Diversity in Graduate Education—Capitalizing on Unintended Consequences
by Richard A. Cherwitz

From time to time, WW In Focus presents a guest editorial on a topic related to our work. Here, Rick Cherwitz, professor of communication studies at the University of Texas at Austin and one of the nation’s leading faculty voices on public scholarship, offers a perspective on a key concern of the Responsive Ph.D. initiative: Can public scholarship help diversify the doctorate?

While last year’s Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action offered campuses hope for increasing diversity in graduate admissions, the admissions process itself does not primarily account for the dearth of minority students in graduate school. Rather, lack of a substantial applicant pool prevents more than incremental progress toward diversity.

The applicant pool for graduate programs in the arts and sciences includes a paltry number of underrepresented minority students. For instance, in fall 2003, only 6.3% of the 18,000-plus applicants to the University of Texas’ graduate school were Hispanic, African American or Native American, a statistic comparable to that of many graduate institutions. Nationally, top-notch graduate institutions battle each other to redistribute an already undersized minority applicant population.

Increasing diversity requires asking why many talented minority students choose not to seek advanced degrees. Countless Hispanic and African American undergraduates admit not giving serious thought to graduate study in the arts and sciences, preferring the professions. In the words of a recent undergraduate, “I want to make a difference—to do something meaningful.” Desires for an impact on society and a clear career path, as well as money and prestige, attract students to law, medicine, or business.

By contrast, graduate education in traditional academic fields is incorrectly perceived as esoteric. Other than become a professor, some ask, what can one do with an advanced degree? Accurate or inaccurate, this unattractive picture of graduate education includes significant debt, uncertainty about completion, a long time to degree, and fears regarding prospective employment and community relevance.

Graduate education needn’t be this way. Intellectual entrepreneurship (IE), an approach we have experimented with at UT, offers a new vision of graduate students as “citizen-scholars.” IE challenges students to envision and adapt to nonacademic audiences for whom their expertise matters: A theater historian creates a plan for a local arts incubator; a literary scholar applies technological expertise to assist educators in developing countries; a mechanical engineer partners with a historian to create storytelling techniques that enhance scientific literacy. By engaging students actively, as scholars, in community projects, IE reveals graduate degrees as tools for creating intellectual and practical possibilities and for fulfilling one’s passions.

How does the IE philosophy of education increase diversity? Notably, 20% of students in IE classes are members of underrepresented minorities, while the same groups comprise only 9% of UT’s total graduate student population. Minority students report that IE courses demystify graduate school and the academic-
professional world, empowering first-generation students to fulfill their dream of giving back to the community.

Diversity in graduate education requires not just admissions strategies, but also bold, concerted, centralized measures to make graduate study in the arts and sciences relevant for minority students—efforts that cut across the academic geography of different departments. When budgets tighten, it is tempting to revert to a bunker mentality, leaving critical initiatives in graduate education to each academic unit. This approach, however, will prevent capitalizing on IE’s most powerful lesson: Only when scholars transcend disciplinary boundaries do we create the intellectual synergy for solving complex problems. I challenge academic colleagues throughout the nation—while confronting tough fiscal choices—to tackle diversity not as an admissions issue or a departmental matter, but as a cross-disciplinary institutional priority.

Information about IE—including a Pre-Graduate School Internship developed and run by Cherwitz that attracts a large number of first-generation and underrepresented minorities—may be found at https://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie. Recent articles by Cherwitz on IE and diversity appear in Black Issues in Higher Education, College & University Journal, Peer Review and Journal of Higher Education Strategists.