly within the CIC, that include a sophisticated prospect tracking system and DOVE fellowships to promote diversity in the graduate student population; support services for all aspects of the graduate school experience, including participation in the Community of Scholars Program to build social and intellectual community while strengthening academic performance; incentives for research productivity in the form of mentored research experiences and funded participation in academic conferences; University participation in the Ph.D. Completion Project to address the multiple barriers to degree completion; and an active postdoctoral program, including a wide range of professional development activities for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows to expand their career horizons.

These services reflect the Graduate School’s commitment to diversity, which

...embraces the University of Minnesota’s position that promoting and supporting diversity among the student body is central to the academic mission of the University. We define diversity to encompass many characteristics including economic disadvantage, special talents, evidence of leadership qualities, race or ethnicity, a strong work record, and disability. A diverse student body enriches graduate education by providing a multiplicity of views and perspectives that enhance research, teaching, and the development of new knowledge. A diverse mix of students promotes respect for, and opportunities to learn from, others with the broad range of backgrounds and experiences that constitute modern society. Higher education trains the next generation of leaders of academia and society in general, and such opportunities for leadership should be accessible to all members of society. The Graduate School and its constituent graduate programs are therefore committed to providing equal access to educational

opportunities through recruitment, admission, and support programs that promote diversity, foster successful academic experiences, and cultivate the leaders of the next generation.

Despite the comprehensiveness of the University of Minnesota's approach to supporting diversity in graduate education, these activities have never before included careful examination of the criteria for and processes used in the selection of applicants for admission to graduate and professional education throughout the institution. Much has been done at the relatively more centralized, undergraduate level to transform admissions practices to include holistic factors that promote a diverse student body. To date, however, little has been done at the graduate level to reexamine the role of admissions processes and practices in creating a graduate community that shares the key traits of excellence and diversity. The decentralized nature of graduate admissions no doubt has discouraged systematic reconsideration of admissions processes and posed a barrier to systemic transformation.

While admissions officers are generally aware of the need to engage in proactive recruitment practices to ensure a diverse pipeline for admissions, little thought has been given at the graduate and professional level to how long-standing admissions practices contribute to or diminish the chances of: (1) recruiting absolutely the most talented students with high aptitude in their chosen field; (2) admitting and retaining a widely diverse student body; and (3) achieving an outstanding fit between admitted students and their chosen academic program. Furthermore, the decentralized character of admissions processes and decisions within graduate and professional programs suggests the need for a coordinated effort across the University. This University-wide initiative is just such an effort and will focus sustained attention on the varied policies and practices that govern admission to graduate and professional education at the University of Minnesota.

It is a three year, University-wide project with three overlapping phases: (1) education, critical reflection, and analysis of prevailing admissions practices; (2) identification of best practices and planning for change at the school and departmental level; and (3) seeding institutional transformation through the dissemination of exemplary practices and evaluation tools both within the University and amongst the broader graduate and professional education community nationally. The Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School has partnered with the Vice President and Vice Provost for Equity and Diversity to combine the resources of their offices in support of this new initiative, "Reexamining Graduate and Professional Admissions Practices." Re-imagining how admissions in graduate and professional schools could and should be operationalized in order to insure both a diverse student body and an inclusive campus climate was begun in the spring semester of 2007. What initially was thought to involve a workshop, quickly developed into a multi-year commitment to working across the University system with all graduate and professional school admissions professionals as well as faculty and staff central to decision-making.

To carry out this project, the Graduate School and Office for Equity and Diversity have organized a project steering committee comprised of key admissions officers throughout the University, including the Medical School, Law School, Graduate School, and others critically involved in university admissions processes. This team has explored key issues, forged a shared commitment to carrying out this project, developed a strategy for engaging other key stakeholders in the project, and has brainstormed an agenda for workshops to be offered during the first phase of the project. Based on our initial meetings, the Dean of the Graduate School and Vice President and Vice Provost for Equity and Diversity made a joint presentation about this initiative to the Twin Cities Deans Council late last

spring. The 17 deans in attendance at that meeting expressed support for this initiative and pledged to identify individuals within their schools and colleges who are critical to the admissions process. They have since submitted those names.

During the first phase of the work, planned for the 2007-08 academic year, individuals central to the admissions process in departments and programs under the umbrella of the Graduate School and in professional schools throughout the University that have been nominated by their deans will be invited to participate in a series of educational workshops. These workshops will provide a mutually supportive environment for identifying and analyzing existing admissions practices. Workshops will include: understanding the implications of recent Supreme Court decisions for inclusive admissions practices; examining research findings about the reliability of the GRE and other aptitude tests as admissions indicators; an examination of the move toward holistic admissions practices in undergraduate education and the implications for graduate admissions; a panel discussion on the value of telephone and in-person interviews in admissions decisions; and a student panel discussing changes in the admissions process that are likely to influence the attendance of underrepresented students. The Provost, who is a legal scholar, has warmly agreed to make an early presentation in this series on the implications of Supreme Court decisions, signaling strong support for this initiative from central administration and the University's chief academic officer.

While institutions have worked diligently to reassess their undergraduate admissions practices over the past 11 years, the work has usually been done in a defensive posture, looking backwards from the limiting words of courts and legislatures. It has not generally been done with either the time or intentionality that is required to reexamine the assumptions underlying the entire admissions process, how these processes are tied to the missions and visions of the institution and individual colleges and departments, and the impact these processes have on not only the composition of the resulting classes, but also the impact on the educational and professional experiences of the students. Even further removed from the review of the admissions process is the examination of how graduate and professional school admissions processes impact the body of research and scholarship that is possible to create at the institution. The series of workshops planned for the first year of this initiative will connect graduate and professional school admissions processes to the core mission of the University in terms of building institutional capacity for integrating attention to diversity into new knowledge creation and dissemination, going far beyond the single emphasis on equity usually reflected in undergraduate reforms to the admissions process. This is because graduate and professional students play more central roles in knowledge creation than undergraduates, and for that reason their diversity plays a critical role in developing inclusive practices in knowledge creation.

More than a dozen academic programs and professional schools will be recruited during the first year of the project to engage in a focused examination of the barriers to excellence and diversity within their existing admissions policies and practices. This second phase of the project will involve the review of specific practices and policies and the beginning of the implementation of change in admissions and related practices. The 14 participants in the University of Minnesota's Ph.D. Completion Project will be offered the first right of refusal to participate in phase two of the Admissions Project with additional participants to be recruited from professional schools. Program representatives will attend the workshop series and participate in more focused sessions devoted to analyzing their own programs. We anticipate working with 12-14 early adopters to document their existing practices, to review the data within their college about the admission and success of all

students including underrepresented and marginalized students, and to interview students to gather additional qualitative data about their graduate experience. After analyzing that data, we'll support the work of the admissions professions in the redesign of their admissions practices and policies where necessary and appropriate to enhance the alignment of their resources with their expected outcomes and the achievement of their mission-driven goals.

Formal participation in this phase of the initiative will make participants eligible for seed funding to support the development of a sustainable plan for implementing new admissions policies and practices. These programs will work together in sessions devoted to examining each element of the admissions process: application forms, required essays; work samples; standard indicators of performance; letters of recommendation; and second-stage admissions practices (e.g., interviews and other activities). By the end of the second year, each member program will present its revised plan for admissions to other participants in the initiative and to students and faculty in their home departments for feedback on the way to implementing new policies and practices. The plans will also include evaluation tools that will be regularly used to assess progress toward articulated program goals. Leaders emerging from this process will serve as mentors for a second round of programs, selected during the second year, that will be funded to develop their own school-wide or departmental admissions plans in the third phase of the project.

The final phase of the work will involve continued implementation throughout academic departments and professional schools within the University of Minnesota and an analysis of outcomes and dissemination of inclusive best practices in admissions nationally. The system-wide implementation will have two components. First, based on the work of the early adopters, a tool kit will be developed for use with other graduate and professional schools throughout the University system. The toolkit will enable all admissions professionals to examine their existing practices in light of their mission and goals, to adopt appropriate best practices and to develop evaluation tools that can be used regularly to insure that their practices and resources are aligned to maximize the potential of achieving their goals. By these means, a University-wide transformation process will be seeded over the three phases of the project. The transformation of admissions practices in approximately 24 academic units will provide a basis for documenting effective practices across the University.

In the second component of this final phase the tool kit will be modified as necessary for use at research institutions nationwide. There are numerous existing collaborations through which we plan to share this information with other institutions, including the recently formed national organization of chief diversity officers in higher education and those working on the Graduate Recruitment and Retention Toolkit which is being developed out of the CIC's Graduate Recruitment and Retention Workshop that was held in November 2006. In addition, after completion of the end of the third phase of the project, the leadership team will prepare a publication, featuring exemplary practices in graduate and professional education, that will constitute a final report for the project and will serve as a tool for other units and institutions seeking to carry out their own transformation projects related to graduate and professional school.

This coordinated approach to information-exchange over the three phases of the project is designed to enable us to effect institutional transformation, given the decentralized nature of graduate and professional school admissions decision-making at University of Minnesota. Professional schools essentially establish independent admissions criteria and processes; and the Graduate School only

establishes minimum admissions criteria, while department and programs establish their own norms independently. This initiative has the virtue of raising critical questions about well-established admissions practices based on the research evidence as well as insights from experienced admissions officers situated in all parts of the University. Like curriculum transformation projects, it will build broader support for diversity initiatives – and strengthen the position of faculty and staff advocates – among and between campus units, when advocates for diversity may otherwise be relatively isolated within particular academic departments and programs. And finally, it uses the example of departments that are prepared to implement change as a model for others that may be more reluctant to examine their practices, building momentum for incremental change over time on a unit-by-unit basis.

This approach has the advantage of mobilizing central leadership for an initiative that ultimately identifies local faculty and staff as leaders at the front line of institutional change. It also has the virtue of uniting graduate and professional school admissions officers on matters of common concern, without regard to the administrative structure of the University. University-wide peer support is likely to strengthen their position and effectiveness as advocates for diversity within their academic unit, which is where matters of admissions policy and practice ultimately are implemented. This suggests a model for transformation that is replicable at other institutions, given the structural position of most graduate school and diversity offices as central administrative units seeking to promote academic change at the decentralized college, school, department and program level.

This project uses the convening power of the Graduate School and the Office for Equity and Diversity to establish an extended and purposeful cross-college dialogue about admissions that moves from thoughtful reflection about existing practices toward a coordinated effort to effect changes in the criteria and process by which graduate and professional students in each field are evaluated for admission. While many elements have changed in the other stages of graduate and professional education, from building the pipeline to supporting retention and completion, little attention has focused on this critical gate-keeping element that plays such a significant role in defining the kinds of past performance and experience that ultimately qualify applicants for admission to their desired field of study. Thoughtful reflection on this question is sure to lead faculty and staff to propose alternatives to the customary “Statement of Interest,” to explore approaches to admission that identify talent at earlier stages of education than the senior year of college, and to seek qualities in their applicants that standard aptitude tests do not measure. The results of this process of reflection surely will influence graduate and professional school admissions practices for some time to come.

### **Assessment Plan**

Metrics for documenting participation in the initiative consist of two key elements: tracking individual and unit participation in the project and measuring change over time in both the criteria for admission and the outcomes of admissions processes in graduate and professional programs throughout the University of Minnesota. The assessment plan includes tracking formal and informal participation in the initiative by graduate and professional programs as reflected by programs making a formal commitment to developing and implementing a plan for transforming their policies and practices; and/or faculty and staff members from a program actively participating in the initiative. It also includes measuring changes in admissions that stem from individual and unit participation in the initiative.

Key data to be collected and analyzed include diversity of applicant pool, admitted students, accepted offers of admission, and time to degree and completion rates in graduate and professional school programs from 2007-2010. These statistics will be used as a baseline for understanding the comparative progress made by programs that have (1) committed to transforming their admissions policies and practices; (2) had faculty and/or staff members actively participating in the initiative without making a formal commitment to changing program policies and practices; and (3) neither made a formal commitment to transformation nor have been represented by faculty or staff in any aspect of the initiative. Additionally, faculty and staff participants will be asked to fill out a survey that (1) assesses satisfaction with the educational program, (2) identifies key barriers to the transformation of admissions policies and practices at the department and University-level, and (3) identifies promising practices to advance the project goals of fostering excellence and diversity through the admissions process. An analysis of findings from this project will be included in the final report along with profiles of the 24 plans developed by first and second year participants in the initiative. The plans will be accompanied by personal testimony from faculty and students in each program. Ongoing data collection regarding diversity in the admissions process will become the responsibility of the University's Equity and Diversity Research Institute, another collaboration between the Graduate School and the Office for Equity and Diversity, which will monitor internal diversity indicators and support graduate student and faculty diversity through additional initiatives.